

# Keeping Your Child Progressing Upward on the Learning Curve While We Flatten the COVID-19 Curve

Parents and children of all ages recently entered a whole new norm because of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Temporarily gone are the Mommy and Me classes, the daycare drop-off routines, and the morning school goodbye wave. Families with high school and college students have also had to shift from keeping up with important end-of-year activities, including graduation.

“Now parents are in a less structured space, with a new level of pressure to fill the role of co-teacher and home school headmaster,” says Daniela Montalto, PhD, clinical associate professor in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone and clinical director of the Neuropsychology and Learning Service at the Child Study Center.

“Parents also have to balance the demands of their virtual learners and manage their sadness about being away from friends, sports, and extracurricular activities,” Dr. Montalto says.

“Parents now all under one—literal or virtual—roof and trying to keep up.”

One can find many resources that offer parents suggestions, activities, and ideas on how to help their child continue their climb toward success during this challenging time.

### **Making the Transition to Virtual School**

“As parents, we are forced to quickly pivot and rework our schedules to help prioritize our kid’s upward trajectory. But, our kids may not have this same level of investment and may fight our efforts to keep them moving upward on the curve,” Dr. Montalto says. And the can battle is a tough one. “School at home now adds a new concept for all of us, and it is likely much harder for kids to adjust to this new classroom environment than it is for us,” she says.

The good news, Dr. Montalto adds, is that kids are not missing out on their typical daily experience alone, as if they were ill and missing school for a month. “They are in this together,” Dr. Montalto says. “Almost all of them are just now learning how to use a virtual classroom. That means we can relax, let go of some of our

worries that they will fall behind, and find some confidence in ourselves that we will keep them afloat.”

Children at each developmental stage have areas parents can focus on to keep them climbing upward in school.

### **Building Foundations for Learning with Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers**

“Infants and toddlers need stimulation that is interactive,” Dr. Montalto says. “Read to them, label things around you as you go about the day, have back-and-forth conversations, and leave out objects they can stack, roll, stick their hands in, and engage in sensory play.”

Preschool children are gaining the building blocks and foundational skills of learning. “Review the alphabet verbally and visually,” Dr. Montalto says. “Practice numbers, shapes, and colors, and show them how to hold a pencil and write their name. You can also get them moving to build their big muscles, and engage them in fun and simple science experiments. And keep them reading, too.”

### **Keeping Elementary School Students Active**

Most elementary school students have a virtual curriculum to keep up with, and there are many ways to engage them as thinkers and problem solvers. “Mix up the day with activities that are indoors and outdoors,” Dr. Montalto says.

“Videoconference with small groups of friends to complete broader assignments, and reward your child’s effort with something relaxing at the end of the day.”

If you are finding that you aren’t sure how to keep your child engaged, or their work is not something you can help with, there are many virtual learning resources that can help. “There are also learning specialists and teachers who can meet with your child to get them through some of the new lessons,” Dr. Montalto says.

“Let’s face it—the way our kids are learning math these days is in a foreign code for many of us; don’t feel you are in this alone.”

### **Helping High School and College Students Stay Engaged**

High school and college students may be the toughest group to engage during this time. “It is truly so challenging for them to go from demanding schedules, and extracurricular

groups and activities, and then revert back to a one-room school experience,” Dr. Montalto says. “Staying connected via social media platforms to complete assignments, review instructions, and engage in projects can be tremendously helpful. Try to give them the independence around responsibilities from school, while also checking in on agreed-upon times to ensure they are keeping up.”

Let them know that you want them to complete their work on their own and you know that might be hard in this new normal. “Agree on a weekly check-in time and discuss the best way to partner to ensure they are not falling behind. Do this before they are knee deep in incomplete assignments,” Dr. Montalto adds. “If they are already behind, set a new tone for the work ahead and partner with them on what feels like the right balance of parent oversight.”

### **Living with the New Normal**

No matter your child’s age, pay attention to their mood and their worries. If they are overwhelmed with anxiety or sadness, they won’t be able to

engage in activities you organize for them, and it will be harder for them to keep up.

Dr. Montalto says parents should be on the lookout for these red flags: changes in appetite or sleep patterns, lack of enjoyment when engaging in activities that were once fun, withdrawal from friends and family, or increased irritability or irrational fears. “If one or more of these are occurring for your child, it may be time to seek support from a mental health professional,” Dr. Montalto says.

Lastly, recall that this new normal could potentially leave parents with a sense of reward and pride that they would not have experienced without helping their children learn from home.

“Perhaps you will catch a milestone you would have missed, teach a skill that your child will remember, or help your teen or young adult through a ‘crisis’ they may have not shared during their typical day,” Dr. Montalto says. “But above all, cut yourself—and them—some slack. Remember, we are in this climb together.”