

Helping Children With Special Needs



During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brrring! The sound of the opening bell signals the beginning of a typical day of school. The school doors swing open, and the sounds of giggling students fill the hallways as they rush to their classrooms. Teachers stand in the hallways greeting students, encouraging them to put their belongings away and get started on their morning classwork. The children unpack their backpacks and store their personal items in their lockers, cubbyholes, or desks, all the while chit-chatting with their peers.

“What are we doing today, Teacher?” a curious student asks.

“Now, Teddy,” begins the teacher, “you know where to find the answer to that question.”

“Oh, yeah,” agrees Teddy. “I forgot to look at the daily routine on the board.”

Teddy glances at the class schedule posted on the board in the front of the classroom. He then looks at the list of

objectives organized by subject (see Appendix for an example of a class schedule). The entire day is outlined on the schedule. Throughout the day, math, science, social studies, reading, and writing are all covered using a variety of materials, from books and papers, to videos and Websites. Students often look forward to a break from the academic courses during the periods that cover physical education, music, and art.

For all students, and specifically students with special learning needs, classroom instruction continues from the opening bell to the closing bell, and it is a joint effort by administrators, teachers, maintenance and office staff, librarians, cafeteria staff, and volunteers to keep all the students on task and engaged throughout each day and week of the school year. The same is true for the teacher in the one- or two-teacher school with a teaching principal; however, the support system might include parent and community volunteers, teacher aides, and others who

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provide assistance. It takes an entire school staff, large or small, to educate a student, and the phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” accurately reflects what happens in many classrooms around the world.

Some students require extra time or assistance to begin or complete tasks. Others may require specialized tools or instructional materials to enable them to access and complete academic tasks. These students may or may not require formal special-education assistance.

Globally, an estimated 1.6 billion students have had their education interrupted and moved to online platforms; however, this number does not include students who have special learning and physical needs, those who “are marginalized, disadvantaged, or “invisible” in educational systems.”¹ According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), approximately 15 percent of the world’s population live with disabilities that can make day-to-day life difficult without some form of intervention, and this includes children and young adults enrolled in schools. Less than 10 percent of countries have law that support education for all students.² UNESCO, in collaboration with the Global Action on Disability (GLAD) Network, has called on governments to make online education and accommodations available to all students, specifically through use of proven methods of adapting curriculum to meet learners’ needs. They have also called on governments to provide support to educators and families so that these needs can be met.³

Within the United States, large and small public schools have access to resource professionals from within the public school system; and, when students need extra help with assignments, there are specialists available to work with them to ensure the students understand and meet their academic goals. These support services are publicly funded.

The 2004 U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was designed to ensure that children with disabilities attending public schools receive a “free and appropriate education.”⁴ Several other countries have similar government-mandated programs to support students with special needs.⁵ IDEA outlines guidelines and procedures to assist schools in identifying and developing Individualized Education Plans (IEP) to help students with special needs achieve maximum academic progress. An IEP details the extra supports, modifications, and/or accommodations a student may need to help him or her successfully navigate classroom expectations.

However, these regulations do not apply for children whose parents enroll them in private schools since private schools are not included in IDEA guidelines.⁶ Private schools in the United States are bound, however, by Section 504, a civil-rights law. Section 504 upholds the rights of children with disabilities to have equal access to education and protects them from discrimination.⁷ Under this mandate, private schools are required to provide modifications, accommodations, and opportunities (e.g., extra time on tests, assistive technology, ramps, tutors, etc.) that will help the child succeed.⁸ Through a program called Child Find,⁹

public school districts are required to identify children in the district that may need services, and this includes children attending public schools, private and parochial schools, and children within the designated school district who are homeschooled. As a result, students in private schools can be eligible for services paid for by public funds once assessed by a team of professionals (e.g., special- and general-education teachers, specialists, and/or a related service provider). This assessment results in what is called an Individualized Service Plan (ISP), which outlines accommodations and modifications that the child needs. Funding for ISPs are limited, however, since most funding goes to service students enrolled in public schools.

