

COPING with @Home Learning: Caregiver tips & reassurance

Be patient, go easy on yourself – Caregivers can't become professional educators overnight. ...And even if they are professional educators, it's very difficult to navigate both roles. It's helpful to really acknowledge this. Caregivers may be feeling pressure (likely self-imposed) to help their children make the "right" amount of progress. At this point, it's helpful just to *celebrate small successes*. Many families can congratulate themselves on figuring out how to login and navigate online platforms at this point. Keep perspective: A global pandemic is happening and there are lots of very real stressors at hand. It is not realistic to think of this as "bonus time" to get ahead and be extra productive.

Try to avoid "social comparison" – Many people are spending extra time on social media, asking their friends/family what they are doing, and scouring the internet to see if they are "keeping up", so to speak. Realize that you don't have to strive for perfection or imitate what other families are doing right now. Adorable crafts, theme days and elaborate colour-coded schedules might not work or even be feasible in your household. And that is *totally OK*.

STRUCTURE and SCHEDULING – For children and adults alike, *routine is comforting*. When we have this, we know what to expect and we can go on autopilot. Families have suddenly been tasked with inventing *new* routines on the fly. There are many ways that this can be done successfully. Consider the following:

- **Work with your natural rhythms** - Are you a family of late risers/night hawks? Do you/your kids get cranky without exercise and fresh air? Is it easier to focus on reading with a snuggly bedtime story, as opposed to 9am desk reading? Do you have non-negotiable work commitments at certain times of day that need to be scheduled around? *That's OK*. When setting a schedule, tailor to your family's changing needs, and not necessarily what has been "typical" in the past (i.e., the old school-day schedule over-laid directly onto the home environment: This is not likely to work well).
- **Stay flexible:** Don't expect every day to be the same. Most caregivers have a difficult multi-tasking feat before them: Doing their job remotely while also supervising children, attending to their own needs and stress, while also facilitating home learning. When scheduling, stay flexible: What works on one day may be different on another. If it's a glorious sunny day, take advantage and don't force a two-hour math marathon. If the children didn't sleep well or if the family is feeling cranky, spend more time on self-care and down time instead.
- **Simplify by creating "anchor" events in the day:** It's easier to maintain 3 or 4 recurring "anchor" events, than multiple tasks scheduled at specific times. Each day, for example, can contain the following anchors at roughly the same times: *schoolwork, lunch, down time, physical activity and social connection*. A six year-old child might be fresher in the morning and able to handle two 20-30 minute chunks of "work" spaced throughout the morning, then lunch, followed by down time, then outside/active play in the afternoon, then video chats at the end of the day (e.g., with family/friends). Anchors provide a framework or sequence for the rest of the day to be formed around. Anchors can also be *categorical*, not necessarily specific activities (e.g., "down time" can be a craft, a TV show, yoga, a nap, reading, drawing, baking, sorting laundry, etc.). Anchors don't have to be at an exact time either – they can just be done in the same order (e.g., downtime after lunch).
- **Give choices:** Even if the choice is limited between only two things, choice helps children feel a sense of control and often improves engagement in chosen activities. It will also give them an opportunity to improve self-awareness (i.e., thinking about what works best for them).
- **CHUNK work into small tasks:** If the expectation is "1 hour of schoolwork each weekday", *do not interpret that as 1 hour all at once* (or even in two, 30-min. sessions, which still may be too much to handle for some children. It might need to be broken down even more). It is important to consider the child's age, level of independence, and attention span. Account for the fact that the new learn-from-home format takes getting used to and may reduce feasibility of longer work sessions.

Specific chunking strategies:

- *Make a checklist first:* Show kids how to do this themselves to encourage independence
 - *Set reasonable time-limits* (e.g., math questions: 20 min, journal entry: 15 min)
 - *Use a timer or a visual timer app* (e.g., www.online-stopwatch.com, Time Timer app)
 - *Use the “Sandwich Approach”:* Easy task → harder task → easy task → break (repeat)
 - *Schedule short BREAKS* to keep energy up (e.g., listening to music, physical activity)
 - *Have REWARDS* → make desirable tasks contingent upon completing undesirable tasks. For example, turn up some music for a dance party once a draft is complete. Have a snack once the math quiz is over and submitted.
- **Prepare and “warm up” to work:** It can be hard to “dive right in” to question #1 at the beginning of a work session. Children (and adults) can benefit from *transitioning gradually into work*. Do this by:
 - *Picking one or two goals for the “school” day* (e.g., complete math practice, read a chapter)
 - *Writing down a short checklist,*
 - *Reviewing anything related to the task that was done last time.* For example, re-watch the instructional YouTube video that the teacher posted, walk through the original example question again, briefly re-cap/discuss key points from the last lesson or chapter, etc.

Other specific ways to “warm up” include: asking questions to the child about the material, having the child explain the instructions or concepts in their own words (i.e., paraphrasing), having the child do one question with you before you step away and let them work independently.

