

How to Help Children with Attention Problems Navigate Remote Learning

Widespread school closures caused by 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) have parents everywhere managing their children's remote learning, often while working from home themselves. This challenge is especially daunting for parents of children with attention and executive functioning impairments, such as [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#).

“These children often struggle to focus on schoolwork under ideal circumstances, and home-based learning is certainly not ideal,” says Timothy L. Verduin, PhD, clinical assistant professor in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone and director of the Attention Deficit Hyperactivity and Behavior Disorders Service at the Child Study Center. Dr. Verduin, who also co-leads the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's [WonderLab](#), provides tools for parents to help improve their children's behavior and school performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding Your Child's Experience

“Parents seeking to improve child behavior or school performance should first try to connect with their children’s experience,” says Dr. Verduin. “Kids with attention problems are likely quite confused by the current circumstances and unsure of how they are supposed to act.” Kids do most of their work in school, where the structure, teaching style, and physical environment are designed to foster learning. “Being home for weeks with playthings, parents, and siblings around feels like a vacation, no matter how much adults insist it is not a break,” he says.

Children’s learning is usually supported by watching others work, following along with the group, and asking teachers or friends for help. Without this structure and support, children with attention problems may feel lost, confused, and disoriented, and thus experience even less drive to engage in their work, and be more likely to avoid it.

“Kids who struggle with impulse control issues and overactivity often have trouble getting others to understand their experience, and are more

likely to annoy or anger their parents than to inspire empathy,” Dr. Verduin says. “Look for signs your child is confused or stressed. They may engage in more noisy, repetitive, or silly behaviors than usual, seem to have taken steps back in their maturity or independence, have greater trouble following directions, or seem moodier or more irritable.” Noticing and commenting on your child’s experience is a good way to team up with them to make positive changes, he adds.

Tools for Achievement

“Science shows that the best way to improve behavior and performance in children with attention problems is to take care of their physical needs, set up their environment for success, provide positive feedback, and avoid negative interactions as much as possible,” Dr. Verduin says. “These tools are so built into school experience, we may not even realize how much they are helping our children make it through the school day.” Dr. Verduin offers some suggestions for how parents can manage remote schooling for children with attention problems.

Take Care of Physical Needs

Changes to routine disrupt biorhythms, which can make it harder for kids to regulate their behavior and attention, Dr. Verduin says. “Kids with attention and activity problems need regular physical exercise and movement breaks. Schedule indoor and outdoor breaks similar to what your child would have at school.”

If your child takes medication for attention or behavior issues, ask your child’s pharmacologist if you should make any changes to the usual school day medication regimen. “Keep in mind that most ADHD medications affect appetite, which you might not have fully witnessed if your child usually eats in school or with a different childcare provider,” he says.

It’s natural for bedtimes to shift during long periods out of school, but keep in mind that getting enough total sleep is crucial for children with attention and executive functioning concerns.

Set Up for Success

How you set up your child’s learning methods and environment is probably the most important factor in how successful their homeschooling will

be. Dr. Verduin says parents should consider the following:

- Collaborate on a schoolwork plan each day to increase engagement. If your child is older, they should create this work plan themselves and check in with you. Be sure to schedule fun activities as well.
- Notice how long your child can work in one sitting, and then group assignments to fit their attention span. Consider using approaches like time management techniques, such as using a timer to break down work into intervals.
- Use strategies that increase successful behaviors to get resistant kids working. Begin seatwork with a fun activity, like a maze or word search, games that happen to get them to sit down and hold a pencil (sneaky, right?). Then move onto a high-interest assignment. Many of us have been told to do the hardest tasks first, but this can make work difficult to begin for kids with attention problems. Remember this mantra: “If you’re having trouble getting started, the first step is too hard.”

Manage Struggles Calmly

Take a breath before giving critical feedback and think of how you are feeling first. “Most kids with attention problems have difficulty managing their emotions, too, and both traits can run in families,” Dr. Verduin says. Find the right time to give feedback so you don’t derail work in progress, or give your child an excuse to fight with you rather than take responsibility.

Parents can also mention positives before and after any criticisms in a “feedback sandwich.” “Think of what the child was expected to do before giving feedback, to keep you from ‘kitchen sinking’ any unrelated complaints—such as their posture, or leaving pencil shavings on the dining room floor,” he adds.

Celebrate Your Child’s Accomplishments

Work with your child to develop rewards for sticking with and finishing their work. “Give verbal rewards that are specific and genuine,” Dr. Verduin says. “Focus on growth, not perfection.”

Small rewards given consistently are better than large rewards given infrequently, Dr. Verduin adds. Social and activity rewards—such as doing

activities or spending time together—are usually more effective than material goods.

“Try not to withhold rewards that are healthy for your child, such as sports or spending time with you,” Dr. Verduin says. “Ask your child to rate their own performance and judge their own reward eligibility to help them increase their self-awareness.”