Regardless of the availability of funds, once a child has been identified as being in need of services, U.S. private schools and educators are required to provide any and all tools, strategies, accommodations, and/or modifications needed to enable students to access the general-education curriculum as outlined in the ISP.¹⁰ One example of an ISP accommodation may be that a student needs to have handwritten or printed notes prior to or following a class discussion/lecture. For example, if a teacher is working on a lesson about the planets of the Solar System, then he or she must provide access to copies of discussion notes, a study guide, or a copy of peer notes from the lesson.

Learning During the Pandemic

But what happens to these procedures during a pandemic?¹¹ What can be done to ensure that student needs are met, and how can schools help parents meet these needs? How do teachers and parents explain to children that they will no longer be going to school for classes? How do they help them deal with their fears about the coronavirus, the unprecedented quarantine, and the possible virtual reopening for the next school year?¹²

Unfortunately, as we now know, the normal school day may not return for some time; a “new normal” has begun. Administrators and teachers have worked feverishly behind the scenes to turn their physical classrooms into virtual areas of learning. This means that parents and families also have had to help children adjust to this new normal. Although classrooms, labs, recess, and field trips may look very different during virtual school, teaching and learning must still happen. Teachers who have students who struggle, require additional help, and/or have an ISP must work collaboratively with parents and individuals responsible for instruction at home to ensure that students’ learning needs are met. How can teachers provide the additional support and/or help parents help students meet the requirements of their ISP in the in-home classroom?

For many parents, the “new normal” of having to also be a teacher has created a sense of frustration and stress for both parents and students. Teachers and parents working together can help reduce student stress and help young people navigate the online, virtual classroom by using a few tested strategies and techniques. These strategies are also effective for students in a paper-based system who are not

accessing school through virtual platforms. Maintaining a regular daily routine, establishing a classroom setting for academic learning, creating visual schedules, using strategies to address visual needs, and encouraging peer socialization are simple and effective steps that teachers and parents can take to create a positive learning environment that will provide additional support for students as they navigate their online classroom and written assignments during remote learning.

Routines

Most students benefit from keeping a regular routine. For students with special learning needs, maintaining routines is key for having a successful day. During this time of quarantine, hybrid instruction, and frequent changes, teachers can communicate to parents that it is even more vital that students maintain a regular routine. Students enrolled in online learning will have a regular start and end time to their day; some schools might reduce the number of online in-class time so as to not overwhelm students with so much screen time. For students at home, where instruction is primarily facilitated by the parent or other individual responsible for instruction, these routines should be maintained (see Box 1: Tips for Parents). Students will be able to focus better when they have routines that are similar to the ones at school.

Visual Schedules

A student's entire day is filled with routines. Most teachers post their daily schedule in the classroom. Students with special learning needs may have a visual schedule posted in the class-

room and/or on their desk. Visual schedules are used to provide students with a quick reference regarding the layout of their day. This strategy is especially useful during online learning since teachers can still post the virtual schedule and refer to it frequently throughout the class period. This virtual prompt provides the student with a quick visual of what his or her day looks like. Reviewing the schedule at the beginning and end of the virtual session can help students to stay on task and refocus.

Teachers can provide parents with a copy of this schedule, which can be posted in a prominent place in the home where it is readily visible. Each day, parents can reinforce what the teacher has done by reviewing the schedule prior to and at the end of the day. This is a good way to help students process and prepare for the next day, and can be an easy reference point to help students refocus. Visual schedules are easily made by using pictures from magazines, actual objects (juice boxes, crayons, etc.), or pictures printed from smartphones and placed on index cards or Post-It notes. For older students, activities can be written on the card instead of using pictures. For some students, it can help to allow them some input in designing and developing the schedule. Examples of visual schedules and pictures can be found online (see Appendix for links to visual schedule examples).

