Institute for
Self Directed Learning

Virtual Learning Guide

Key Moves Parents Can Make to Shepherd Children through Remote Learning

When parents are asked what they want out of their children's schooling, their answers often surprise teachers and policy makers. While it's often assumed that a parent's primary focus is their child's academic outcomes, new research indicates that parents are most interested in, "a combination of intellectual, emotional and moral development, where critical thinking and problem solving meet self-worth, independence, empathy and knowing right from wrong." These parents are describing a holistic education, one that helps to shape their child into an independent learner that is an active, rather than passive, agent in their own education.

In today's climate, parents also have pressing questions about how to safely and successfully help their children develop the skills they'll need to be independent learners. Parents, facing unprecedented questions about whether they should send their children back to school, how they'll navigate virtual learning and their own work schedules, and how to seek out support services that they may previously have received through in-person school, must weigh their current circumstances with their desired long-term outcomes for their child.

With the COVID-19 crisis ongoing, and schools and school systems scrambling to make plans for how students will learn in the fall, parents have a lot to consider when it comes to the educational experience they aim to help create for their child.

First, many parents must decide whether to send their students back to school at all. With some districts offering in-person schooling, online schooling or a hybrid model, parents should carefully consider what they believe will work for their family by asking themselves, first, about logistics, "is a parent, caregiver or other adult able to be home and to provide supervision and support throughout the day?" next, about safety, "is my child or anyone in our home at higher risk for contracting COVID-19 or developing serious complications?" and, finally, about their child's unique needs and desires when it comes to school, "When considering age, attention span and learning style, does my child function better in an online or in-person environment?"

If, after weighing the decision and opting for online schooling, or because schools chose not to reopen or to close again as a second wave of Covid-19 rolls in, parents find themselves once again at home with their learner, there is much they can do to create a peaceful, positive, and enriching educational experience for their child. There is also, once parents and students move through the process of onboarding themselves to at-home learning, a great opportunity to help students unearth the skills they already possess and develop those they will need to thrive as independent learners.

Parents can create an effective educational environment by using the following core building blocks of education that shape a child's learning environment and experience:

- Curriculum, assessment and instruction
- Schedules and routines
- Space
- Technology
- Cultural practices
- Partnerships
- Communication

In this e-book, we'll explore these educational building blocks and examine what parents can do, or how they can shift what they are already doing, while their children are learning from home to ensure they remain on the path towards becoming an independent learner. By following the simple guidance laid forth in this e-book, parents can be confident that they have covered all their bases and that their children are in for a challenging, inspiring year ahead!

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

Three fundamental building blocks of an effective learning environment are curriculum, assessment, and instruction. The curriculum is what students are learning, assessment is how that learning is measured, and instruction is how the material is taught. An understanding of these in conjunction with the building blocks we will cover in this e-book will set your child up for success in a home learning environment.

During times of at-home learning due to Covid-19, curriculum, assessment, and instruction are not likely to be determined by parents. Rather, individual districts and teachers are developing and sending home material for students to learn either independently or via online instruction. Parents can support what is being offered by familiarizing themselves with their child's assignments and learning packets or

e-learning platforms. While doing so can feel overwhelming for many parents who are used to a sharper delineation between the roles of 'parent' and 'teacher,' it often takes just an hour or two to develop a comprehensive understanding of a child's learning platform. Parents can consider inviting their child to give them "a tour" of their online learning platform and then co-creating with their child a "cheat-sheet" of the daily tasks and mediums students use to create and collaborate with their instructors and peers that includes links to the platform, passwords, and any other key information kids or parents might need in order to access them smoothly. This will put children in the driver's seat.

Parents might also consider supplementing the curriculum being offered with fun challenges like **these** or with topics that their learner is passionate about but that are not often explored through their traditional curriculum. For example, parents might push their learner to dig deeper into their interest in space, nature, writing or fashion by developing a project based learning opportunity in which their child researches, learns, and creates a product that shares the knowledge or skill they've developed. How do you set something like that up? Easy.

To set up a passion project, follow these steps:

1. Have a conversation about your child's interest.
2. Invite your child to **"design their own course"** that follows some or all of **these criteria**
3. To add value and excitement to their project, have your child "pitch" their course idea to a small group that includes you, a friend of your child, and someone with deep knowledge of the subject
4. Have the small group share feedback of ways to improve the course, give encouragement about the planned experience, and formally authorize, launch, and celebrate the endeavor
5. Check in with your child from time to time to see progress and look for ways to encourage
6. At the end, reconvene the small group, have your child share about their experience, and celebrate together!

