

# Remote School Recommendations

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## Executive Summary

*During this unprecedented time, many students and caregivers are grappling with concerns related to virtual school environments. This paper offers recommendations and solutions that they may find helpful.*

The coronavirus pandemic has created new stressors for parents of school-aged children. In some cases, parents had to decide whether to send their children back to a traditional brick-and-mortar school, possibly exposing their children to coronavirus and increasing the risk of spread. The other option for many was a virtual learning system, where the student would be learning from home or a learning pod. This came with its own concerns, as many working parents rely on school for childcare while they work. Additionally, not all children have access to the materials needed for online services, including a stable internet connection and an internet-capable device. Almost 75% of the largest school districts in the United States made the decision for the parents, opting for a remote (or virtual) option to start school (Education Week, 2020). This means that at least 8,000,000 students and their caregivers are now faced with the task of recreating some sort of education environment at home.

Unfortunately, virtual education is not as simple as putting a student in front of a device. Teachers and schools provide services beyond simply instruction—schools provide an environment conducive to learning. When a student walks into a school, there are expectations that often differ from the expectations at home. Additionally, at home there are distractions present that are not present in the school setting, including toys, video games, parents, siblings, and pets. Moreover, schools have support staff to assist with learning challenges, including speech–language pathologists, school psychologists, counselors, reading specialist, principals, nurses, and paraprofessionals. The lack of immediate access to these personnel at home places the caregiver in the position of a “learning coach” who must ensure that the needs of the student are met in the virtual learning environment (Smith, Burdette, Cheatham, & Harvey, 2016). However, parents are not prepared for this role, nor do they typically have the education and training needed to fill these roles. This can result in parents feeling overwhelmed and unprepared, increasing stress levels.

Still, difficulties can arise because of the nature of the virtual environment, even for the most prepared caregivers and teachers. Unlike traditional schools, there is not only one

learning environment. Instead, the nature of virtual learning creates multiple microschoools, with each student in their own unique learning environment. Each of these environments has its own challenges that differ depending on the home environment. It is also more difficult for teachers to attend to each of their students on screen, quickly scanning 20 or more faces via videoconferencing technology to identify which students are engaged. Even if the teacher is able to do this, there is no guarantee the student is actually paying attention, as students have identified creative ways to make it look as if they are engaged (e.g., see Nagbe, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Additionally, in the traditional school environment, if a child is not paying attention or disrupting class, teachers have other staff members there who can assist. In the virtual learning environment, there may be staff members available to redirect students who need assistance, including one-on-one aides. Although these individuals may be present in the virtual setting, they typically are virtual. Thus, if the student walks away from the video, shuts off the video, or turns off their sound, there is no way for the virtual support to redirect the student. As a result, it becomes the caregiver’s role to keep the student engaged.

Students (and teachers) are now subject to a phenomenon known as Zoom fatigue (Sklar, 2020). This can increase the mental fatigue many students already experience during periods of sustained academic work, resulting in more anxiety, restlessness, and exhaustion. As a result, the student becomes less engaged and less available for learning.

We clearly are in unprecedented times. There is information out there to assist with virtual schooling; however, it can be difficult to find. As such, caregivers tend to seek out assistance from other professionals that know their children, including physicians and mental health professionals. The following is a list of virtual schooling recommendations that can be shared with caregivers and teachers to assist with virtual learning. It is organized by area of need, not by diagnosis, as all learners are unique.

## General considerations

**Make sure your student has a quiet, semi-private space to work.** To improve the likelihood that your student will be able to focus and to minimize distractions that daily life poses to the learning process, make sure that your student has a quiet, semiprivate space to work in your home. This does not need to be a private office, a desk or table in a less frequented place in the home can suffice. Ideally, it should be the same place each day of school. Ensure your student has all the things they need for learning, including paper, pencils/pens, crayons, and headphones (if needed for class). If possible, you may want to have a calendar or whiteboard to keep track of assignments.

**Ensure a large screen area for learning.** For online learning, use of a phone limits your student's ability to participate, due to small screen size and reduced mobile options on many online platforms. If possible, your student should use a large tablet or a laptop. Chromebooks are sufficient. If you do not have access to a Chromebook or a sufficient alternative, many school districts are offering to loan laptops to families in need.