Breaks

When building a schedule for the virtual classroom, teachers should be sure to include frequent breaks and a time for lunch. Preplanned breaks give students an opportunity to take time away

Box 1. Tips for Parents

Below are several ways parents can help students with special learning needs during at-home school:

1. *Maintain routines.* Begin every day the same as if students were physically going to school—i.e., wake them up, and have them eat a good breakfast and get dressed for school. Help them pack a lunch and a backpack for the day. To help children feel as if they are going to school, have them carry their school supplies and walk to their in-home classroom. It may be helpful for some students to go outside for a short walk down the driveway and then back into the house. For others, you may simply need to ask them to pick up their backpack and walk into another room that is designated as the in-home classroom space. The idea is to make the school day seem as regular as possible. Students will be able to focus better when they have routines that are similar to the ones at school.

2. *Coordinate breaks.* Breaks are essential. Students need time to process information, de-stress, and then refocus. In addition to breaks built into the regular online class, parents can schedule breaks throughout the time designated for learning, and coordinate these breaks with their own work schedule. (See Box 2 for ideas for Breaks or "Recess.")

3. *Create an in-home classroom space.* As part of building a routine, students need a designated space for learning at home. This may be a room, a table, or a space created using wall dividers. For more, see Box 3: Suggestions for Classroom Setting.

4. *Reduce the impact of screen time.* Increased screen time is an unavoidable consequence of the pandemic. Children with visual disabilities may experience fatigue and physical distress, eyestrain, dry eyes, and more. Hannah Sheldon-Dean of Child Mind Institute® offers several suggestions for managing screen time beyond what is required for school in "Screen Time During the Coronavirus" (2020): <https://childmind.org/article/screen-time-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.

5. *Plan opportunities to socialize.* Socialization is a significant part of the school experience, and even more so during this period of social distancing and remote learning. There are creative ways of bringing students together whether online through Zoom, FaceTime, or Google Meet, and possibly even opportunities to have students connect safely in-person. Teachers and parents working together with school administrators can come up with safe, yet fun and creative ways of building social skills. See article by Sierra Filucci, "Online Playdates, Game Nights, and Other Ways to Socialize at a Distance," *Common Sense Media* (August 12, 2020): <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/online-playdates-game-nights-and-other-ways-to-socialize-at-a-distance>.

for intense focus. Parents and those facilitating instruction at home should also include preplanned breaks during the period that the student is not in a scheduled virtual class. One effective way to do this is to coordinate breaks so there is limited interference with parental work requirements (see Box 2: Ideas for Breaks or “Recess”).

Classroom Setting

The design of the virtual classroom environment can make a big difference for students who have difficulty focusing, are easily distracted, or have issues with noise.¹³ The virtual environment should have clear, simple, uncluttered layouts. Content should be projected using large, bold, and high-contrast fonts on plain backgrounds so that it is easy to read. If preparing videos, include captions. The virtual classroom requires that information is presented in as many ways as is possible. For example, teachers must plan to make use of text, video, audio, and images when sharing information, and allow students to demonstrate learning in a variety of formats, as well. There are several resources online that provide helpful tips for creating accessible online classrooms. See Disabilities, Opportunities, Inter-networking, and Technology (DO-IT): <https://www.washington.edu/doi/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course>.

Similarly, teachers must encourage parents to set up the in-home classroom in a space dedicated for learning. The designated area should be free from distraction and excessive noise. If a separate room is not an option, they will need to work with what is available and find a space that can be designated as a “classroom” workspace. By using their creativity, they will find ways to enable the student to be a part of the process of setting up the workspace in

Box 2. Ideas for Breaks or “Recess”

1. Play-Doh™
2. Kinectic Sand™
3. Coloring books
4. Puzzles
5. Board/card games
6. Selected toys (Choose special toys to be used during break or recess time. Toys can be alternated daily or weekly.)
7. Music and movement
8. Legos™
9. Blocks
10. Arts and crafts

schools and teachers must include in their policies ways of limiting screen time. Some schools are already doing this by limiting the number of hours students are required to be online in virtual contact with the teacher during class, or by implementing a block schedule that allows students to alternate classes throughout the week.¹⁶ This is helpful; however, more screen time is always a challenge. Sitting and looking at a computer screen for long periods of time is not good for

a suitable location.¹⁴ (See Box 3: Suggestions for Classroom Setting.)