Schedules
and Routines

Teachers place paramount importance on creating schedules and routines for their learners, and for good reason. Research shows that predictable schedules and routines help children navigate both daily activities and change or stress in a way that promotes mental wellness and primes their brains for learning.
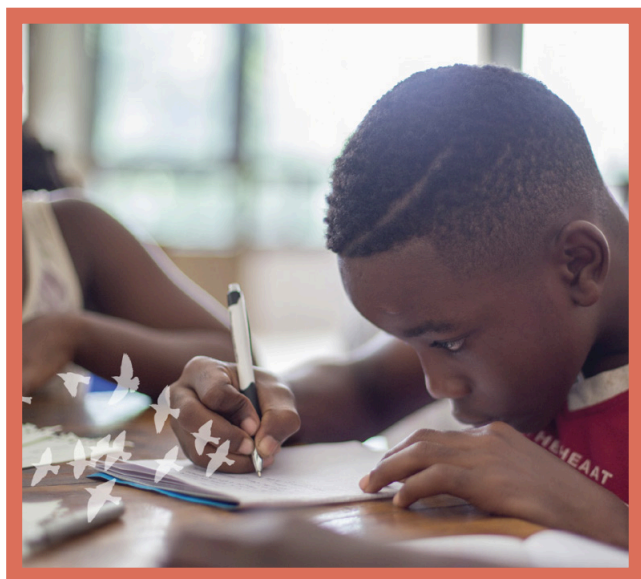
With parents playing the role of teacher, they will need to consider how they can develop and uphold schedules and routines that are conducive to learning within the context of their family's schedule and routine. Families should consider both their external commitments (when does the adult need to be available for work calls or to care for other siblings) and their own unique desires (is my child an early riser or do they prefer to sleep a little later? Do they focus best in the morning or the afternoon?). Parents might also consider co-developing a schedule with several nearby families that allows them to share the work of monitoring and supporting their children as they learn virtually. Long time homeschooling families often use a co-op model that gives each family both responsibility for supporting students and time away from their students to dedicate to work or caring for other children. As more families move towards at home learning, the popularity of these "pods" is growing. When forming a "pod" with other families, parents should consider a weekly schedule that provides consistency around where children will spend their time and who will be "in charge" on given days.

A good place to start when working to develop a daily schedule is to set a morning starting time and routine for each school day. School at home does not have to start at the same time as a child's out-of-home school, and parents should be mindful of choosing a time to start schooling that feels natural for the child. Parents and children can work together to develop a morning routine or ritual that denotes the clear beginning of school time. For example they could start with a morning meeting with siblings, a journaling prompt, or a math game that gets their brain working.

Once families have established a morning start time and routine, parents can work in tandem with their child or children to create a schedule that they'll follow each school day. The daily schedule should

include a breakdown of their tasks for the day as well as 'extracurricular' breaks such as walks, art time, or outside time. When crafting this schedule parents can work to create as much overlap as possible between sibling schedules to ensure that they take their breaks together and are able to provide support to one another as they work in each task or subject area.

At the start of each day, parents and children can work together to fill in the schedule with the assignments and activities their teachers have provided and tailor the time they'll spend in each area accordingly. While extracurricular breaks are an important part of the day, so is connection. Penciling in lunch together, a video call with a relative, or time to write a letter to a loved one can be a valuable part of the day.

As parents work with their child to develop a daily schedule, it's important to remember that a learner's at-home school schedule does not have to mirror their in-school schedule, and that the learner does not necessarily need to be working on school work all day.

Finally, when school, work and play all take place at home, it can be challenging for both students and parents to have a clear understanding of when the school day closes and their family homelife begins. Having a routine to close the school day, or a go-to activity for once school work is done, can be an important way for kids to relax into afternoon or evening family time. Parents can develop this routine with their child to ensure it feels like a positive way for everyone to end the day. Some examples or end-of-day activities that families have found success with include journaling on a given question or topic, writing a letter to or facetiming with a loved one or going on a family walk or bike ride. Parents can also explore more traditional ways to close out activities in the classroom **here** and **here.**

Several sample schedules are available below. Parents can use these sample schedules to begin to develop a personalized schedule that will work with their individual learner, with their family or with a "pod" of students.

