

Balancing Online/Remote and In-Person Learning for Young Children

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Learning does not happen in one natural way but in lots of ways.

Each individual learns differently. People learn differently in different cultural communities, countries and contexts, depending on what is available, who is powerful, what the norms and values are and how learning makes sense for different kinds of lives and circumstances.¹ Learning has changed across time and looks different generation to generation.² This is good news because it means that there are lots of ways to combine online, remote learning with in-person learning when it comes to young children.

At this time of COVID-19, teachers, parents, and caretakers are trying to figure out how to educate young children using online technologies. Schools and districts are trying to figure out how best to support parents and continue children's academic progress while they are away from school.

Here are some principles of early childhood learning that could be helpful in shaping how schools and districts approach daily or weekly support for children and families.

- **15/45 Minute Rule**

Give your full attention to young children for 15 minutes and then put an activity out or an online lesson/video so that you can work or complete other responsibilities for 45 minutes.

- **5 Senses**

Children learn by touching, listening, talking, moving around, observing and tasting. When things are bleak, go outside for a short walk and see what children notice and let them use all their senses. Or let children explore materials in the house like rocks, leaves, sea shells, instruments or cooking utensils.

- **Balance online with in-person learning**

Children learn through their bodies. Online learning (listening to people read books, math facts, reading apps, etc.) should be evenly balanced with in-person/hands-on activities like building, working, drawing or playing.

- **Pass on Your Knowledge**

Children want to learn about what parents are excited about. Teach your child to appreciate what you are interested in by letting them participate with you.

- **Learning happens by trial and error**

Teaching children is challenging and scary at times. We don't have to be experts to show love, attention and provide learning opportunities to young children. Young children learn to walk by falling down and so do their parents and caretakers.

The list of ideas below are meant for teachers, parents and caretakers of young children who are planning for the next few months – trying to balance learning, safety and mental survival. Each principle is research-based and citations are included. Thank you for all that you do and how hard you are working for children.

Ideas for Parents and Caretakers

1. Young children need undivided attention in short bursts.

If you give children 15 minutes of your undivided attention (no computer, phone or other adults), then you can give them an activity, some toys or a short video and they will most likely be content. If you try to pay attention to them while using devices or talking to other adults, they will keep trying to interrupt you and get your attention. We suggest a 15/45 model where you give your full attention to children for 15 minutes and then get work or other responsibilities done for 45 minutes. Even if you are working together on cleaning, fixing, cooking or another long activity, take a few minutes to include them or connect with them somehow while in the middle of participating together. This way they will feel connected and safe with you and they will be much more likely to play on their own for 45 minutes or so until they will need your undivided attention again. These numbers are a minimum and can change depending on the child, but kids need time to work and play with adult supervision but without adult direction. Give them a little deep connection and attention and then they will reward you with time to complete your other responsibilities.

2. Young children want to participate. Let them help.

Children learn through observation and participation³ – not just by being told something directly. Young children love to help people they love and will observe and participate alongside you while you are cleaning, working, cooking or helping others.⁴ They only learn to not help when we stop them, insult or criticize their efforts or insist on them doing it “perfectly.”⁵ In fact, children are usually more capable than adults think. Welcome them into whatever activity you are doing and let them know you appreciate them. Can they practice colors by helping you sort laundry? Maybe they can wash tupperware or other unbreakable dishes. Do you have plants? Your toddler may be able to water them. Remember that online learning should be balanced with in-person participation and helping out around the house. This is to make sure young children feel like they are contributing which helps them feel content, peaceful. Let children play a special role in caring for their grandparents or elders in person or online.

3. Young children’s attention lasts longer with one activity or set of toys at a time.

With in-person or hands-on learning, young children are more engaged when there are fewer options. This means that giving them a box with lots of trains, balls, blocks or sticks is too much and can overwhelm. Instead, give young children balls and a ramp OR sticks and pots OR blocks and cars or any small set of everyday objects from around the house. Old clothes, shoes and bags can spark imagination. You can play with them to get them going and then let them be to build and play. Then, when the time is over, you can take those away and offer a different activity or set of toys for them.

The idea is to make things special and foster curiosity.⁶ When children are interested and exploring, they will spend much more time engaged without your help. It's a good time to explore the home for toys that have been lost or shoved in a closet or corner! They can be used for play or to give away!

4. Young children learn through their bodies – let them touch, move, shake and yell when possible.

To balance out online learning (apps, videos, online lessons, etc.) children need in-person body experiences where they use their 5 senses and utilize their bodies to learn. This means moving, using objects for a variety of purposes (a pot or pan can be used as an instrument, container, pretend pool for toys or a way to move objects around the room), and being able to use their bodies to explore and make noise. Parents working at home or trying to find some peace in all this upheaval do not want noise all the time so really let go and allow children to make noise sometimes and really let go and then you can insist on quiet other times of the day.

