

# Keeping Kids Engaged in Remote Learning

## Tips for coping with the challenges of virtual school

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At this point, many kids have been doing remote or hybrid learning for the better part of a year. As parents, it's easy to feel like we should have this down by now. But if your child is refusing to log into online classes or blowing up over constant schedule changes, you're not alone. Lots of kids are struggling to feel invested in school.

Still, with classes resuming in the new year, families have an opportunity to start fresh. With a few new strategies in your back pocket, you can help your child get the most out of a difficult experience — and keep conflict at home to a minimum.

### Get to the root of the issue

Even if your child is making their negative feelings quite clear — say, by running into the other room and slamming the door when it's time for online class — the causes may not be obvious.

“There are lots of reasons why kids might not be engaged with school,” says Daryaneh Badaly, PhD, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute. For instance, some kids might be struggling because they're being asked to do more remote work than they're able to handle. Others might have attention issues that are exacerbated in online school, or they might be experiencing anxiety that's holding them back.

The best way to start sorting out the possible source of the problem is simple: talk to your child. “The person who knows the most — and who might not know how to say it — is the child,” Dr. Badaly says. Here are her tips for having a productive conversation about this tricky topic:

- Pick the right moment. “Don't talk to the child when things are really bad,” says Dr. Badaly. “If they're throwing a tantrum and saying, ‘I'm not going to do this,’ that's not the right time to talk. Give them the time to cool down and feel a little bit better, and then come back to it.”
- Validate their experience. Letting kids know they're not alone can help them confide in you about what they're going through. You might share some of your own challenges with remote work, or model language they can use to articulate the problem: “I've missed my coworkers so much these last few months. It was easier for me to focus when I worked with other people.”
- Ask open-ended questions. “They give the child more space to say what they want to say, rather than focusing the conversation for them,” Dr. Badaly says. For instance, you might ask: What would you like to get out of the rest of the school year? What do you think would make school feel more interesting to you?

Dr. Badaly notes that it's important to frame the issue as something that's going wrong *for* your child, rather than something that's wrong *with* your child. The goal is to emphasize that you and your child are on the same team, and that you're there to help them — not to blame them.

And if your child does seem to be dealing with a mental health challenge like anxiety or depression, this conversation can clue you in that getting professional support from a pediatrician, therapist, or school counselor might be helpful.

## Rethink motivation

Of course we want our kids to care about school. But right now, that kind of internal motivation might be unrealistic — and that's okay! Letting go of the idea that your child should *want* to engage with school can actually make it easier to keep them involved.

While your goal might be for your child to do their schoolwork, they might have a different goal altogether. Maybe they want to earn more screen time or pick what's for dinner — or just get you to quit bugging them about schoolwork. Figure out what your child really wants, then make a contract to match. For example, you could agree that for each online class they participate in, they'll earn points toward a reward. “Yes, it's wonderful to be educated,” says Dr. Badaly. “But sometimes it's fine for a kid to just say: ‘This is eventually going to get me that PlayStation. So I'm going to do it.’”

This approach is better for kids who are simply fed up and acting out, rather than those dealing with more persistent mental health or learning challenges. However, Dr. Badaly notes that this kind of incentive can also help kids cope with milder cases of anxiety and depression. The extra motivation can create a positive feedback loop: once kids get into class, the social engagement and sense of accomplishment can boost their mood, which makes them feel more motivated to do it again tomorrow.



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## Collaborate with teachers

In some cases, a little more communication with your child's teachers can go a long way toward improving engagement.

One common scenario right now is that some kids just aren't keeping up with the amount of work that's expected. "The burden placed on the child might be too much, or the family might misunderstand what the teacher's expectations really are," Dr. Badaly notes.

Try checking in with the teacher about their expectations and whether it's possible to adjust them. For instance, if your child struggles to complete a worksheet of ten math problems, their teacher might give them permission to complete just two or three. That way, the teacher still gets a sense of the child's progress, while the child gets a more achievable goal.

Talking to the teacher is also crucial if anxiety, depression, or another mental health challenge might be interfering with your child's school experience. Fill the teacher in and let them know what they can do to help. For instance, you might ask a teacher to actively praise a child who's dealing with low self-esteem, or you could ask for permission to keep your child's camera off if they experience social anxiety. Small adjustments like these can make school feel more manageable for kids who are struggling.

## Adjust your expectations

There's a lot of talk right now about this school year as "lost," but Dr. Badaly encourages parents to be a bit more optimistic. "It's a difficult year, it's a year where students might need a lot of help," she says, "but it's not a completely lost year."

The key to reframing this school year in a more positive light — and helping your kids stay motivated along the way — is setting realistic goals. Dr. Badaly recommends picking a few top priorities that are most essential for your child this year, like building math skills and reading more independently. "Work toward those core components," she says. "And the rest? If you can get there, awesome. If you can't, maybe acknowledge that the situation is just really tough on everyone."

By focusing on a couple of important things and easing up on the rest, you'll decrease pressure on yourself and your child. The idea is to help kids get the positive experience of achieving a smaller goal (like finishing a book on their own) instead of feeling overwhelmed by the idea of finishing a book *and* acing a science test *and* writing a social studies paper. Even small wins can interrupt bigger patterns of feeling discouraged and unmotivated, and they can help kids build up to more ambitious goals over time.

Lowering your expectations might feel counterintuitive, but Dr. Badaly notes that many kids thrive when they don't feel as much pressure from parents. She recently worked

with a child who had a hard time engaging in remote learning in the kitchen, with her parents nearby. “The parents would check in in a friendly way,” Dr. Badaly says, “but to the child, it didn’t seem friendly. It seemed like they had huge expectations.” By simply moving her work set-up to the basement, away from her parents, the child had a much easier time focusing.

## Give yourself a break

It’s natural to feel overwhelmed by managing kids’ schoolwork on top of all the other burdens of daily life during a pandemic. And the truth is that there’s no easy fix for many of the challenges that families are facing.

That’s why it’s so important to cut yourself plenty of slack. “You probably cannot be a full-time worker and a full-time teacher who is also an amazing parent,” notes Dr. Badaly. “It’s too many things all at the same time.” Instead of getting caught up in all the things you can’t do, try to reward yourself for the things you *are* managing to do. Remember that essentials like feeding everyone or keeping your job are huge accomplishments right now, whether or not your child finishes their math homework.

What’s more, giving yourself a break sets a good example for your kids. When you take time to rest and relax, you show them that work isn’t everything, and that it’s okay to be less than perfect. “Have some fun time with your child to keep that positive relationship,” Dr. Badaly says. Even if that’s all you and your child get done that day, it’s still time well spent.