

Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home



How You Can Help Your Child Actively Engage in Learning

Young people often think of homework as a chore, and now that all schoolwork is “homework,” that feeling might be intensified. However, learning at home can be more than drudgery for your child. This time at home can provide opportunities to learn in a new way—to spark interests, creativity, excitement, and fulfilling engagement. In this section, we will focus on:

- **Understanding what it means to be engaged in learning:** what is it and why does it matter?
- **Using this information:** what strategies can help your child actively engage and stay engaged in learning at home?
- **Things to look for:** what is normal and what may be a potential warning sign that something needs more attention?
- **Resources:** what can you consult to explore this topic in greater detail?

As you read through [these resources](#), remember: Every family is different. Everyone’s individual circumstances are different. Everyone brings their unique set of strengths to address life’s challenges. The information we are sharing here is designed to be flexible and adapted in the ways that work best for you.

Understanding Why It Is Important to *Actively Engage* in Learning

With learning, there are different kinds of engagement. When children are *behaviorally engaged*, they simply attend virtual classes and complete and submit their schoolwork. Given the varying degrees of change and trauma children are experiencing right now, this type of engagement alone is OK. It may be all that your child can do right now, and it is important to allow your child that freedom.

However, it’s important to note that all people learn better when they are *actively engaged* in learning. When children are *actively engaged*, they are genuinely interested in and value what they are learning, and they can apply it beyond their lessons. Being *actively* and *emotionally engaged* helps young people to feel connected to their educational experience. This can help them to feel good about learning and themselves. Active engagement also can help motivate young people to do what is asked of them or even inspire them to want to learn more.

Here's the thing: As a parent or caregiver, you cannot make your child become engaged in their learning. The good news is that you can create opportunities to expand learning and make space for inquiry and creativity, thinking outside of the box, or trying things.

Using This Information

Supporting learning in your home and keeping your child motivated and curious may feel like a lot right now. Perhaps you did not feel particularly engaged in your own educational experience when you were younger. Or, you may not have the time or resources to spare (for more on this, please refer to the section on [readiness](#)). However, there are things that you **can** do. Here are a variety of strategies to help you help your child engage in learning.

- **Encourage your child to understand and appreciate that the opportunity to learn is all around them.** Learning is about developing and enhancing foundational learning and life skills: learning to solve problems, thinking critically, finding and making sense of information, accomplishing tasks, collaborating, and listening to and communicating with others (which can be done in your child's home language or languages other than English). This can occur while doing schoolwork but also through experiences at home and out in the community.
- **Introduce flexibility into where, when, and how your child learns.** This may mean discussing with your child what they are learning, the timing for this learning, and identifying indicators of progress and success that go beyond grades.
- **Make sure learning builds upon your child's passions and interests.** This is important not only as they work through their schoolwork but also as learning extends beyond the school curriculum and into their everyday life.
- **Make space for creativity and thinking outside the box.** Ask your child to explain their thinking and learning—not only what the answer is but how they arrived at it.
- **Help or permit your child to alternate between school-directed instruction and student-led inquiry.** Success and interest in one area can be translated back to the other.
- **Make meaning and apply learning across different situations and settings.** Take the time, whenever possible, to sit with your child and help them to identify the purpose in what they are doing or ask them to share something they are learning, what it means to them, or how it connects to their personal experience.
- **Recognize when it might be time to introduce other material and new approaches to learning.** If your child seems disinterested, tired, or bored, it may be time for a break or a new way of thinking.
- **Find ways to build in connection,** even if in-person contact is limited. For many young people, the most challenging aspect of the pandemic has been the lack of collaboration and connection we have when we work alongside one another. Are there ways in which your child and a few friends or family members could gather virtually in small teams or work on projects together?