**Consider mirroring the screen to a television, if available.** A larger screen can benefit your student. Many laptops/televisions allow for mirroring capabilities, where the screen on the laptop can be displayed on the television. This may require downloading an app or use of an external device. There are many options available at varying price points.

**Ensure a high-speed Internet connection, especially for synchronous classes.** Cell phone data can be unreliable. Ideally, your student should rely on wired high speed internet, such as what would be available via a broadband Internet connection. If possible, the laptop/tablet your student is using for class should be directly wired to the cable modem. If this is not possible, then your student should connect via a Wi-Fi connection.

**Minimize use of Wi-Fi when your student is attending a synchronous (live) class.** Videoconferencing takes a great deal of bandwidth; if others in the house are relying heavily on the Internet at the same time, such as by streaming videos or playing online games, it can impact the quality of the connection. When your student is attending class, try to minimize your own use and the rest of the family's use of the Internet, if at all possible.

**Turn off phone notifications.** If your student has a phone, they should turn off notifications. If their phone continues to pose a distraction, they should turn off the phone entirely.

**Consider purchasing a Chromebook/tablet only for class or using an app to block distractions.** If your student has their own tablet/laptop and are using it for class as well as other things, such as gaming or social media, it is very possible the games and social media options on their laptop will pose a distraction for them. If this is the case, you may want to consider purchasing a separate device for class that only has the programs necessary for class. Another option is to install an app that has been designed to increase productivity and decrease distractions; there are a number available.

**Use printed materials.** Some students have difficulty learning from a screen. If this is the case for your student, consider printing the materials and having them complete them on paper rather than online. The materials may need to be scanned in so that your student can submit them for grading; if this is the case, many phones have built in scanner apps. There are also a number of free scanner apps available.

**Track deadlines on a paper calendar/whiteboard.** Place a paper calendar or whiteboard near your student's work station and help them put the due dates for various assignments on it. This will provide them a visual cue of when the assignments are due. Have your student cross off each assignment when they submit it.

**Breaks in between classes.** In a traditional academic setting, students do not jump from one academic topic to another; there is a transition when students are switching classes, getting materials, etc. Recreate this at home by encouraging your student to stand up and move between classes.

**Breaks after work.** After school ends, your student should take a break before they start their homework. They will also likely need breaks while doing homework; one option would be to take short breaks while doing homework (about 5 minutes) where they do something active, such as jumping jacks.

**Adult sitting with student/easily accessible during class.** Your student, especially if they are younger, will likely require adult supervision during classes. There should be an adult in the room with them or nearby (next room over) to provide redirection, as needed, during class.

**Create an online study or networking group.** Your student may want to reach out to their peers to organize an online study or networking group. Younger children may need some assistance to develop an online study group (e.g., you may need to contact other caregivers).

**Recess/lunch outside and away from screens.** During extended breaks like recess or lunch your student should be outside, if the weather permits. This can help your student get in some physical activity as well as improve their mood, as the outdoors is relaxing for many.

**Consider finding a “quaranteam.”** It is impossible to balance working full time with monitoring your student’s learning. One or both of the tasks will suffer. However, many parents need to work. Virtual learning becomes even more difficult when the parent’s employer does not allow for telework due to the nature of the job. One option for this is to work with other parents to develop “quaranteams” or “social bubbles,” where the families agree to social distance and only interact with one another. These are generally small and involve only a few families. As part of this academic “quaranteam,” families could take turns hosting school in their house for a few children at a time. This allows parents to work and provides some social interaction for the children. If this is to occur, it is vital that the families develop and adhere to a set of rules to follow and that these groups remain closed to reduce risk of possible COVID-19 transmission.

**Treat online asynchronous classes like you would a regular class with a weekly schedule and timers.** Your student will likely be doing some asynchronous learning or independent study. Even though these classes may not have structured times where they meet with faculty, your student should still have a scheduled time each day to complete their academic work. They can set alarms with times to let them know when to switch classes. Between classes, they can get up, walk around, and gather any necessary materials for the next class.

### If your student has difficulty remaining seated

**Consider alternative seating.** If your student is active, they may find it difficult to remain seated during a Zoom class. Your student may prefer using a standing desk so that they can move around a bit. Other options include having your student sit on a yoga ball or a wiggle seat, as these both allow for movement and fidgeting.

