

COVID-19 Distance Learning and Challenging Behaviors

Almost overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed our educational system. Transitioning to a distance learning model is just one of the adjustments families have had to make without warning or preparation. Expectations for learning, communication with the school, the amount of time and help that children need from parents or caregivers to learn at home, and setting up a home environment that supports learning can be overwhelming and challenging.

All of these challenges may change your child's behavior. The behavior may be a way of communicating and often expresses a need or a response to a problem that is not being resolved. Children are more likely to use challenging behaviors because they may get a quick response.

What can parents do when their child is exhibiting challenging behavior during distance learning time?

Here are two things to consider:

Identify your child's problem or unmet need

It may look like your child is refusing to do schoolwork or being defiant, but your child may be having trouble completing the tasks being asked of them. Identifying why your child can't complete tasks will allow you to help them problem-solve and meet their needs in a different way.

To help identify the barriers to learning, you may consider:

- Does my child understand how to use the technology they are expected to use for distance learning?
- Does my child know how to navigate the programs or apps they are being asked to use?
- Do they understand the assignment?
- Is my child struggling with attention issues or concentration?
- Are there academic struggles, possibly already identified, for which they need more support?
- Are you noticing academic struggles that you were not aware your child was experiencing?

Connect with your child's teacher(s) about what support they can offer to your child and, possibly, to you.

Plan positive responses to behaviors

Proactively plan positive responses to challenging behaviors. Some strategies for positively responding to behaviors might include:

- Acknowledge and validate your child's feelings and experiences
- Reassure your child that you will help them figure things out
- Ask your child for ways you can help them, and do your best to honor their requests when possible
- Break assignments down into smaller, more manageable tasks, and offer breaks when those smaller tasks are completed
- Use a calm tone and manner when your child is using challenging behaviors

- Give your child space and let them know that you plan to check in with them after a specified period of time
- Be flexible and provide choices about when and what tasks your child will complete
- Allow your child to temporarily not do some work that they are struggling to complete
- Build in breaks and time for preferred activities
- Focus on what your child has accomplished, rather than the things they have not
- Create a system to reward your child for completing work

Distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for all families. If your child has challenging behaviors, consider what those behaviors are telling you about why your child is struggling. If you are not able to help your child find solutions to the problems they are experiencing or their unmet needs, reach out to school staff and ask for support.

You can also connect with a PACER Center advocate for support at (952) 838-9000 or PACER@PACER.org.