Reduce the Impact of Screen Time

An unavoidable consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on schools is the increase in screen time. According to Heather Kelly, “Families can feel powerless to control how much screen time schools are tacking on to their children’s days, especially when they need some of it to get their own work done.”¹⁵ As a result,

schools and teachers must include in their policies ways of limiting screen time. Some schools are already doing this by limiting the number of hours students are required to be online in virtual contact with the teacher during class, or by implementing a block schedule that allows students to alternate classes throughout the week.¹⁶ This is helpful; however, more screen time is always a challenge. Sitting and looking at a computer screen for long periods of time is not good for anyone’s health. For children with special needs, especially those with visual disabilities,¹⁷ too much screen time can cause visual fatigue and physical distress such as eyestrain, neck stiffness, dry/ inflamed eyes, and digital motion sickness.¹⁸ Teachers can suggest several helpful strategies that parents can use to help reduce the negative impact of computer screens on their children’s eyes:

1. Position the computer/ computer screen so that the child will have to focus his or her eyes downward.

2. Use an anti-glare screen if possible. These are easily purchased for minimum cost online or anywhere computer accessories are sold.

3. Place a small notepad and pen beside the computer, and encourage the child to frequently look away from the screen and to take notes or doodle.

4. Place small fidget cubes or objects in a container next

Box 3. Suggestions for Classroom Setting

Use the kitchen table during the virtual classroom time period (whether during online instruction or even when completing assignments such as worksheets or hands-on projects). Position the computer comfortably to allow for a small range of movement. Students should have the option to sit or stand when needed while still watching and attending to the lesson. If the student needs to stand or move during the lesson, contact the teacher in advance to share your concerns and what you are observing at home during the lesson.

The floor can be used for sitting by moving pillows or blankets to create a comfortable space. Try to arrange the setting near a couch or a wall so that students can rest their back while working on assignments.

If you have an outside deck or porch, set up a small table and chair and create an outdoor work area.

As long as students are able to answer questions when asked and successfully complete the assigned tasks, they should have some freedom to stand or fidget rather than having to sit still through the entire virtual lesson. Work with the teacher to create a movement plan for the student that will enable him or her to successfully engage in the lesson. Find ways for the child to access the information without having to sit for long periods of time.

to the computer to give the child something else to look at while listening to the instruction. These may also be a distraction, so use your best judgment when finding ways to engage the child in the lesson without his or her having to look at the screen for long periods of time.

5. Another suggestion is to limit additional screen time. Find other activities for children to decompress from academic tasks. Young people do not have to be sitting directly in front of the screen to be an active participant in the activity. Position computers and tools in such a way that it allows them to divert their eyes and body, to provide rest from continuous contact with the computer screen.

For additional information, see the Appendix for classroom accommodations for students with visual challenges.