**Use fidgets on the chair.** There are some fidgets that can be attached to chairs or desks to give your student a chance to move. This includes bouncy bands, which are elastics that can be attached to chair legs, or a foot hammock. The hammock attaches to the desks and the student can swing their feet back and forth.

**Move during breaks.** Make sure your student leaves their desk during breaks. Have them do some jumping jacks, run in place, or even walk around the house.

**Switch places when they switch classes.** Set a different area of the house for each class. For example, language arts could be in the kitchen and mathematics could be in the living room. If this is not possible, switching seat placement between classes may be an option. Another possibility is to have a sign on the wall near their work area that they change for each class.

**Fidget toy.** Provide your student a quiet fidget toy to use during class. The toy should be small enough that they can keep it in their hands.

### If your student has trouble paying attention

**Give breaks.** There are breaks built into the traditional school day. During these breaks, make sure your student walks away from the screen and does something active. Your student may need additional breaks. If frequent breaks are provided for on their IEP or 504 plan, discuss how this will be implemented with teachers. For example, they may be able to send their teacher a message in chat that they need a break. The student should have a timer that lets them know when their break starts and ends.

**Snacks during breaks.** Sustained attention, especially for children with anxiety, ADHD, or depression, requires a great deal of energy. To replenish the energy, give your student a healthy snack with protein and carbohydrates during break (e.g., apple with peanut butter).

**Use of a visual timer.** Students with attentional difficulties could benefit from use of a visual timer to alert them to how much more time is left in class. This could be a timer with different colors to alert of how much time is left rather than numbers, as the numbers themselves could pose a distraction (e.g., the student counting down how much time is left).

**No open tabs.** After each class, your student should close all programs. They should only open the programs they need for the next class.

**Device used only for class.** Your student should have a laptop or tablet designated only for academic work. There should be no games allowed on that device.

**No phone.** If your student has a phone, it should not be present during class. They may have the phone during short breaks as long as it does not result in them experiencing difficulty reengaging with class after break.

**Fidget toy.** Provide your student a quiet fidget toy to use during class. The toy should be small enough they can keep it in their hands.

**Clean desk.** Limit your student's work area to just materials needed for class. You can also have separate boxes or bins for each class.

**Have students take notes by hand.** Students may find it easier to focus if they are taking notes by hand in a paper notebook. This also can improve retention.

**Turn off gallery view on Zoom.** Gallery view can be distracting as all classmates can be seen. Additionally, active speaker view can be a distraction as the screen will change to show whoever is speaking, which can result in multiple rapid screen shifts. Instead, use the option to pin the teacher to the screen so your student limits distractions.

**Print materials.** Your student may find it easier to focus on work when provided hard copies of their materials. Try to print materials and/or ask the school if they can provide printed materials.

**Study corral.** If your student is detracted by visual stimuli in the home (e.g., people walking, other family members doing work), they may benefit from use of a study corral, which provides visual barriers between individuals.

**Noise-canceling headphones.** If household sounds are distracting, consider the use of noise-canceling headphones.

**Actively participate.** You and your student should set a goal that they will participate in each synchronous class. Work together to decide how many times they will virtually raise their hand during each class to answer a question or make a comment. This should help to keep them more engaged.

### If your student is anxious around others

**Study corral.** If your student is anxious about others seeing their work, consider purchasing or creating a study corral that provides a visual barrier between them and others around them.

**Turn off gallery view on Zoom.** Pin the teacher to the screen so your student can only view the teacher and can't see other students (or themselves). This should limit anxiety around others, as it will appear that they are alone with the teacher.

**Make sure they cannot see themselves on screen.** Seeing yourself on the screen can increase anxiety, as it can cause you to become hyperaware of how you appear and what you are doing. For individuals with anxiety, this can result in an increase in anxious feelings, which can distract them from class. If possible, set up the videoconferencing to hide their video. This can be achieved by pinning the teacher to the screen.

**If allowed, turn off camera.** If the teacher allows it, your student may consider turning off the camera so their peers cannot see them. The student could instead use a picture of themselves as an avatar.

**Use chat for questions.** Ask your student's teacher if they can rely on chat for questions rather than having the student ask the question to the class. Many online platforms allow the student to ask a question to just the presenter, similar to what would happen in a class where a student asks a teacher a question on a one-on-one basis rather than in front of the whole class.

