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Virtual Learning During COVID: Supporting Parents for Children's Success

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Support for Virtual Learners: Parent Roles & Responsibilities

With many children still attending school remotely, parents are being asked to be more involved in their children's education than ever before. Young children, and those with special learning needs, are especially dependent on parents to help bridge their learning process.

Despite the superhuman efforts many teachers are putting forth to engage and facilitate children's remote learning, they can only do so much from their side of the screen!

As parents navigate this new educational territory for their families, parenting education supports are quickly being adjusted to respond to families' changing needs.

Though specific approaches vary by school and teacher, this resource outlines seven key areas parents, and parenting educators, can focus on to help support virtual learners.

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Maintaining a Helpful Learning Environment

An environment conducive to learning looks different depending on the age and needs of the learner. Here are some tips to consider:

- Structure & Schedule- establishing and maintaining a predictable daily schedule can help a learner with their time-management and organization. Knowing what comes next and when also reduces stress.
- The Basics- adequate sleep and nutritious food are foundational to engaged learning. Parenting educators can help families by discussing strategies to help children get the recommended amount of sleep, or by connecting them to local food resources (e.g., school meal program).
- Learning Spaces- designating a learning space and removing distractions (e.g., toys, other screens) can help learners focus on their lessons. Parenting educators can help by brainstorming strategies, and facilitating peer solution sharing, especially for families with multiple learners.

Communication & Advocacy

Understanding expectations and advocating for child/family needs is crucial in supporting virtual learning. It can also be an area of disempowerment for families, particularly those whose home language is not English. Parenting educators can assist families in identifying and prioritizing unmet needs for learning support. They can also help families navigate the educational system to find solutions.

For example, many families are not aware that their child's school is required to provide materials in a family's home language. Here are some tips on promoting communication and advocacy for all families:

- Keep the lines of communication open and use them regularly.
- Ask teacher for clarification if needed (e.g., expectations for time spent online daily?).
- Ask for skill-building alternatives to screen-learning if needed.

Supporting the Virtual Learning Experience

The process of learning is complex! Parents may be more comfortable and feel empowered to support their child's learning through other important actions, beyond "helping with homework." Parents can:

- Help break up learning into small periods of time with physically active breaks between more focused learning periods.
- Encourage outdoor/non-screen time between virtual learning.
- Stay close for support (but give learner time to come up with their own responses and answers- stifle perfectionism).
- Dedicate one-on-one time with learner for regular check-ins.
- Interpret learner's behavior and responses to virtual learning as information about what they may need (e.g., can't focus? They may need a different approach, or a shorter learning period).

Monitoring Online Safety

Internet access within schools is characterized by monitoring and filtering measures in place school-wide to protect children against inappropriate exposure and online risks. Virtual learning from home transfers these online safety responsibilities to families instead. Parenting educators can help by supporting families in taking steps to keep their virtual environment child-safe at home. Consider:

- Internet and device filtering devices.
- Situating learner's workspace to provide parent visual access to screens for easy check-ins.
- Communicating expectations to learners for online behavior.

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Connecting Kids with Social Opportunities Virtually

Children learn important lessons about themselves, others and the world through their social interactions at school. Virtual learning has made this challenging! Parents can help facilitate social opportunities by introducing high-quality virtual options for their learners. Parenting educators can help by sharing fresh ideas, links and resources, including:

- City or county parks and rec synchronous virtual classes (e.g., soccer, drawing)
- Museum programming (e.g., OMSI.edu live events)
- Library story time, book clubs, and the R.E.A.D. program

Children's Social, Emotional & Mental Health

The pandemic has introduced an unparalleled level of stress into the daily lives of adults and children alike. This heightened state of stress can impact children's social, emotional and mental health and introduce significant learning challenges.

Parents can help their children weather these stressors and build resilience by employing some of the tips shared below. When parents have a network of support themselves, such as warm and responsive parenting educators, they can be more supportive and effective for their children. Here are some tips for supporting children's social, emotional and mental health:

- Keep the social learning coming by providing learner with feedback and maintaining social expectations and boundaries.
- Establish non-screen ways to build connections (e.g., board games, puzzles, writing letters to far-away family members, creative or cooking projects, Sunday afternoon family walks).
- Connect virtually with friends and family members (e.g., schedule weekly video calls, play online games together).
- Support children's emotional well-being by showing and acknowledging your own emotions, and by naming theirs.
- Model healthy ways of coping with difficult feelings (e.g., doing things you enjoy, asking for a hug when you are feeling sad).

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Protecting Parent Well-Being

Parents often prioritize their own well-being dead last. However, parental well-being actually benefits the whole family! Parenting educators can help families by supporting parents to view their well-being as essential to their family's functioning, rather than as a personal luxury.

Here are some tips:

- Make time for yourself alone and undisturbed, even for a short time (e.g., take a walk around the block, a long shower, or designate time to read after the kids are in bed).
- Do not underestimate the benefit of small things often. Waiting to have "enough time to take care of my needs" is often a losing prospect.
- Manage your expectations and be realistic. This is the first time any of us have lived anything like this, our previous expectations we may have had for ourselves (e.g., productivity, creativity in parenting) and our children simply do not apply to our current situation.
- Prioritize healthy choices as often as you can. This includes making healthy nutritional choices and getting regular and adequate sleep.
- Moving through the pandemic is a marathon that necessitates sustainable habits for physical and emotional well-being.

Images from Unsplash.com and Pexels.com

Helpful Resources

Learning Heroes uses parent-centered research to develop resources to support parent virtual learning
https://bealearninghero.org/

Common Sense Education:

Tips for distance learning (available in English and Spanish)
https://www.commonsense.org/education/articles/parent-tips-and-tricks-for-distance-learning

Distance learning templates (e.g., daily routine, fillable digital learning pledge/agreement):
https://www.commonsense.org/education/articles/free-distance-learning-templates-for-teachers-and-families

Parents' Decision Guide to YouTube for Young Kids Infographic:
https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parents-decision-guide-to-youtube-for-young-kids

Digital learning guide for parents and caregivers:

https://tech.ed.gov/files/2020/10/Parent-and-Family-Digital-Learning-Guide.pdf

Tip-sheet for internet safety at home (available in English and Spanish):

https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/netsmartz/downloadable/tipsheets/Internet-Safety-at-Home-EN-ES.pdf