Socialization

Socialization is a vital part of the school experience and the most difficult to replicate during remote learning. There are many ways teachers can incorporate cooperative learning in the virtual classroom even if children are nervous and do not want to speak during a synchronous (live) online class. Providing students with the option to share a video recorded response to an online assignment can help them develop oral presentation skills. There are other activities teachers can do with students such as making or building crafts or projects, or baking or cooking food. Students can share their projects or products with their peers or community members through safe delivery to a neighbor's front door or through a virtual platform. Using Zoom, Google Meet, or one of the many online platforms to go on virtual field trips around the world is another way for students to interact, learn together,

Sidebar 1. Additional Resources for Coping With Disruption

Ideally, planning routines, establishing virtual schedules, and identifying and organizing a physical space for learning should be effective in supporting the smooth delivery of instruction. However, despite best intentions, things may go wrong. From circumstances that make instruction difficult such as disrupted routines or the lack of physical space or technology resources, to no access to Internet or virtual classes, to students experiencing physical symptoms such as headaches, eyestrain, or screen fatigue, it is possible for students with learning needs to face significant challenges. Here are a few additional helpful resources for coping with the disruption:

Articles

American Psychological Association, "Advice for Caregivers of Children With Disabilities in the Era of COVID-19" (March 2020): <https://www.apa.org/research/action/children-disabilities-covid-19>.

Mary Burns, "School Interrupted: 4 Options for Distance Education to Continue Teaching During COVID-19," *Global Partnership for Education Transforming Education* (April 2020): <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/school-interrupted-4-options-distance-education-continue-teaching-during-covid-19>.

Davenia J. Lea, "Supporting the Learning, Growth, and Success of Our Students in the Face of Trauma," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 82:2 (April-June 2020): 23-26. Available at <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2020.82.2.5>.

U.S. Resources

Maryland State Department of Education, *Supporting Students With Disabilities During COVID-19 and Afterwards* (2020): <http://marylandpublicschools.org/programs/Documents/Special-Ed/TAB/SpecialEducatorsGuideCOVID-19.pdf>, 10-17.

National Center for Learning Disabilities:

"A Parent's Guide to Virtual Learning: 4 Actions to Improve Your Child's Experience With Online Learning" (March 2020): <https://www.nclld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Parents-Guide-to-Virtual-Learning-4-Actions-To-Improve-your-Childs-Experience-with-Online-Learning.pdf>.

"An Educator's Guide to Virtual Learning: 4 Actions to Support Students With Disabilities and Their Families" (March 2020): <https://www.nclld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/An-Educators-Guide-to-Virtual-Learning-4-Actions-to-Support-Students-With-Disabilities-and-Their-Families.pdf>.

International Resources Through UNESCO

Many countries have begun to provide resources for educators. See UNESCO's "Education: From Disruption to Recovery" (2020): <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse> for resources such as:

Webinars: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/webinars>;

Distance-learning solutions: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/solutions>;

National learning platforms and tools: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/nationalresponses>.

UNESCO Bangkok: "Empowering Students With Disabilities During the COVID-19 Crisis" (May 2020): <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/empowering-students-disabilities-during-covid-19-crisis>.

World Bank: "How Countries Are Using Edtech (Including Online Learning, Radio, Television, Texting) to Support Access to Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (June 2020): <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

and apply the academic skills they have learned in school while practicing socialization (see Appendix for Virtual Field Trips).

Beyond the classroom, parents, or those facilitating at-

Appendix

1. Pandemic discussion points:

Effects of COVID-19 school closures on parents and children:

<https://study.com/academy/popular/effects-of-coronavirus-school-closures-on-parents-and-children.html>.

COVID-19 tips for talking with children: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html>.

COVID-19 tips for helping students learn: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/children/learning.html>.

COVID-19 parent checklist: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/parent-checklist.html>.

Talking to your child about COVID-19: https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/how-talk-your-anxious-child-or-teen-about?gclid=Cj0KCQjwoaz3BRDnARIsAF1RfLcYaUIA24T8CrtQnv3hpHqELubxMTdSC5ZBPYj_MJwOczXzpRApWEoaAoUtEALw_wcB.

“Coronavirus in the Classroom: What Teachers Can Do”: <https://www.teachervision.com/blog/morning-announcements/coronavirus-and-the-classroom-what-teachers-can-do>.

2. Visual Schedule examples:

Daily routine example: <https://adayinourshoes.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Daily-Routine-Printables-2.pdf>.