### If your student is sensitive to sound

**White noise machine.** A white noise machine can assist in minimizing the impact that noises have on someone and can reduce noise from their environment.

**Ask the teacher to keep everyone on mute unless they are talking.** Just like in a traditional classroom setting, many individuals talking at once can become distracting and overwhelming. If this is the case, ask the teacher to keep the class on mute unless they are participating. If the students want to say something, they can raise their hand or put something in the chat box and the teacher can unmute them.

**Use of a quiet keyboard/mouse.** Keyboards and mice can make clicking noises that can be irritating to those with sensory sensitivities to noise. There are quiet options available that do not make these clicking noises.

**Consider use of captioning.** If the virtual classroom setting becomes overwhelming for your student, consider using the captions options available on many videoconferencing platforms. This will allow them to mute the sounds while still seeing the material. This only works if the student is able to read at a relatively rapid pace.

**Noise-canceling headset.** The home environment has noises that are not typically present in school. If these are negatively impacting your student, consider use of a noise-canceling headset to minimize the exterior sounds.

### If your student is sensitive to lights/visual stimuli

**Blue light reducing glasses/film.** If your student is sensitive to light, consider using blue light reducing glasses or film on their screen. This can make the screen seem less bright, which can reduce strain for students with light sensitivities.

**Change contrast settings on the screen.** Most devices allow the user to change the screen settings to increase/decrease brightness, contrast, etc. Vary the settings on your student's screen to identify what settings work best for them.

**Print materials.** Your student may find it easier to focus on work when provided hard copies of materials. Try to print materials and/or ask the school if they can provide printed materials.

**Keyboard covers.** Some keyboards emit light that can be distracting for students who experience light sensitivities.

There are a variety of silicone keyboard covers that can change the look of a keyboard. This may help with visual sensitivities.

### If your student is sensitive to smells

**Consider the scent of hand sanitizer/cleaning supplies.** Hand sanitizers can have a strong smell to them. There are a variety of supplies available that are scent sensitive. When the student returns to the classroom, consider asking the teacher to use these instead. This may need to become a formal accommodation on a 504 plan or an IEP.

### If your student is sensitive to tactile sensations

**Mask considerations.** When your student returns to in-person learning, it is likely they will need to wear a mask for extended periods. There are a variety of mask designs and fabrics available. Try different masks to identify which one(s) your student prefers. Practice wearing those masks prior to the return to in-person services.

**Keyboard/mouse covers.** If your student is sensitive to the feel of a keyboard or mouse, consider using silicone covers to change the tactile sensation.

### If your student has a hearing impairment

**Consider use of captioning.** Consider using the captions option available on many videoconferencing platforms. This should improve access to the material.

**Copies of teachers' notes.** Your student may benefit from the use of teacher's notes to ensure they were able to access the material.

**Mask considerations.** When your student returns to in-person learning, it is likely they will need to wear a mask for extended periods, as will their teachers. Many students with hearing impairments rely, at least to some extent, on lip reading. Ask your school district to ensure your student's teachers use a clear mask where the teacher's lips are visible. This may need to be formalized in a 504 plan or an IEP.

## If your student has a visual impairment

**Ensure a large screen area for learning.** A larger screen can benefit your student. Many laptops/televisions allow for mirroring capabilities, where the screen on the laptop can be displayed on the television. This may require downloading an app or use of an external device. There are many options available at varying price points.

**Copies of teachers notes.** Your student may benefit from use of teacher's notes to ensure they were able to access the material. These may need to be in recorded form so your student can access the materials.

## If your student has difficulty getting motivated

**The cause of the lack of motivation is important.** If your student is not motivated because they are not receiving the assistance they need via an IEP or 504 plan, do not use these strategies. These are designed to address oppositional behaviors.

**Incentives for effort.** Provide your student incentives for effort. For example, if they engage in class for a certain percentage of the day, they can earn time toward video games or another preferred activity. However, they cannot get the preferred activity unless they complete the non-preferred activity (school).

**Be sure you model motivation.** Your student will take cues from you. If you have a negative view toward online schooling, they will too.

**Choice for tasks/task order.** When possible, let your student choose the order of the tasks they need to complete. For example, if they have to complete math and science homework, have them select which one they want to complete first.

