

# Reducing the Stress of Hybrid and Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Objective

To help families prepare for the school year with less stress, whether children are attending school remotely or in-person through a hybrid model.

## You Should Know

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of children are returning to newly-designed classrooms with rules like social distancing and mask wearing, or they are doing virtual learning or homeschooling.

According to recent research, the changes and uncertainty caused by the pandemic have had a significant impact on children's mental health. As last year's school year ended, 30% of parents reported their children were "experiencing harm" to their emotional or mental health because of social distancing and school closures. You might have observed your children struggling to meet virtual learning expectations. Kids who never had behavioral or emotional challenges might have experienced issues, and kids who had some struggles before school closures might have experienced an increase in problems. You might be worried about the upcoming school year, and wonder how you will manage your family's stress level.

Here are some suggestions for how families can prepare for the upcoming school year:

**1. Familiarize yourself with your school's plan.** Most schools are releasing extensive plans for the school year, including remote and hybrid learning guidelines.

**2. Communication is key.** Talk with your children about how school is going, and check in about interactions with classmates and teachers. Ask your children how they are feeling, and let them know what they are feeling is normal. Anticipate behavior changes in your child (like irritation, worry, or sadness). Watch out for the following red flags:

- Anxiety or worry is causing a great deal of distress.
- Getting along with family members or friends becomes difficult.
- Avoidance of normal activities in and outside of school.
- Physical symptoms suddenly come up – like stomachaches or fatigue.
- Excessive crying.

When your children are experiencing overwhelming emotions or melting down, they might communicate through behavior. Your child does not have access to their thinking and reasoning skills when they are overwhelmed with emotions. If your child cannot focus on school tasks, or they are having a tantrum, it is likely they are having a hard time meeting an expectation while distressed. What can you do? Use empathy. Research shows empathy calms the nervous system and re-engages the thinking and reasoning side of the brain. If your child is having a meltdown, remind yourself: "My child is not giving me a hard time; they are having a hard

time,” or, “Behavior is communication, and my child is *telling* me they need help.” You can create a “calm-down guide” and post it for all family members.

**3. Create an at-home learning space.** Children need a dedicated place for learning and school work, even if it is the dining room table.

**4. Stay active and eat healthy.** Kids who are doing virtual learning will miss recess and physical education classes at home, while kids who are attending school might also miss out due to social distancing. Schedule physical activity into your day – take a walk each morning or evening. For younger kids, taking periodic 10-minute “activity breaks” will help; they can do jumping jacks or dance, for example. Eating nourishing meals will strengthen your family’s immune system.

**5. Remain flexible.** You can help your kids develop more resiliency through leading by example. Maybe your preferred method of educating your children – in-person, remote, or hybrid – is not working out as you had hoped, but you can model a positive attitude. Be flexible and talk to your kids about the changes. Wishing things were different than they are will lead to frustration – and research shows acceptance is important for well-being.

**6. Develop routines.** Work with your children to create a schedule that works for the whole family. Routine and predictability are calming during times of stress. It is okay if your schedule does not go smoothly every day. Remember, your job is not to recreate an eight-hour school day. Instead, focus on helping your children feel safe and do their best with the educational plan that is in place. Be sure to include opportunities for fun, hands-on learning activities, and family connection. Use “emotional checkpoints” during the day to check-in with your children, and adjust the schedule as needed.

**7. Focus on the present and practice gratitude.** When talking about the pandemic, conversations should be age-appropriate and focus on what kids can control and what is happening in the moment. During dinner time or family meetings, you can get in the habit of asking your kids what they are grateful for. Research shows that gratitude is a way to enhance well-being, so even in challenging times, find ways to be grateful and accept what you can (and cannot) control.

**8. Be mindful of screen time – but let go of guilt.** Allowing your kids more screen time during the pandemic for socialization is important – but continue to monitor screen time and break it into increments throughout the day.

**9. Focus on skills.** It is helpful to know how your kids learn, whether they work fast, need more time, or work completely outside-the-box. Adjust accordingly by focusing on the skills they are learning rather than on precisely following each assignment.

**10. Cultivate a social life.** Your children probably feel isolated if they are learning remotely, and if they are in school and practicing social distancing, they might not feel connected to friends. You can plan a FaceTime or Zoom pizza party with friends. Make time for family activities like movie nights and board games. The quality of interactions at home can become more meaningful, which will have a positive impact on your children’s mental health.

**11. Discuss safety.** If your children are attending school in-person, they might be required to wear masks. Help young children feel more comfortable wearing a mask – you might put a mask on a stuffed animal, or decorate masks so they are more personalized. Review and practice proper handwashing techniques, and discuss the importance of socially distancing from other students.

**12. Seek support.** Support yourself by picking one daily self-care practice, or connect with a friend to vent. If you take care of yourself, you are more likely to parent from a place of calm and effectively problem-solve as a family. Kids learn by watching, so taking care of yourself is teaching your child how to cope.

During these unsettling and uncertain times, your job is less about academics and more about creating safety, belonging, and acceptance. This is the time to step back and focus on connection. By focusing on healthy connection and attitudes within your home, you will experience this year’s back-to-school transition as less stressful.

### What to Do

Following the above suggestions, complete any (or all!) of the following activities.

1. Create an at-home learning space for your children. Describe what you did.

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2. Set up an activity and healthy eating routine. This might include scheduling a family walk five evenings/week, playing a board game, or spending Sunday afternoons doing meal planning and preparation (*search online for meal planning ideas*). Use the following chart to plan weekly activities. Make a copy if you would like to plan the month ahead.

Date	Activity	Materials needed	Notes

3. What can you do to deal with your stress and frustration?

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4. Use an app, planner, or large whiteboard to outline the daily family routine. Describe what you did.

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5. Do this simple activity with your children: say, write, or draw one thing you are grateful for, one thing to do, and one thing to let go of or accept. You might do this during dinnertime. Try this activity, and describe your experience.

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6. What can you do to socialize with friends and family? What can you set up for your children so they can connect with their friends? Describe.

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7. Create a "Calm Down Guide" to post on your refrigerator or in a place where all family members have access. Brainstorm ideas, and make a list of what children and adults can do to calm themselves when they are upset or stressed. For example, you might escape with a book for 30 minutes, your partner might go for a run, and your teenager might play a video game to escape. Create the guide, post it, and discuss how it worked for your family.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise contribute to a less stressful start to the school year? Why or why not? Be specific.

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Were you surprised by what you learned while completing this exercise? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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