

How to Reduce the Stress of Homeschooling on Everyone



A school psychologist offers advice to parents on how to support their child during school closures.

BY REBECCA BRANSTETTER | APRIL 21, 2020



With nationwide school closures in effect, many parents are now monitoring homeschooling while at the same time trying to make a living in the midst of a terrible economic crisis. In this environment of broken routine and uncertainty, chances are your child is showing big feelings and challenging behaviors.

In my work as a school psychologist, I've been hearing from parents that despite their best efforts, their children are struggling with meeting homeschool expectations. Kids who never showed behavioral or emotional challenges are experiencing issues, and kids who had some struggles before are showing an uptick of challenges. Here are three ways to support your child (and manage your own stress) during school closures that parents I work with have found helpful.

1. Simplify: Relax your homeschooling and productivity standards to a level appropriate for a worldwide pandemic

If you're a parent suddenly trying to balance remote work and homeschooling, your household might look a bit like mine right now. As I am writing this, I am also toggling back and forth between helping my third-grader with Google Classroom, trying to set up my kindergartener for some independent writing work, and fielding questions every few seconds (wait, what *is* the difference between scalene and isosceles triangles again?!?).

I've come to realize in these past few weeks that being super productive with my work as a school psychologist AND giving full attention to homeschooling my children is not possible right now. Turns out, being a parent, teacher, and school psychologist are three different jobs that cannot all be done well at the same time.

Spending time wishing things were otherwise is an exercise in frustration. And since research shows that acceptance is an important trait in positive well-being, here are a few mantras about simplification you might want to try:

- I am not homeschooling. I am doing my best to help my kids learn at home during a crisis.
- I am not “working from home.” I am doing my best to work at home during a crisis.
- I cannot be as productive as normal because these are not normal times. I will focus on what I can accomplish in just the next 24 hours and let go of what I cannot accomplish right now.

TIP: CONNECT WITH TEACHERS

Connect with your teachers if your child is struggling with distance learning. For elementary school children, just one to two hours a day of “school” is sufficient. It's better to have one high-quality lesson completed with calm than battling all day long about doing everything assigned with stress.

Research shows that gratitude is another way to cultivate well-being. Even in challenging times, there is an opportunity to be grateful and to be accepting of what you can and cannot accomplish in a crisis.

Here's one simple strategy for you and your family members to start your day: Say, write, or draw (if your child is young) one thing you're grateful for, one thing to do, and one thing to let go of or accept. Putting gratitude

at the front of your day will set a positive tone for the day. And while you undoubtedly have more than one thing to do, focusing on ONE important task and letting go of impossible standards will keep you from feeling like you are falling short every day.

2. Structure: Keep calm and structure on

If you Google “How to support my child during COVID-19,” the top advice is to stick to a regular schedule, even when you’re all at home all day. There’s good reason for this. For adults and kids alike, routine and predictability are calming during times of stress. If you’ve tried to set a schedule and your children are resisting it, here are some reminders:

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

- Here is a short video training for parents on how to build structure and emotional checkpoints in the day (including customizable printouts of sample family schedules, a downloadable “Calming Toolkit,” and scripts to problem-solve challenging behaviors).
- The Collaborative Proactive Solutions model offers solutions to parents for challenging behaviors and resistance to schedules.
- Now is not the time to clamp down and control your child’s day. Now is the time to collaborate with your child on a schedule that works for the whole family.
- It is okay if your schedule does not go to plan every day. Every day is an opportunity to fine-tune what is working and eliminate what is not working.
- Your job as a parent is not to recreate an eight-hour school day. Your job is to help your child feel safe and do their best with the distance learning plan the teachers have provided.

It’s worth reiterating that you do not have to recreate a full school-day schedule! Your family schedule may look more like what you would create over a summer break, including opportunities for fun, exercise, hands-on learning activities, and family connection. It

is also important to build in “emotional checkpoints” during the day and involve your child in the schedule.

3. Support: Get ahead of the meltdowns (and teach critical social-emotional skills, too!)

When our children are experiencing big feelings, they may communicate them through behavior. If your child is melting down over something that seems small to you, it may be a sign they are overwhelmed or flooded with emotions.

For instance, when my kindergartner fell into a puddle of tears and screamed at me because she didn't like the word-sorting activity that her teacher gave her to do, it wasn't really about the sorting activity. After she calmed down using her “Calming Menu” we had created earlier (hugging the dog is her go-to), she ended up sharing that she was sad because she missed her friends. Had I clamped down on compliance on the assignment, it would have been a missed opportunity for her to practice calming down and expressing her emotions.

The important takeaway message here is that children (and, indeed, adults!) do not have access to their thinking and reasoning skills when they are flooded with emotions. If your child cannot focus on school tasks, or you are seeing them melt down, tantrum, or withdraw, it's likely because they are having a hard time meeting an expectation while under stress.

The antidote? Empathy. Research shows that empathy can calm the nervous system and re-engage the thinking and reasoning side of the brain. When you are in the middle of a meltdown, you might remind yourself of this using the following mantras:

- My child is not giving me a hard time; they are *having* a hard time.
- Behavior is communication, and my child is “telling” me they need support.
- The teachable moment about behavioral expectations is never in the “hot” moment. I must calm my child through empathy first.

The reality is, your job right now as a homeschooling parent is less about academics, and more about creating safety, belonging, and acceptance. Your kids can learn about academics from teachers. The most important skill you can teach is how to manage big feelings under stress. Here are some techniques that may be helpful in teaching critical emotional-regulation skills:

- Develop a list of calming strategies BEFORE you and your children need them. Post them on your fridge where all family members can readily use them.
- For research-based and easy-to-do connection activities that teach social-emotional skills, visit Greater Good in Education and pick a few to try with your family.
- Get support yourself by picking one self-care practice on the Greater Good in Action website so you can parent from a place of calm and model for your child how to solve problems together. Kids learn by watching us, so taking care of yourself is teaching your child how to cope.

We are living in unusual times, but we also have a real opportunity. Being in close quarters during times of stress is a chance to step back and focus on connection. In stressful times, *children will be protected if they are connected*. When all this is done and our kids go back to their schools, we can have given them the gift of connection and some new social-emotional and problem-solving skills.

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About the Author



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Rebecca Branstetter, Ph.D., is a school psychologist, speaker, and author on a mission to help children be the best they can be in school and in life by supporting school psychologists, educators, and families. She is the co-creator of the “Make It Stick Parenting” course, which provides parents tools to build their child’s social-emotional learning. She is also the founder of The Thriving School Psychologist Collective, an online community dedicated to improving mental health and learning supports in public schools. Learn more at www.thrivingschoolpsych.com.
