

Distance Learning and Your Child with Disabilities: Tips for Families

During this time of the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, children are no longer getting on the school bus in the morning to engage in their education for six hours a day. Many parents are feeling stressed, thinking, “I am not prepared to homeschool! How can I teach my own children? How do I fill the time?”

While there are some virtual school options available year-round, traditional schools are modeled very differently. The ten days that Governor Walz gave school districts to prepare for distance learning is more than many states received. This timeline was intended to allow school districts time to respond to this crisis.

We are currently experiencing distance learning in a crisis, and the learning curve for educators, as well as families, is steep. We all need to remember to make the demands we put on ourselves and our children reasonable ones. The following tips may help you feel more confident in the weeks ahead.

- **You are the parent, not the primary teacher.** Distance learning is not a choice you made. During this time of distance learning, your child still has a teacher. Your job is to help your child have the space and time that they need to work on the lessons their teacher has developed.
- **Communicate with staff.** Good teachers are always engaged in reflective practice; they do this by monitoring their students to see what works. This gives them the ability to adapt lessons, condense lessons, or reteach challenging material. With distance learning, they may not have the ability to observe their students to know what works well and what is challenging. If your child is confused about a lesson, you should communicate the struggle or lack of understanding to the teacher. The only way they can meet the needs of your child is to know how the distance learning lessons are working.
- **Be patient.** Many teachers will tell you that it takes three times of presenting and refining a lesson to produce something that is effective and easily understood. This process of distance learning is completely new to most teachers and students. The information, platform, and everything else that comes with distance learning is being done for the first time, so it may not be perfect. However, know that your child’s teachers should be available to answer your questions and respond to concerns.
- **Be flexible in response to your child’s needs.** If you find your child is distracted, frustrated, or finishes quickly, let them take a break. Time spent doing something else will often allow them to be more focused when they come back to their studies.
- **It takes a lot longer to present to 30 students than it does for one student to learn something online.** Do not expect that your child will be learning at home for the six or so hours that they are typically learning in school.
- **Consider unique opportunities for your child to learn at home.** Look for opportunities to incorporate learning into the home. Baking or cooking together helps reinforce learning about math, sequencing, reading, and often patience. Explain that you have something to do; giving them the opportunity to come up with a plan to keep themselves busy for the next 30 minutes, or however long you need, can support their understanding of time management.

Whatever the task, remember that at some point things will return to a more normal schedule. Be patient with your child, be patient with the school staff, and most of all, be patient with yourself.

For additional information, contact PACER Center at (952) 838-9000 or PACER@PACER.org.