

Tips for Families in Supporting Their Children with Disabilities in Virtual Formats

First, remember that your role is a parental one. Your child needs family.

- Teachers are still teaching, just in a virtual format, and with a different schedule. It can be confusing for students if families try to assume the role of teacher.
- Explain to your child that their teacher is still their teacher, and that you are in communication with the teacher to help them learn at home. While you may feel more pressure with your child at home, try to think of it as a different way of helping your child with learning.

Set up a comfortable space in your home for learning. While school closure for COVID-19 is temporary situation, it is likely that it may be extended as needed to keep people safe.

- Choose a non-distracting space in your home to set up a learning space. Some students need a quiet area in their room, while others need oversight and frequent assistance.
- Remember that it is not necessary for your child to sit at a table in order to learn. Pillows, a floor space, lying on the couch, or even a yoga ball might provide additional comfort for your child while learning. Students with sensory needs can be supported in this way.
- Think about what your child will need in order to learn and plan around those needs. Once you have a space, gather supplies such as notebooks, pencils, calculators, or any type of supportive or assistive devices your child needs, and make sure they are nearby.

Establish a schedule. Schedules are important for you and for your child, especially if you are also working from home. Set clear expectations and goals with your child.

- Keep bedtime and daily routines intact, and work with your family to establish a daily schedule for learning at home. For some students that might mean following their classroom schedule as closely as possible, especially if their class is meeting virtually through video.
- Some schedules and goals may need to be visual. Ask your child's teacher for the class's schedule, post it, and stick to it as closely as you can. Some students will need support, such as social stories, to make even minor adjustments to the schedule, so be patient and as consistent as you can. Post clear goals that you and your child have agreed to.
- You may need a daily chart, so that your child can check off each item as they complete it. Cutting apart the schedule, writing or snapping a picture of the start and end times for each section, and taping up one item at a time next to the clock may also help your child visualize the day and the progress toward his or her goals.

Allow breaks and time for recess. Most children don't have long attention spans, and this can be even more likely for students with disabilities. Many students' individual education plans (IEPs) include accommodations for frequent breaks, and this will apply to home learning as well.

- Breaks are good times to allow your child access to their preferred activities or to have snacks.
- Recess is also extremely important, even though it may look a little different at home. If your child cannot play outside, you can use exercise programs for video game consoles, or access video channels from YouTube or <https://www.gonoodle.com/>. If your child receives physical or occupational therapy, you can use their therapist's suggestions for at-home exercises.
- It is a good idea to use a timer to indicate the end of a break. If your child needs a visual timer, you can download one here: <https://www.online-stopwatch.com/classroom-timers/>.



Find information on inclusion and contact local facilitators at: www.FloridaInclusionNetwork.com

Limit distractions. Siblings, gaming devices, tablets, television shows, or other distractions are likely to take your child's attention away from schoolwork.

- Try to limit distractors to scheduled break times. Set a timer to signal the end of a break.
- Try playing music with 50-80 beats per minute in the background, such as classical music, nature sounds, or video game music (without the visuals, of course). Music has been found to have a positive impact on productivity and concentration. You might find that music helps you focus more and be productive, too!

Allow socialization. Even if playdates are not recommended, you should find ways for your child to interact with family, friends and classmates.

- Allow video chats or FaceTime. You may have to work with other families to set this up, depending on your child's age or ability to do this independently. Even for teens, sometimes texting or social media just isn't enough.
- In addition, reserve or schedule some time for your immediate and extended family to interact and bond, even if it is virtually.

Provide time away from screens. Eye strain, screen glare, and not moving cause fatigue.

- Using virtual learning platforms should include off-screen time with books, drawing, writing, and other mediums of learning. Your child may need to have pages printed out, or have a hard copy of textbooks, in order to use removable highlighter tape or reading guide strips, as needed.
- Reinforce the lesson content through activities and hands-on experiences at home. Students with disabilities will benefit from making these connections.

Find or create support networks. You are not alone. Everyone is experiencing this, so reaching out can provide you with new resources, ideas, or just plain comfort.

- Your child's teacher(s), related service providers, therapists, and other professionals are still available to you to provide what is needed to help your child learn, even if it looks different from what they usually do. They are working hard to be creative with ways to provide services to students with disabilities in a virtual format.
- Other families are also experiencing the same challenges. If you do not have access to a family virtual group, request that one be created so that you can connect with others to share experiences and solutions.

Ask for help. While we are practicing physical distancing and families and teachers are doing their best to continue education, many agencies and organizations are temporarily suspending fees for their online resources so that there are plenty of resources.

- School and district websites, organizations for students with disabilities, and social media have provided increased access to websites and programs to support learning for students with and without disabilities. Too many resources can also be overwhelming, so select just one or two, and see how it goes.
- Resources will also be shared by your child's teacher(s) and support providers. If you need suggestions, or something isn't going well, don't hesitate to reach out.

Be patient - with your child, with the system, with teachers, and with yourself. This is an unusual time, and nobody is perfect. There will be meltdowns, technology challenges, and unanswered questions. But tomorrow is a new day, so stay positive, healthy and focused.

Glossary of Terms

Accommodations – Changes in the way a child learns. Extra time, frequent breaks, fewer questions, or a different format for responding are a few examples. For more: <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7690/urlt/0070069-accomm-educator.pdf>

Assistive device – Any item or piece of equipment that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of a child with a disability.

Individual educational plan – A written plan for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with federal law.

Occupational therapy – A form of therapy that focuses on school activities, such as writing, self-care, or hand strength to increase independent functioning for students with disabilities.

Physical therapy – A form of therapy that focuses on mobility and movement for students with disabilities who need assistance in navigating physical spaces.

Preferred activities – Anything that a child eagerly looks forward to doing.

Reading guide strip – A transparent, colored reading strip used to help students who struggle with keeping their place while reading.

Related services – Services required to assist a child with a disability, such as speech-language therapy, audiology services, interpreting services, physical and occupational therapy, social work, counseling services, or orientation and mobility services.

Removable highlighter tape – A removable alternative to highlighter pens used to highlight word parts, parts of speech, vocabulary words, punctuation, prefixes, suffixes, and more.

Sensory needs – Difficulties experienced when receiving and responding to information from the senses. Children who have sensory needs may have an aversion to anything that triggers their senses, such as light, sound, touch, taste, or smell.

Social stories – Individualized short stories that depict a social situation that your child affected by autism may encounter, along with ways for your child to handle them.

Virtual learning platform - Web-based systems that can be use for teaching. Examples: Google Classroom, Office 365 Teams, iReady, Zoom.

Visual timer – An item used to show a countdown of time, in the form of digital numbers, a disappearing color wheel or an oil-based liquid.