SCHEDULE ONE (single family)

8-8:30am	Family breakfast
8:30-8:45am	Family meeting to set goals for the day!
8:45am-10:45am	Individual work time
10:45-11am	Family meeting to check in and set a goal before lunch
11am-12pm	Individual work time
12-1pm	Lunch and down time
1-1:15pm	Family meeting to set afternoon goals
1:15-2:15pm	Individual work time
2:15-3pm	Outdoor games or recess or exercise
3-3:15pm	Family meeting to reflect and celebrate progress

SCHEDULE TWO (pod or co-op model)

Time	Activity
9:00-9:15am	Arrival at learning location
9:15-9:45am	Learners set goals for the day and create work plans
9:45-11:30am	Small group and individual work time
11:30-12:30pm	Outdoor games, recess or recreation time
12:30-1:00pm	Lunch
1:00-3:00pm	Small group and individual work time
3:00-4:00pm	Reading and reflection time
4:00-4:30pm	Evaluate daily progress, set goals for the next day, wrap up and celebrate progress

SCHEDULE THREE (multi-age siblings)

Time	Activity
8:30-9:00am	Family breakfast
9:00-9:30am	Reading time as parent/caregiver helps each child set individual daily goals
9:30-11:00am	Individual work time
11:00am-12:00pm	Recreation and outdoor time
12:00-12:30	family lunch time
12:30-1:00pm	Writing/journaling time as parent/caregiver helps each child assess daily progress and develop an afternoon plan
1:00-3:00pm	Individual work time
3:00-3:30pm	Evaluate daily progress, set goals for the next day, wrap up and celebrate progress

The CDC also has some **helpful videos** for first-timers on how to start creating structure and routine.

Space

While many parents grew up in a time period when desks aligned in straight rows were the norm in nearly all classroom environments, youth today are often used to being welcomed into a more flexible learning environment. Flexible seating, desks arranged in a manner that is conducive to group work and collaboration, and multiple learning stations are often now standard in modern classrooms. Not only does this flexibility in the learning environment allow students to feel more comfortable in the classroom, it also often allows them to feel comfortable working in a range of settings.

With some at-home learning under their belt, many parents have naturally discovered that, while providing a space conducive to learning is important, what that space looks like may vary widely depending on their home environment and their learner's preferences. In general, experts recommend that a learner's space be somewhere that affords them the opportunity to concentrate without distraction and that has all the materials they'll need to learn available within easy reach.For some learners, this might look like the dining room table while others might be more comfortable on their bedroom floor. As long as a learner is able to focus and make progress on their work in a particular location, parents shouldn't stress about whether it looks like a traditional classroom or not.

Technology

Technology is a cornerstone of the modern educational system, allowing children to reach beyond the classroom walls to learn and connect with the world around them. While technology can be a limiting factor when it comes to at-home learning, parents can help bridge the gap by connecting with their school district or service provider to identify solutions. Many school districts are providing technology—e.g., devices and/or internet hotspots—for students to use while they work at home, and many service providers are offering connective technology for free or at a greatly reduced price.

While identifying how to access technology can be a challenge for parents, once it's in the home considering what parameters they put around technology use for their kids will be important and relevant for every family. Parents should consider and clearly communicate with their child about the intended use of their technology during school hours and how they'll remain accountable for how they use their technology. Parents might also want to consider how the potential increase of school-related screen time will impact their feelings on non-school related screen time. If kids are old enough to have the discussion, ask them what they think about screen time limits and come up with a flexible amount that everyone is comfortable with. Lastly, look to resources like Safe Search, GoGuardian, Circle with Disney, and others to ensure safe, age-appropriate browsing.

Cultural Practices

In any successful classroom, a teacher has likely worked painstakingly hard to take into account the cultural practices of their students. While old school thought dictated that students should conform to the school environment, experts now recognize the importance of **culturally responsive teaching.**

In order to bring their own cultural practices into their at-home classroom, parents can follow some of the basic principles of culturally responsive teaching such as communicating high expectations and belief in student success, allowing students to take ownership over their experience and their work, and acting as a facilitator rather than dictating how and when an assignment will get done. For a glimpse at what it looks like for an adult to be more of a guide than a teacher, watch **this video.**

Parents can also work to blend together some of their learner's school traditions and their own family traditions to create a seamless experience that will help the child feel that both settings support one another. Parents can continue family traditions that have served them well, such as family movie nights, while incorporating their learner's school experience by choosing a movie that aligns with what the learner is studying at the moment. In order to support their learner's school experience, parents can also incorporate some of their learners' school or classroom traditions into their everyday family life such as instituting daily shout-out's during dinner or sharing highs and lows during a family walk.

Partnerships

In today's connected world it's nearly impossible for a classroom to be an effective learning space without leaning on the power of community and partnership. While 'community' might look different now than it has in the past, creating community and partnerships in schooling is as important now as it ever has been. Many teachers are working to create virtual communities for their classes by leading informal weekly Zoom or Google Hangout sessions for their students or creating virtual small group projects.

