

Three Ways to Help Your Kids Succeed at Distance Learning

How can parents support their children at the start of an uncertain school year?

BY CHRISTINE CARTER | AUGUST 31, 2020

Dear Christine,

Last spring, distance learning in our household was a mess of constant interruptions, wacky sleep schedules, and Zoom burnout. I'd like to set my kids up better this fall, as the soonest in-person schooling could open for us is mid-October. What can I do until then to ensure that my kids actually learn something this fall?

Sincerely,

Totally-Not-a-Teacher

Dear Not-a-Teacher,

Good news: Setting our kids up for success with distance learning now can also set them up for academic success later, no matter where they go to school or what the format is. My best advice is to focus on fostering the following three key skills that can help our kids complete their work faster, concentrate longer, and remember more of what they are learning.

Dear Christine



In Dear Christine, sociologist and coach Christine Carter responds to your questions about marriage, parenting, happiness, work, family, and, well, life. Want to submit a question? Email advice@christinecarter.com.

1. Focus

With distance learning, focus is now a prized superskill. Without it, kids struggle to learn. To minimize the interruptions and distractions that kill focus, we can do the following.

Designate a learning playing field. Kids need a place where they can concentrate, and when we designate a place that is for *concentration only*, we help them train their brains to focus better.

For example, they might have a specific spot at a small desk in a hallway where they do their online schooling and their homework—and *only* those things. Have them leave their desk to check social media or do anything but focused work. Encourage them to step away from their desk when they take breaks. Bonus: Their presence at that desk can be a signal to others in the household that they are trying to focus, and that everyone else needs to be quiet and careful not to interrupt.

Ask them how they feel. Interruptions and distractions can be both external (losing internet access, a Snapchat alert) and internal (feeling stressed or overwhelmed). Research shows that when kids stuff their feelings down (also known as “emotional suppression”), their intelligence and learning suffer. Pretending to feel fine even when we are actually feeling something else takes energy and self-control, and that steals the energy and willpower needed to focus.

As parents, we can help our kids identify how they are feeling. “I’m feeling anxious right now,” they might say. This is the “name it to tame it” technique. When kids label their emotions, the emotions tend to dissipate. If they start telling you a story that is making them *more* emotional, gently bring them back to what they are feeling.

The task here is to identify *what* they are feeling, not necessarily *why* they are feeling that way. This can be difficult. We can get attached to our narratives about why we are upset, and get caught up in trying to problem-solve. But that won’t help us focus. We need to talk about the actual emotions, not the *reasons* for the emotions.

See if you can sum up their feelings in a simple phrase or two. For example, “You feel sad and lonely.” You could leave it at that, or throw in a little empathy: “That’s so hard. Feeling lonely is the worst.” Don’t try to “fix” their challenging emotions. The goal is to unearth and label emotions, not change them. Send your kids the message that you believe they can handle those difficult emotions. There’s no need to stuff them down.

Encourage single-tasking. It might seem blazingly obvious that in order to focus, kids will need to *focus* on one thing at a time, but this is no longer the way of the world. Even though multitasking is wildly inefficient, it *feels* productive. Especially for kids who are feeling bored and stuck at home, having a lot of screens open and alerts coming in makes them feel busy and stimulated.

But multitasking is the enemy of focus. The human brain did not evolve to focus on many things at once, and it can’t actually do it—it can only switch

rapidly back and forth between tasks. This is a giant energy drain for kids' brains in *many* ways. It makes them tired (or wired) and inattentive. Most of all, multitasking makes learning inefficient.

As parents, we can help kids configure their learning environment, their devices, and their online time so that they aren't tempted to multitask—so they're less distracted by alerts and less tempted to check social media compulsively. Turn off all alerts and turn on “do not disturb,” and designate a parking place for phones during school hours, allowing them access to just one screen at a time.

2. Motivation

Trying to motivate kids with sticks and carrots is its own special form of parental hell. Without self-motivation, it's pretty darn hard to learn. Fortunately, we can foster self-motivation in our kids by supporting their competence, their independence, and their connection to others. These are the three core psychological needs that, when filled, lead to self-motivation. Here's how to help meet those needs.