- **Encourage your child to share what they are learning with others.** Whether it is with friends, family members, or their school teachers and staff, it is important for children to share what they are learning, what they are curious about, and the progress they are making. Being able to talk about learning will help everyone to learn better. For many families who have multiple children at home, taking breaks to reflect on learning and share their experience could be a good way to strengthen relationships in the home.
- **Understand that screen-based learning has its limits.** Because of this, you may have to help your child engage in other kinds of learning and projects so that they can sustain their engagement in the learning process.
- **Use disengagement as an opportunity for growth.** Are there ways that you can redirect in-the-moment frustration, challenges, and lack of connection to create a new learning opportunity? Consider asking your child where they are stuck and how they wish they could learn more about the topic if they could design their learning experience again.

HELPING YOUR CHILD DO MEANINGFUL WORK

Children need time and space, not only to accomplish concrete tasks but also to let their minds be free to wander and make sense of all that they are experiencing. All people—children included—benefit from uninterrupted (and technology-free) downtime and may feel renewed when they emerge from this reflective, quiet time. They also may regain their sense of purpose—reminding themselves what really matters and why.

A sense of purpose comes and goes during difficult times, but having purpose is key to engagement and meaning-making. Purpose gives us a reason to be creative and innovative, and a reason to work hard and persevere through the tough spots.

To help your child find a sense of purpose in these difficult times, consider ways to help your child make their work feel meaningful. See if you can help them make connections to what they are learning. For example, how might you help them see how their schoolwork fits into the “bigger picture”? Perhaps ask your child to think about why they are doing what they are doing (not simply because they were told to).

You may also talk to them about small ways they can help. If your child can come up with ideas that can be helpful in the current situation—whether that is tutoring a younger child or struggling classmate, helping out a parent or neighbor, or something else entirely—that can be inspiring and empowering. Help your child to identify problems they see around them and support their agency to imagine solutions and engage. This means giving them the space to think, work, and dig in. They may even get passionate about a project or idea—even one that is not directly related to their usual interests and activities. Self-direction, learning and creativity emerge when children are in this purposeful space.

Things to Look For

Some children are better able to directly communicate when they are disengaged, and others might show you their lack of engagement through their actions. Pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues that your child may need additional support.

Preschoolers may act out, throw tantrums, whine more than usual, or have difficulty transitioning to new activities. They may refuse to engage in any learning activities, even ones they had enjoyed previously.

Elementary school children may express self-defeating statements such as “I can’t do it,” or “It does not matter how hard I try.” You may also observe defiant behavior or your child refusing to engage in learning activities or complete their assignments.

Adolescents’ disengagement may show up as frustration, anger, stress, or anxiety. You may hear, for example, your child saying that they are not concerned about grades, returning to the normal daily schedule, connecting with peers, or transitioning into a new grade or school next year. They may express such statements as, “This work doesn’t matter anyway,” for example.

Resources

Remember, children learn best when they have the opportunity for exploration, inquiry, and creativity in safe and supportive spaces with caring adults. The [preceding sections](#) on readiness to support your child, safety, and support for learning have more information you can use to create the conditions that will help your child stay engaged in learning. In addition, these resources will help you to ensure your child is and remains engaged in learning at home:

- [Engagement Overview](#): More information about engaged learning from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.
- [Design Thinking in Education](#): Design Thinking is an approach to learning, collaboration, and problem solving that puts the person at the center. The Thinking and Learning Lab at Harvard offers support and resources for Design Thinking.
- [Design Thinking in Education: Empathy, Challenge, Discovery, and Sharing](#): This article from Edutopia describes Design Thinking and how it reconnects educators to their creativity and aspirations for helping students develop as deep thinkers and doers.
- [Personalized Learning is Student-Directed Learning](#): Personalized learning customizes learning based on the individual’s strengths, needs, interests, and skills. This blog from NWEA describes strategies for student-directed learning.
- [Project-Based Learning at Home](#): Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects. In this blog from PBLWorks at the Buck Institute for Education, a father reflects on leveraging his son’s natural curiosity during the pandemic.
- [What Happens When Your Child is Disengaging at School?](#) This blog from the Templeton Foundation describes why young people disengage, what the signs of disengagement are, and strategies for how experiential learning can help.