5. Young children respond to direct connection, affection and love.

When children will not leave you alone or seem needy - they usually need love, attention and listening. If you can offer this - even if just for a couple of minutes - they are more likely to feel reassured and let you get some work done.⁷ It is helpful for young children to know what is going on. Find calm and reassuring ways to let children know what is happening at work, in the world or what the new normal will be like at home. Young children can handle difficult topics and circumstances if adults can be calm, communicate and reassure young children that they are loved and cared for.

6. Young children benefit from simplicity.

Planning for 10 minutes at night can save you hours of time the next day. You can plan out a schedule for the day that includes rest time, 3 meals, online time, outdoor time, and in-person learning time. You can collect items from around the house that you might need in a box so you have them handy. Young children do not need fancy toys. They just need to be able to touch and move things and explore how they work - they are usually interested in very simple items they see each day. For example, spooning beans into a cup feels good. So does moving containers around the house and putting things in them. Children also love learning games their parents and grandparents enjoyed playing.

7. Young children speed up and calm down on outside walks (if possible).

Taking care of nature and being able to spend time with plants, animals and scenery gives young children things to think about, notice, observe and talk about.⁸ Children are usually really excited to be outside at first and then they calm down. They are the ones that notice a really small puddle, the tiny rock inside, the airplane in the sky, or the leaves that fell off the tree. This noticing can give adults a break and a way to feel some calm and appreciation for how smart children are.

8. Young children need some space.

If possible, move furniture around so that there is floor space for different kinds of activities. It might not look great but floor space is helpful for children to entertain themselves. Sitting down with them on the floor helps them feel connected.

9. Young children need to share their knowledge.

Find ways for children to present, share or contribute their knowledge to others in the family or household or online to extended communities so they can have their new knowledge validated.⁹ When students have a sense that there will be an audience for their work, it adds another purpose, as well as helps them focus on how they want to share their knowledge.¹⁰ This is a great opportunity to connect with friends and communities that children are a part of but rarely see or connect with. Asking young children questions is a great way to keep them talking and sharing. Questions such as “I wonder how that happened?” or “How did you do that?” or even repeating back what young children say to you as if it is a question propels them to keep talking to you.

10. Young children love stories

Children can listen to stories read online, by their family members in-person or on-line. They can listen to their friends’ parents reading a story. Parents and grandparents can share oral stories or read stories to others in the class through platforms like Instagram or Zoom. Children will love hearing people they know telling them stories.¹¹ Hearing stories from community members and underrepresented groups can be especially powerful for young children to see how everyone matters in the world.¹²

11. Young children will learn more from GOOD content.

Think carefully about content! Just like there are very good websites, podcasts, videos and online games for young children, there are also terrible ones. Any site that promotes gender/racial stereotypes or treats children like babies (high-pitched baby talk, pink for girls and blue for boys) - choose a new one! There are plenty. Trust your instinct because young children need YOUR guidance and direction online. As you choose videos or podcasts for children, it is ok to reject ones that you don’t want to hear while you work. Choosing content that you also enjoy will help you engage with children about it later.

12. Young children depend on you, so take care of yourself.

In such stressful times, sleep and healthy eating are important. Having people to call and healthy ways to relax are not luxuries but a necessity to get through the stress, anxiety and uncertainty that COVID-19 is bringing. While you may have a unique situation, you are not alone and it is important to find ways to show love to yourself and deepen friendships so you can feel supported.

Ideas for Schools and Districts

- 1. Weekly themes:** Give parents and caretakers a theme of the week. This will help them think about what they know and can offer each week. Make them simple and useful such as colors, construction, helping, families, letters, patterns, water, food, relationships, plants, gardens, etc. Elders and community members are a source of expertise.
- 2. Weekly kits:** Give parents and caretakers a kit each week (perhaps with school meals handed out on Fridays) around each theme that includes worksheets, a special activity for each day and a suggested list of materials that can be found around the house that could be helpful. Offer parents toys such as blocks, duplos, and sidewalk chalk, all of which can be used for many different activities across days and weeks.
- 3. Daily checklists:** Give parents and caretakers a list of activities for the day that include a balance of online and/or worksheet activities AND in-person learning activities in which children use their bodies and senses. Doing some of the work for parents while encouraging parents to rely on their own knowledge and experience can help ensure that young children have meaningful in-person learning too.
- 4. Daily schedule:** Give parents and caretakers a 6 hour schedule for full day and a 3 hour schedule for half day to guide activities. This should be hour by hour, not every 15 minutes. This is because parents need time to work and move around. And children need time when adults are not telling them what to do and they can explore.
- 5. Daily face to face connection:** Give parents and caretakers a way for young children to connect with their teachers (and classmates if possible) through online, Instagram, facetime or Zoom. Visual connection (except in case of impairment) will mean more to children than audio or online chatting. Teacher video messages can help with the transition and chaos.
- 6. Check in calls:** Give parents and caretakers a call each day for their own support and comfort. This will have a significant impact on parent's well-being which will have a direct impact on children's well-being. Offer a 24/7 access line for parents seeking help with calming down or finding strategies when things are tough.¹³ See <https://preventchildabuse.org/coronavirus-resources/> for more ideas and resources.
- 7. Healthy food:** Children and parents need access to healthy food each day. You can help families by compiling a list of community resources.
- 8. Cultural differences:** Ensure that materials, activities and communication respect cultural representation and encourage parents to share their cultural expertise with their children. What an

opportunity this is for schools and districts to communicate how much they would love for parents to pass along what is meaningful to them!

