

In-Home Strategies for Time Away from School

Having an unplanned period of time off from work and school is challenging for most families. Concerns for health, childcare, income, and other related challenges can result in a high-stress environment that impacts the way children are feeling and the way they behave. Here are some strategies parents can use to help smooth the path through this unusual situation.

Maintain a Routine



Younger children may do best if their sleep and wake times remain consistent from day to day. After breakfast and morning hygiene activities is often a good time of day to do some type of academic/learning activity such as reading, math practice, writing in a journal or doing some type of research on a preferred topic.

Tweens and teens may very much appreciate some extra time for sleep. This is generally fine unless their waking time and sleeping time schedules begin to skew too far. Waking at 1:00 p.m. and going to bed at 3:00 a.m. can lead to disruption of family interactions and allow for many hours of unsupervised and less-productive activities.

For children who frequently ask, “what’s next”, a visual schedule that they can independently check may help them understand the flow of the day. For those who are not yet reading, a picture schedule with symbols that represent the different parts of the day can be helpful.

For older children and teens, listing chores and/or academic activities you expect them to complete each day and allowing them to put those activities into a calendar helps to build their organizational skills. Giving the older child some input as to when they complete their expectations may also reduce arguing when it comes time to complete the task. Some guidance may be necessary for students who struggle with organization or who tend to schedule less preferred activities for the end of the day, when their energy and cooperation are likely to be low.

Limiting Screen Time

Screens are a big part of our daily life. Being home for long stretches of time without many trips into the community could lead to many hours on tablets, television, computers, video games and cell phones. For many children, electronics can be great sources of motivation to get other, less preferred, activities completed.

Alternative activities can include board games, dance parties, picnics outside or in the living room, crafts, building activities, and making collages from magazine or printed photos. Creating memory albums, with photos, are also time-consuming activities that can sneak in some cutting/gluing and writing skills while being interesting and fun.



Social Media and Texting



Many teenagers may be resistant to staying home and reducing social interactions. Social media and texting use will most likely increase, and with that increase, the risk of unexpected and inappropriate posts will also rise. Years ago teens spending time at home were quite insulated from challenging interactions with peers they did not get along with or who did not treat them with respect. Now those peers can be present in a virtual format right in the teen’s room with them. This is a great time for extra supervision of your tween or teens’ online interactions.

Television/News



With the availability of 24x7 news programming comes the risk of children being exposed to heightened reporting which includes adults arguing, frequent reports of how many people have become sick or have died from the virus, as well as information on shortages and panic shopping. Most people are thoughtful about how much information they intentionally share with their children, but the background information being broadcast into the home environment by leaving the television on could increase children's stress levels as they try to process information that is not delivered at their level of understanding. Turning the television off and playing music for background noise may be a good option for portions of the day.

To help you explain the coronavirus to your child, Brainpop has come out with a free lesson that does a great job of describing the virus in a calm and educational manner.

<https://email.brainpop.com/b0000nNZyAl0S03Q020XG0E>

Activities

A full day can be a long period of time for a child to try to fill in a productive and happy manner. Sitting down and making a list of what activities are available during the day could help the child make better decisions. For some children, having a choice of too many options can be overwhelming. For those children, writing the choices in a fashion similar to flash cards can allow you to choose two to three options and present them to your child. This will help them pick out one activity they would like to choose.



Behavior

Stress on parents and children and changes in schedules combined with a lot of time at home can result in some challenging behaviors. Some behavioral strategies that may help include:

Strategy

Example

Positive Reinforcement for Completing Less-Preferred Tasks



"You may use your tablet for 30 minutes after you empty the trash and make your bed." [The key to success for this strategy is to ensure your child does not use their tablet without doing the task.]

"We can use sidewalk chalk after you put your toys away."

Forced Choices

"You can read your book for 20 minutes or you can work on math IXL for 20 minutes, which would you like to do?"

Setting Limits

[By putting the behavior you would like to see first, followed by the natural consequence that would occur if they do not comply, you have a higher likelihood that your child will do what you are asking of them.]

"If you are gentle with the dog you can play with her. If you are rough with her, you will not be allowed to touch her."

"If you can enjoy your video game and are careful with the controller, you can play for an hour. If you throw the video game controller on the floor when you get frustrated, the game will go off for the rest of the day."



Time Out from Reinforcement

"You can come back to play the board game after you sit on the couch calmly and quietly for a few minutes."

Communication

Communicating with your child is key during a period of unusual schedules, activities, warnings and possibly illness. Ask your child how they are feeling. Ask them what they are thinking about. Check-in with teenagers, who may not independently share their concerns or challenges. Although this is a difficult community situation, it may be a unique opportunity to spend time together as a family and overcome this obstacle together.