Create a consistent workspace: Functional workspace sets the stage for better focus and helps with keep routines. You can compartmentalize “work time” by confining it to a specific physical space, whenever possible. This may be harder to manage with multiple children and limited space, but experiment with what works best. Try to create a space away from distractions (e.g., away from TV, toys, high-traffic/noisy areas). Use earplugs, earphones with quiet music, and have sufficient lighting. Consider having focused work time for everyone at the same time to create accountability (e.g., my big sister and mom are working now, so I will too). Some children may work best with their own desk/table/corner so it doesn’t blur into other aspects of the day (e.g., doing work, crafts, videogames, and eating meals all at the same table). Environmental cues help us shift our focus and settle into the task at hand.

Resist “hovering”, fixing and over-checking: Caregivers don’t sit next to their child in school all day: It’s not necessary to do the same at home. *Mistakes are necessary for learning* and it is helpful for the teacher to see the types of errors being made in a child’s submitted work. If a child is really struggling, offer assistance by *asking questions*, having the child articulate exactly what the problem is, or reminding them of where they can look up the answers themselves. This way, the child’s frustration becomes a challenge that motivates *problem solving*. If the parent is over-correcting or hovering, the frustration can end up directed toward the parent instead of the work. Encourage the child to edit/review their work, but if they don’t catch all of their mistakes, *don’t sweat it: just submit it*. It will be a true representation of their understanding, which is what is expected.

Manage expectations: Caregivers and teachers can maintain open communication collaboratively. Teachers can keep in mind that parents are in new territory, and be flexible with delays and difficulties. Caregivers can check-in with their child’s teacher if they are really confused or concerned. It may be helpful to keep health and wellbeing, daily academic engagement and consistency as the main, broad priorities right now (e.g., reading daily, accessing/listening to the lesson, trying our best).

A note about Screen Time Overload: With the new learn-from-home and work-from-home norms, many people are experiencing an increase in daily screen time. This can be hard on the eyes (e.g., more artificial blue-light, eye-strain at short-distances, etc.) and can even increase irritability (e.g., difficulty signing out of a video game, constantly “stress scrolling” through news or social media). Consider the following:

- For every 20 minutes of screen time, take a break to focus your eyes on something 20 feet away for 20 seconds (think: 20-20-20). Children should probably walk away from the screen for at least 10 minutes every hour.

- Be intentional about *compartmentalizing different kinds of screen time*. For example, separate screen time for *schoolwork* and screen time for *leisure* (videogames, movies) by changing the physical cues. For example, children can use a computer at a desk or table for schoolwork, then later in the evening moving to the couch to watch a TV show.
- For adolescents, limiting smart phone/social media time may still be important, but also consider that they may need their phones now more than ever to stay socially connected with their friends. Adolescents can be asked for their input on establishing reasonable boundaries for phone usage.

Get Old School and be cReAtivE: In the day-to-day of learning from home, consider the stress-reducing effects (and educational benefits) of *low-tech activities*. Take out the Lego or blocks, art supplies, play-dough, letter-writing stationary, journals, “dress-up” materials, etc. and tap into imagination.

Don’t reinvent the wheel: Use and fall back on the educational websites and educational apps that have been vetted and recommended by the school. Websites like *Raz Kids* for literacy and *Khan Academy* for math review (and literacy) can provide ready-made lessons and practice exercises that to count toward learning time.

Let children get bored: Children can benefit from sitting with the discomfort of “boredom”. Caregivers need not fill in all the lulls throughout the day. This can be good for the imagination and can help children become more resourceful. Children may enjoy *brainstorming ideas* for things they can do when boredom hits: Suggest that they write down activities/ideas on little slips of paper and collect them in a big container to draw upon whenever boredom strikes (e.g., build a fort, do a chore, draw a monster, invent a new fashion, invent a secret code, make a treasure map, learn a magic trick, create an indoor scavenger hunt, write in a journal, play cards, find an online workout/dance/yoga video to try, etc.)

Seize the opportunity to teach life skills: If schoolwork just isn’t happening, invite children to help out with, learn and observe household tasks. This can include learning how to fix/repair something in the home, cleaning, laundry, food prep/cooking, organizing, caring for the family pet, even learning household planning and financial literacy (e.g., budgeting, paying bills online, making grocery lists).

Fall back on reading: Reading for pleasure and building literacy skills is a worthwhile for kids of all ages. When in doubt, just read/look at books. Lots of online story-time videos and live-casts exist these days, as well as audiobooks and free online e-books for children. Do an online search for options.

****Prioritize Wellbeing**:** If you or the children are *not* managing this new situation without unusually high levels of stress and anxiety, it makes sense to take a step back and focus on wellbeing first. If stress is running high, that is *normal*. Take a breather, evaluate what is going well/what isn’t, *reach out and seek support if needed*, then go from there.

Remember, TDSB’s Remote-Learning Guidelines and FAQ are available at:
www.tdsb.on.ca/Remote-Learning/Questions-and-Answers

Also see further TDSB *General Mental Health and Well-Being Resources*
www.tdsb.on.ca/Remote-Learning/Resources-During-Covid-19

Outside links for immediate or emergency support:

[Telehealth Ontario](#) [Kids Help Phone](#) [Mental Health TO](#) (1-866-585-6486)