9. Balance between following directions and creating

There are different neurological connections made when children are following directions or completing tasks compared to when they are creating. Making sure that phonetic lessons, for example, are balanced with creation activities online or in-person. Creation activities include online whiteboards, open-ended apps (see list below), drawing, building, making a collage, making up a story, putting on a show, interviewing someone or taking pictures. Creation activities usually hold children's attention longer than activities where children consume information or just complete tasks.

¹ Gutiérrez, Kris D., and Barbara Rogoff (2003) Cultural Ways of Learning: Individual Traits or Repertoires of Practice. *Educational Researcher* 32 (5): 19-25; Gupta, Amita. (2015). Using postcolonial theory to critically re-frame the child development narrative. *The Routledge International Handbook of Philosophies and Theories of Early Childhood Education and Care*, 147.

² Tobin, Joseph, Yeh Hsueh, and Mayumi Karasawa (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Correa-Chávez, Maricela, Rebeca Mejía-Arauz, and Barbara Rogoff (2015). *Children Learn by Observing and Contributing to Family and Community Endeavors: A Cultural Paradigm*. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* 49. Waltham, MA: Academic Press; Urrieta, Luis (2015) Learning by Observing and Pitching In and the Connections to Native and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. In *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, 49:357–379. Elsevier; Alcalá, Lucía, Barbara Rogoff, Rebeca Mejía-Arauz, Andrew D. Coppens, and Amy L. Dexter (2019). Children's Initiative in Contributions to Family Work in Indigenous-Heritage and Cosmopolitan Communities in Mexico. *Human Development* 57, no. 2-3: 96-115.

⁴ Orellana, Marjorie Faulstich (2001). The work kids do: Mexican and Central American immigrant children's contributions to households and schools in California. *Harvard Educational Review* 71, no. 3: 366-390; González, Norma, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti (2005). *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. New York: Routledge.

⁵ Coppens, Andrew D. and Lucía Alcalá (2015) "Supporting Children's Initiative: Appreciating Family Contributions or Paying Children for Chores." In *Children Learn by Observing and Contributing to Family and Community Endeavors: A Cultural Paradigm*, edited by Maricela Correa-Chavez, Rebeca Mejía-Arauz, and Barbara Rogoff, 91-112. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* 49, Waltham, MA: Academic Press.

⁶ Engel, Susan (2011) Children's Need to Know: Curiosity in Schools. *Harvard Educational Review* 81, (4): 625-45; Gopnik, Alison (2012). Scientific Thinking in Young Children: Theoretical Advances, Empirical Research, and Policy Implications. *Science* 337 (6102): 1623–27

⁷ <https://indigenoumotherhood.wordpress.com/2020/03/16/traditional-indigenous-kinship-practices-at-home-being-child-centered-during-the-pandemic/>

⁸ Marin, Ananda, and Megan Bang (2018) Look It, This Is How You Know: Family Forest Walks as a Context for Knowledge-Building About the Natural World. *Cognition and Instruction* 36 (2): 89-118;

⁹ Nxumalo, Fikile (2019). *Decolonizing Place in Early Childhood Education*. New York: Routledge.

⁹ Helm, Judy Harris, and Lilian G. Katz (2011) *Young Investigators: The Project Approach in the Early Years*. New York: Teachers College Press.

¹⁰ Payne, K. A. (2015). Who Can Fix This? The Concept of "Audience" and First Graders' Civic Agency. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 27(4), 19-22.

¹¹ Alvarez, Adriana (2018) Experiential Knowledge and Project-Based Learning in Bilingual Classrooms. *Occasional Paper Series*, 39 (8): 1-8; Genishi, Celia, and Anne Haas Dyson. 2009. *Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times*. New York: Teachers College Press.

¹² www.storylineonline.net; www.storypirates.com; <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/532788972/circle-round>

¹³ Adair, Jennifer Keys, and Alejandra Barraza (2014) Voices of Immigrant Parents in Preschool Settings. *Young Children* 4: 32–39; Doucet, Fabienne. 2011. "(Re) constructing home and school: Immigrant parents, agency, and the (un) desirability of bridging multiple worlds." *Teachers College Record* 113 (12): 2705-2738.