

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Kids Are Home. You Need to Work. What Do You Do?

How to keep your children learning and active while you handle your responsibilities—all, hopefully, without driving anyone crazy.



Matt Kramer helped his daughter Meg with schoolwork in San Anselmo, Calif., March 18. His daughters Frances and Lucy were also home as schools were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.
PHOTO: EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES

By
Andrea Petersen

With millions of people now hunkered down at home amid the Covid-19 pandemic, families across the world face a daunting challenge: How can parents keep working and children keep learning while they're on top of each other? And how can they stay sane during it all?

We talked to pediatricians, educators and child psychologists to get their advice on everything from daily schedules and screen time to how best to motivate kids to do their online schoolwork. Here's what they said:

Yes, your child does need some sort of schedule. No, it doesn't have to look like the typical school day.

Ambitious, color-coded schedules that divide the day into 45-minute blocks filled with productive activities have proliferated on social media. But such a rigorous schedule may just set families up for failure, says Roberta Lenger Kang, director of the Center for the Professional Development of Teachers at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Take time to figure out what works for your family. Dr. Lenger Kang, who lives in New York City, has important online meetings in the morning and needs to be quickly responding to emails then. So her three children, ages 4, 6 and 13, spend their mornings going on walks with their father, playing with Legos and having screen time. After lunch, she helps them with their school work. "Think about the learning. That is the important thing, not the timing," she says.

Still, kids do need a structure, says Rebecca Rialon Berry, clinical associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU Langone Health. “Children thrive on routine, which can help them feel safe, regulated and calm,” she says.



Colin, 10 years old, whose school was closed because of the coronavirus, did schoolwork at home in Washington, D.C., on March 20.
PHOTO: ERIC BARADAT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

So, neither kids nor parents should lounge in their PJ’s all day (no matter how tempting that may be). In the morning, children should do their typical getting-ready-for-school routine, such as brushing teeth, making beds and dressing in what they’d usually wear to school, Dr. Rialon Berry says. Keep bedtimes and wake times relatively consistent. Daily physical activity is important, too: Take time for “recess” outside or an indoor dance party. And give children a say in their schedules. You’ll get more buy-in that way, she says.

It can be helpful to define the beginning of the school day in a physical way, such as going for a walk, says Mary Alvord, a psychologist in Chevy Chase, Md. That can provide at least some psychological separation between “home” and “school.”

Be creative—and try virtual help—to motivate kids to do their schoolwork.

As any parent who has dealt with evening homework tussles knows, it can sometimes be tough to get kids to complete their assignments. And now there’s a whole lot more schoolwork that parents are on the hook to supervise.

Opt for “positive reinforcement over negative corrections,” advises Dr. Lenger Kang. For younger kids, under age 8 or so, “giving out high-fives” can be enough. The reward of a snack or screen time after a certain amount of schoolwork can also motivate kids, she says.

Dr. Alvord suggests hiring high-school or college students (who likely have a lot more time on their hands now) as virtual tutors for an hour or so a day to supervise schoolwork.

“It is a way to change the dynamic,” she says. Children will think “it is kind of cool” to spend time with an older student and will more likely get their work done without a struggle. It can also ratchet down tension within the family.

Parents must agree about who is “on.”

While middle- and high-school students may be relatively self-sufficient during their at-home school day, especially as more school districts get their curricula up and running, most elementary-schoolers and younger children will need a parent to supervise.

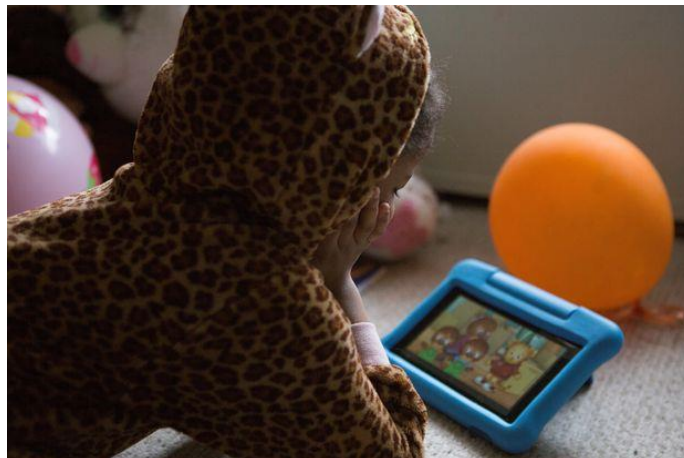
Parents must work out who does what and when—but not in front of the children. Divvying up household responsibilities can cause conflict in the best of times. When both parents are working from home, “there can be a lot of conflict around whose job is more important, who has a deadline,” says Paul Donahue, a child psychologist in Scarsdale, N.Y. “As much as possible, we want to iron out those [issues and responsibilities] outside of earshot of the kids,” he says. “Each person has to make sacrifices.”

