

Tips for Homeschooling Children With Special Needs

Before schools closed their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many families were new to homeschooling. This sudden change has been challenging for most parents, but especially for those with special-needs children.

While schools remain closed until further notice, what can you do to support your child's learning?

"Parents shouldn't try to be the teachers," said Dr. Gwen Wurm, pediatric physician with the University of Miami Health System. "Your child may not be completing lessons at home exactly as the school would prefer, but this is about surviving this time in our lives and its limitations. Don't stress out if your child isn't sitting still and completing all the lessons their school provides. There will be time later for your child to catch up in the classroom."

Be creative and flexible with learning opportunities

"Make learning at home fun for you and your child," Dr. Wurm advises. "Children don't need to sit still in a room of 20 students to learn something." Find learning opportunities outside the traditions of education and structure. Be creative and flexible to make the best use of your resources and this extra time with your child. "This isn't a greenlight for completely unstructured, unsupervised, hands-off education. But, for now, we're broadening the scope of what learning is," she said.

"We want to keep kids healthy and ready to learn. So much of what happens in

children’s brains and bodies is dependent on food choices,” said Dr. Wurm. “Parents are cooking more at home these days, which is spectacular. Turn home-cooked meals into an opportunity to restructure how you feed your family. Instead of sugary boxed cereal for breakfast, cook a simple meal with your child, and demonstrate measuring and counting. Discuss the names and colors of different fruits and vegetables. Name the different cooking techniques, like stirring, chopping, and boiling. Some older children with learning disabilities might enjoy learning about the science of cooking and the nutritional values of the different ingredients.”

“Our expectations need to change for now. But, you are not alone in this.”

For playtime, board games and puzzles have learning imbedded in them. “Games like Scrabble and Boggle can expand a child’s vocabulary with your help. Puzzles can improve a child’s attention span and encourage matching colors and patterns,” Dr. Wurm said. “Card games teach kids how to take turns, be patient, and think ahead.” As you play, model positive behaviors for your child like fair play, patience, and being happy for others when they win or make a strategic move.

Emotional learning is also important for children. “The isolation of this public health pandemic is teaching us to manage the emotions of being away from those we love. Respond to your child’s frustration and disappointment with openness, kindness, patience, and honesty.” Here’s some guidance on speaking with your child about the COVID-19 pandemic.

10 Tips for Successful Homeschooling

1. Create a quiet, clutter-free learning space to reduce stress and distractions.
2. Make a daily and weekly calendar/schedule, color-code it, and stick to it. Here's a list of possible activities to include.
3. During learning time, reduce distractions like music, video and computer games, social media, TV, toys, and pets.
4. Visually break down school assignments into more manageable steps.
5. Use technology accessibility features that can help your child. Options include read aloud, text-to-speech, slowing video playback, and closed captions.
6. Require that your child take frequent breaks from schoolwork. If you or your child is getting frustrated or restless, take a break. This is also a good time for exercise and physical play before children return to more structured learning.
7. Connect with your child's teacher via email, text, phone calls, or video conferencing. Address your child's unique learning barriers. How can you help a child who is struggling with tasks like reading, comprehension/understanding, writing, and organization?
8. Talk to other parents of special needs children. No one has the perfect approach to this situation, but you can learn from and support each other.
9. Reduce stress at home for the entire family. Lowering emotional stress opens the door for learning; clearer, focused thinking; and immune system support. Try a meditation or yoga app designed for children. This can be particularly helpful for those with ADHD.
10. Get outside. Seeing different scenery and spending some time in the sun (while protected from the harmful rays) can help reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. It's also an opportunity to identify different animals, plants, and street signs. Review the rules for safely crossing streets and playing

with objects like a ball or kite.

Of course you and your children should follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines for proper social/physical distancing at all times.

Dr. Wurm reminds parents, "Our expectations need to change for now. But, you are not alone in this."

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"Use this as an opportunity to create a healthy lifestyle," says Dr. Raul Poulsen, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the University of Miami Health System. "Adapt new ways to manage stress and anxiety. Stay physically active. Doing things together as a family will create unity and cohesion and establish a sense of

normalcy." *Read more.*

Talking to Your Kids about COVID-19



Kids know about the coronavirus, or COVID-19, outbreak. It is on the news, everyone is talking about it, and your child's teacher or school may have given them instruction on personal hygiene like washing hands, etc. But hearing about it from all those sources isn't nearly as important as hearing it from you. *Read more.*