

Distance Learning: 8 Tips to Get Your Child Ready to Learn at Home

By Sean J. Smith, PhD on Mar 17, 2020

The rapid closure of schools due to the [coronavirus](#) has taken many families by surprise. Suddenly, kids all over the country are being asked to learn from home, often through online learning, assignments sent via e-mail, or packets sent out by the school. For many, this will be a new experience. It's not easy to convert homes into classrooms. But there are a few things you can do to get ready.

Here are eight tips to prepare your child for online learning at home

1. Create a learning space for your child.

Does your child already have a special place to do homework? It's important to [set up a quiet, clutter-free area](#) if your child is learning full-time from home. For example, you can convert the kitchen table into a learning station. Turn off the TV and remove all cups, salt and pepper, and other kitchen items when your child is doing schoolwork. When it's time to eat, put away the school supplies and use it again as a kitchen table. Why is it important to clear away the clutter for learning time? Reducing clutter helps kids focus.

2. Make a schedule and stick to it.

We are creatures of habit. With no school bell to mark kids tardy, they might feel like sleeping in. With no set schedule, kids might never get around to schoolwork. Finding time for learning requires planning. Take a look at your family's schedule and figure out the best times for learning.

Here are a few questions to help you and your child come up with a schedule:

- Does your child need a lot of help from you to get started? If so, think about when you, another adult, or responsible sibling is available to provide support.
- Do you have a middle-schooler or high-schooler? If so, late afternoon and early evening might be when they're most awake and ready to learn.

- Are you building time into your child's schedule for exercise? (See tip #5 below.) Going outside and taking [brain breaks](#) can help kids focus and get more done.
- Does your family have any [contracts to help kids follow rules at home](#)? Agreeing on when to watch TV or play video games is important when kids are learning full-time at home.

Once you decide when your child will learn, identify that time as school time and stick with it.

3. Reduce distractions.

Video games, computer games, social media, TV, toys, pets—our homes have lots of distractions.

Make a list of the things that distract your child. Then, find ways to limit them during learning time. For example, is the dog a big distraction? If so, can you put the dog in a separate room when your child is doing schoolwork?

Are games or social media a big distraction? Try blocking them on your child's device during instructional time. Another way to eliminate online temptations: After downloading an assignment, turn off the Wi-Fi and/or cellular service to help your child focus on the work.

4. Use a calendar and color-code it.

It's important to set up systems to help your child stay on top of school deadlines. This will help your child stay organized. Post a calendar and mark it with due dates. Help your child plan backwards from the due dates. Use visual organizers to [break an assignment down into steps](#) and the specific strategies needed to complete it.

You can also use [color-coding for tasks](#). For example, use a red pen for reading and a blue pen for math.

5. Get plenty of exercise.

Exercise helps us think better. When we move and groove, our problem-solving, memory, and attention improve. Physical activity is a natural way to reduce stress and prevent anxiety. Experts say that when we move and get our heart rate up, it has a positive impact on how we think.

Look for [family-friendly workouts](#) you can do at home. Identify a time and place in your home for physical activity. The best time to exercise might be right before tackling schoolwork. It's also good to take exercise breaks throughout the day.

6. See which accessibility features help your child.

Most phones, laptops, and other mobile devices have [built-in assistive technology](#). For example, read aloud or text-to-speech can help struggling readers, and speech-to-text can help struggling writers. On YouTube, you can adjust the settings to slow down the playback speed if your child is having trouble understanding videos. You can also change the settings to show closed captions if it helps your child to read the text while listening to videos. See which features help your child access digital content and select the ones that fit your child's needs and preferences.

7. Reach out to your child's teacher.

Online education or learning at home requires family support. Some [online schools](#) go as far as calling parents "learning coaches." To support your child, set up a direct line of communication with your child's teachers. Use email, text, phone calls, or maybe even video conferencing to connect. Try not to worry that you're interrupting. If you're not sure how to do an assignment, don't just guess—reach out to confirm. You may even want to set up a day and time each week to connect with the teacher. You can use this time to talk about challenges your child is facing, review upcoming instruction, and understand expectations. Being proactive is essential if your child is struggling in school.

8. Look for ways to remove learning barriers.

If your child has learning challenges, it's important for you to review the online and other learning material the school sends you. Keep in mind that it may not have been designed with your child's needs in mind. Here are some questions to consider:

- What options are teachers offering to help struggling readers with written material?
- What options does your child have to demonstrate understanding? For example, if your child has trouble writing, ask the teacher if your child can send a video response.
- Is the teacher including supports to help kids with things like getting organized, identifying the main idea, and taking notes?

Work with your child's teachers to identify and remove any barriers. Remember: If it's a challenge for your child, it's most likely a problem for other kids, too.

(For more family tips/ resources, go to <https://www.understood.org/pages/en/families/>)