If a child's teacher is not leading up an effort to create community, parents can work together to come up with ways to safely help students feel connected such as virtual hang-out sessions or exchanging addresses and creating a pen-pal arrangement. Additionally, as many families create co-op or pod style learning groups, students' access to both peers and adults they can call on for support grows. Whether they are creating a learning group or not, parents can also work with their child to brainstorm and create a list of additional people, outside their immediate family, that they can call on for support as they learn. This list might include older family members or cousins, family friends with expertise in a certain area or peers who have a strong grasp on a particular academic area. Parents can keep this list available, with contact information handy, so that when a child gets stuck during a lesson they are able to easily access their "phone-a-friend" support people.

Parents can also help their child feel like a part of the larger community by participating in online learning opportunities offered by local and distant organizations. Students can take yoga lessons, participate in art classes and tour museums all from the comfort and safety of their own home.

Communication

Parents and caregivers are often used to communicating with their learner's teacher about their educational strengths and challenges but, as educational leaders at home, parents need to prioritize communicating directly with their child about their learning.

The end-result of effective communication about school between parents and their children is an understanding between both parties of the learner's goals and challenges and needs for support. Parents can reach this goal by offering regular check-in points throughout the day, including a morning meeting during which they discuss the child's needs and goals for the day, and as the child switches from subject to subject. During check-in's parents should be sure to start with a compliment or briefly highlight a 'win' their child experienced that day and to remain focused on asking questions and listening, which will allow the child to take ownership over their learning. Parents can also build continuous improvement into their check-in's by asking broader questions about what's working and not working about learning at home. Staple check-in questions, that actually accelerate a child's development, include:

- How are you?
- What do you feel you're capable of this week? What are your goals?
- What do you think will happen if you pursue the goals you're setting?
- What will be the hardest obstacle or barrier in meeting your goals?
- What's your plan to overcome that obstacle or barrier?
- What do you need from me to help?

See also **this long list** for other helpful check-in question ideas.

Lastly, many parents wonder how to respond when their child is bored or disengaged. Though some learners are resistant to virtual schooling for reasons such as uninteresting content, culturally irrelevant material, screen fatigue, rote work, and more, there are key moves parents can make to inspire their students to shoulder the responsibility for their own learning. In the absence of the watchful gaze of the teacher and all of the rules that govern a classroom, caregivers can support students by thinking of two categories of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic.

Regarding intrinsic motivation, Aristotle argued in Metaphysics that "All men [and women] desire to know." People want to learn things. Children are curious. Part of what can make school so hard is that instead of fostering curiosity among young people, often it is discouraged. However, parents can take advantage of this at-home time by encouraging students to learn something they want to learn. This can be a "passion project," where students can choose to spend 4-5 hours throughout the week exploring a skill or topic of interest, and then presenting in some virtual format what they've learned. Another option is that parents can send out links of TED Talks to watch, podcasts to listen to, lists or images of skills to learn, and see what sticks. Tapping into a child's inherent curiosity will help them to see meaning in their work and to sustain their interest.

There is also the category of extrinsic motivation. Sometimes a learner might need a little push to make it through the hurdles of Algebra 1 or spelling. Here, parents can ask what kinds of incentives can be created to motivate students when they're feeling stuck? One approach is to post a transparent chart of time spent on e-learning platforms and pages read for the week and publicly celebrate the wins. Another strategy is to give learners prizes for completing work or participating in challenges throughout the week. While the presence of extrinsic motivators concerns some, it can be helpful to anchor in the belief that we're human, and sometimes we need all the help we can get. Whether intrinsic or extrinsic, what motivates a young person is often a mystery and usually changes over time. Therefore, it's helpful for caregivers to design multiple incentives—a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators—to see what really motivates. For a more in depth conversation about the brain research behind what motivates, as well as more strategies, parents are invited to watch a webinar—**Key Moves Parents and Caregivers Can Make to Guide Children Through Remote Learning at Home during COVID-19**—that we hosted recently at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. Access password: ho#^T&&o

While taking on the role of educator has and will continue to be a challenge for many parents, **some more than others,** developing a thorough understanding of the building blocks of effective education is an important step in cultivating the skills necessary to help a learner continue to grow and develop while they remain at home. It's also important for parents to recognize and celebrate the ways that at-home learning can help their child develop new skills they may not have accessed in the classroom. With the freedom to direct their time and energy towards subject matter that thrills them, the support of parents, peers and other adults and the confidence that comes with mastering new skills, today's learners are unlikely to "fall behind" and more likely than ever to become the driven, independent learners they are all capable of becoming!