Acknowledge competence. Help kids see where they've done really well in the past through their own effort (rather than your nagging). Ask: “Where do you feel most confident?” And then help them see that it is their own effort that led to that capability.

Allow independence. Our kids need the freedom to fail on their own—and the freedom to succeed without having to give you credit. Our kids cannot feel responsible for school work if we are the organizing force. So instead of instructing and directing kids, ask them: “What's your plan?” As in, “What's your plan for eating breakfast for eating breakfast before class tomorrow morning?” Asking kids about their plan makes it clear that they are still in control of their own behavior, and it helps put them in touch with their own motivations and intentions. If kids aren't asked to articulate their plan, sometimes they won't make one. (Especially kids who are used to being nagged; those kids know that their parents will eventually get frustrated and do their planning for them.)

helping them feel a sense of belonging? If they are coming up short, ask them who needs help and what they can do to help that person—helping others is one of the best ways to create connection.

3. Flexibility

You might have noticed: Every plan we make seems to fall apart. We are living through a time of accelerated change and constant unknowns. That makes it critical for us—and our kids—to remain flexible. They may be going back into the classroom this year. They may not. Either way, they'll need to roll with the punches. We can help them do so.

Stick to a consistent sleep schedule. Exhaustion makes us brittle; it's pretty hard to stay limber when we're so tired we just want to lay down and cry.

Despite not having much going on, many kids are exhausted (especially teenagers). Not having the structure of school (at least the don't-miss-your-bus kind) makes it harder to impose our own schedules and enforce bedtimes. In addition, many older kids who are used to having a lot of privacy and social time at school are now filling their needs for independence and connection with their peers by staying up playing video games half the night, unmonitored by sleeping parents.

Unfortunately, irregular sleep causes more than grogginess and grouchiness. Even modest reductions in sleep quality, such as simply not sleeping deeply because of a blue-light-induced decrease in melatonin, tend to make kids feel lonelier, even without a reduction in quantity. So, if their sense of connection to peers is already fragile, sleep disruption might be exacerbating the problem.

We parents will do well to enforce consistent bedtimes. The most important thing is not necessarily that they go to bed early (if their school starts late and they can sleep in), but rather that they are getting enough sleep for their age, and that they are doing so on a regular schedule. (See this post for how to reset kids' biological clocks.)

Practice accepting whatever is actually happening. Our kids don't have to *like* doing school online, but the more they resist it, the more they will struggle. We can acknowledge all the ways that school isn't ideal right now, and also how they are feeling about it. It's okay if they are frustrated or disappointed. And, also, the sooner they accept the reality, the better.

That doesn't mean that they won't feel frustrated anymore, or disappointed, or saddened by the state of things. Our feelings are a part of what is actually happening! When our kids surrender resistance, they put themselves in a better position to move forward.

To be clear, acceptance is not the same as resignation. Accepting a situation doesn't mean that it will never get better. We don't accept that things will stay the same forever; we only accept whatever is actually happening at the moment.

Foster happiness. By happiness, I mean positive emotion, not pleasure. Positive emotions enhance our “cognitive flexibility”—that's a fancy way of saying our ability to deal with a change. Research shows that positive emotions (like gratitude or awe) make dealing with change less taxing, and they make us more open to new things. This might be part of the reason why other research shows that students with higher emotional well-being tend to be more than one semester ahead of those with lower well-being.

Yours,
Christine

Get the
science of a
meaningful
education
delivered to
your inbox.

Email Address

Sign Up

About the Author



Christine Carter

Christine Carter, Ph.D. is a Senior Fellow at the Greater Good Science Center. She is the author of *The New Adolescence: Raising Happy and Successful Teens in an Age of Anxiety and Distraction* (BenBella, 2020), *The Sweet Spot: How to Accomplish More by Doing Less* (Ballantine Books, 2015), and *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents* (Random House, 2010). A former director of the GGSC, she served for many years as author of its parenting blog, Raising Happiness. Find out more about Christine [here](#).