Screen-time rules can be relaxed. A lot.

Pediatrician Dimitri Christakis is a lead author of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ media guidelines for young children, which recommend that preschoolers (ages 2 to 5) “limit screen use to one hour per day of high-quality programs.” But even he says those recommendations are unrealistic in the current reality when many parents are working from home without child care.

“The guidelines were never issued with the apocalypse in mind,” he says. Instead, he recommends parents limit preschoolers’ screen time to four hours a day.

“Of all the age groups, preschool has a fair amount of high-quality educational programming,” says Dr. Christakis, who is also the director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children’s Research Institute. He suggests that parents use guides like those from Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that recommends age-appropriate entertainment, to choose content and talk to children about what they have seen and learned.



Joy Malone's daughter watched video on a device at her home in New Rochelle, N.Y., in an area under lockdown because of a coronavirus cluster, March 19.
PHOTO: JOY MALONE/REUTERS

For elementary-schoolers, Dr. Christakis suggests limiting recreational screen time (not including what’s necessary for online learning) to three hours a day. “Given parental needs in

this situation, we should be willing to be fairly lax about these things,” he says. For middle school and high school, Dr. Christakis says to make sure tweens and teens are spending at least four hours a day away from screens (not including sleep time). There should be no screen time during meals, and for at least one hour before bedtime.

Kids still need a social life.

Between social media and multiplayer gaming, older children and teens tend to have a lot of experience connecting with their friends digitally. But younger children need to spend time with their friends in this new world, too.

“Young people really rely on social connections. Not having it, over time, can have an effect on mood and self-esteem,” says Dr. Rialon Berry.

Parents can arrange virtual playdates using Google Hangouts or [Zoom](#). Dr. Lenger Kang is helping her 13-year-old son set up an online Dungeons & Dragons club with his friends.

Dr. Donahue, the child psychologist, says responsible teens also could take walks together—as long as they stay 6 feet apart, as public-health officials recommend.

Some time alone is good, too.

Kids, especially teens, still need some physical and psychological space. With families suddenly spending so much time together, a spike in squabbles is probably inevitable, especially among siblings.

It is important for each child to spend some time alone to decompress, says Dr. Rialon Berry. For siblings who share a room, she suggests that each child gets at least 30 minutes a day in their room alone to do what they want.

Many teenagers are used to a certain amount of physical freedom. They may have had cars, jobs and liberal curfews. Now, they might be chafing at new rules and saddened by their loss of freedom.

“We have to recognize that they, too, are experiencing stress and strain,” says Nathaniel Beers, a pediatrician at Children’s National Hospital in Washington, D.C. Parents should give them privacy to connect with their friends and “vent to their community,” he says.

Brad Sachs, a family psychologist in Columbia, Md., says parents can help teens who are “rattling the cage for more independence” by encouraging their social consciousness and sense of altruism. Suggest that they offer to pick up groceries for a senior, or that they communicate with an isolated family member through FaceTime.

Says Dr. Sachs, “Those concrete actions tend to take the edge off that loss of autonomy.”

Ms. Petersen is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal in New York. She can be reached at andrea.petersen@wsj.com.

DIGITAL DOINGS

Selected activities for children, including podcasts and games.

- [Bloom](#): Musician Brian Eno helped create this app, which mixes instruments and artwork.
- [Brains On!](#): The podcast uses science and history to explore questions about the world, tackling subjects from black holes to narwhals.
- [Eleanor Amplified](#): A brave radio reporter has adventures in this podcast series that also offers a lesson in media.
- [Khan Academy](#): Kids can access free online courses in math, science, computer programming and other subjects from kindergarten through high school.
- [The Kid Should See This](#): The site offers more than 4,000 eclectic children’s videos that also aim to entertain adults.
- [Mission US](#): This series of interactive American history games delves into subjects like the Revolutionary War and the Great Depression.
- [Monument Valley](#): The puzzle app has been compared to an M.C. Escher drawing, except here an elfin person moves through mazes of increasingly complex buildings.
- [Mystery Science](#): The site features video lessons for elementary-school children and offers hands-on activities.
- [Outschool](#): Students can learn about everything from raising chickens to “Harry Potter” in these live online classes, which operate via video chat for ages 3 to 18.
- [Scratch](#): A free programming community from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that gives students a chance to create interactive stories, games and animations.
- [Six Minutes](#): Short episodes of this serial podcast dive into the mystery of an intriguing girl pulled from the chilling waters off Alaska.
- [Thinkrolls](#): The physics and logic app is geared toward children ages 3 to 8.
- [Toontastic 3D](#): Children can turn their stories into cartoons with animation, narration and music using this app.

—Ellen Gamerman