Morning/afternoon schedule example: http://www.victoriesnautism.com/uploads/4/0/4/0/4040527/schedule_8_morning_.pdf.

Center card example: http://www.victoriesnautism.com/uploads/4/0/4/0/4040527/center_cards_f.png.pdf.

Visual support example: <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx>.

Premade visuals: <https://do2learn.com/>.

3. Classroom accommodations for students with visual issues:

<https://www.bouldervt.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/478/2015/12/227-Course-Handout-CCIRA-2016.pdf>.

4. Social communication/interaction: *Caribu*: <https://caribu.com/>. *Together*: <https://www.togethervideoapp.com/>.

5. Virtual Field Trips:

Discovery Education: <https://www.discoveryeducation.com/community/virtual-field-trips/>.

Virtual Field Trips: <https://www.virtualfieldtrips.org/video-library/>.

with toys and talk with one another (toy selections can be pre-planned so that students and have the same toys). Teachers and parents working together can come up with unique, fun, and safe ideas for socialization.

Conclusion

In many parts of the world, schools are still uncertain regarding what reopening format to adopt for the 2020-2021 school year. Some schools are continuing with virtual/remote schooling through the end of 2020 while others have announced that they will begin the 2020-2021 school year with in-person face-to-face instruction (see Appendix for talking points about the coronavirus and the classroom).

The strategies and information provided in this article can be used throughout the school year. Keeping students organized and on task may initially require substantial work. However, the long-term benefits of assisting students during these unprecedented times will help to increase their level of academic success. When teachers work with parents and those responsible for at-home school to collaboratively think outside the box, students can have a variety of experiences in their in-home classroom. Being creative is the key to helping all students stay focused and engaged in academic learning whether in a school building or in an in-home classroom. ✍️

home school might consider arranging playdates and social time for students since this is an important aspect of remote learning that should not be overlooked. There are numerous apps that enable young people to play games and read books with peers, adults in the community, and grandparents. *Caribu* and *Together* are two apps that allow students to FaceTime with parent-approved peers to play traditional games such as checkers and Connect-Four as well as read books together with friends (see Appendix for link to *Caribu* and *Together*).¹⁹ For younger children (e.g., preschool and kindergarten students), peer interaction can take place using inflatable or hard-sided wading pools appropriately distanced and arranged in a backyard or common area. Students can play in their assigned pools

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16. One example of a modified schedule is the reopening plan for Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Schools, "Reopening Schools Plan—Full-time Online Instruction" (2020): <https://www.fcps.edu/returnto-school/reopening-schools-plan-complete-information/full-time-online-learning-request>. On Mondays, all students participate in asynchronous, independent learning, and students with English-language learning needs and special learning needs who require additional instruction meet with their resource teachers. On Tuesday through Friday, elementary students in grades PreK-2 are in school for three hours per day, or three and a half hours for grades 3-6. These students receive synchronous, teacher-directed instruction in core subjects. Of that time, one hour per day is dedicated to extracurricular classes such as music, art, and physical education. Middle and high school students have a block schedule that alternates courses Tuesday through Friday. This schedule is designed to give students more time away from the computer screen.
17. Kate Bratskeir, "Eight Physical Risks of Too Much Screen Time" (November 2015): https://www.huffpost.com/entry/technology-health-physical-effects_n_564a1df4e4b045bf3df03368/.
18. WebMD, "What Is Computer Vision Syndrome?" (n.d.): <https://www.webmd.com/eye-health/computer-vision-syndrome#1>; For more on the challenges of increased screen time, see Heather Kelly, "With Remote Learning, It's Now Screen Time All the Time," *Washington Post* (September 6, 2020): G1, G4.
19. For more on protecting students during social interaction online, see "Protecting Student Privacy: Learning From COVID-19" by Annette Melgosa and Ernest Staats, available at <https://jae.adventist.org/2020.82.2.3>.