**Break work into pieces.** Sometimes students feel overwhelmed with demands. Break the work into pieces. For example, if they have 10 math problems to complete, show them only one at a time. This makes the work seem more manageable, which can improve motivation.

**Start with easy tasks.** In order to foster a feeling of success, which can increase motivation, start with tasks that will be easier for your student to complete. Then move onto tasks that are a little harder. By starting with easier tasks, you increase your student's confidence to be able to complete the task, which can result in them attempting the more difficult tasks.

**Visual to show the amount of work.** Many times, students who have difficulty getting motivated feel overwhelmed. One way to address this is to visually show what work needs to be done. This makes the work tangible, which helps the student understand what is required.

**Firm boundaries.** In order to help with your student's compliance, set firm boundaries. Do not allow the student to complete a desired activity until they complete at least part of their schoolwork. If you give in and allow them to do the desired activity without them completing the required work, it sends a message that you will give in. Consistency in this is key for success.

**Natural consequences.** A student not completing their work has natural consequences, including failing assignments and classes. You may want to rely on these to improve motivation.

## If your student desires enrichment/is bored

**Review online resources.** There are a number of online resources for enrichment. Some of the more popular ones are Prodigy, which is a mathematics game, and Kahn Academy. Many academic groups are running virtual aftercare as well.

**Allow your child to be bored.** Boredom in class is not necessarily a negative, as we all need to cope with boredom at times. Reframe this as an opportunity to learn how to appropriately cope with boredom in a nondisruptive manner.

**Practice mindfulness.** Teach your child mindfulness techniques and have them use them when bored. This can also improve anxiety and help with focus.

**Encourage the student to self-advocate.** If your student is bored, encourage them to problem solve and self-advocate. For example, if the pace of the class is too slow, have them type an appropriate email to their teacher asking for suggestions. This helps teach them how to appropriately self-advocate and write professional emails.

## Parent/caregiver recommendations

**Assess your own attitude towards virtual learning.** Your student will take cues from you. If you do not believe that virtual learning is worthwhile or that it will fail, your student will likely feel the same way. Have a positive



outlook toward virtual schooling. There are benefits and drawbacks to it; try to focus on the benefits.

**Test the technology ahead of time.** Technology can be wonderful, but it also can fail and be finicky. Be sure to test the technology ahead of time.

**Have a signal when you can't be interrupted.**

Caregivers may have to work at home while the student is at school. In ideal situations, a caregiver may be able to rearrange their schedule so that they are available when the student is on break and during transition times. If this is not possible, have a signal if there is a time the caregiver absolutely cannot be interrupted unless it is an emergency.

**Hands-on learning at home.** You may want to take advantage of some hands-on learning opportunities at home to reinforce material your student learns in class. For instance, you could bake with your student, as this requires reading a recipe, measuring, and some math.

**Make time for fun.** It can be easy to fall into the “parent as teacher” trap where you focus so much on ensuring your student completes their academic tasks that it interferes with your relationship as parent and student. You should be sure to interact nonacademically, such as by playing games, having meals together, etc.

**Self-care for parents.** It is difficult to assist with online learning and work from home. Please ensure that you take care of your own needs as well by creating a strong self-care plan. Remember that you cannot help others unless you help yourself.

**Don't be afraid to ask for help!** This is uncharted territory for many. Please reach out and ask for help! Teachers and staff and your student's school can help you to find resources. They may even be able to offer some assistance/tech support as needed. There are also online communities that can help with ideas and/or provide you a chance to express your frustrations. Friends or colleagues may know someone who has been homeschooling and may be able to provide some help. Use any available resources and do not feel guilty about it. We are in this together.

**Remember your job as a parent/caregiver is to ensure the health of your student.** There are many pressures on parents/caregivers. Your primary focus is on your student's mental, emotional, and physical health. Try not to compare yourself to others. What is right for one family is not necessarily right for another. Do what is best for your family and those around you.

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Dr. Hasson is licensed as a psychologist in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC. She specializes in psychological assessment, including psychological evaluations, psychoeducational evaluations, and forensic evaluations. In addition to conducting assessments, she regularly runs workshops on assessment for licensed psychologists in the area, including for local universities, psychological associations, state hospitals, and attorneys. She has experience participating in IEP meetings and testifying in court. She has been qualified as an expert in both criminal proceedings and educational hearings.

Dr. Hasson is a published author. She has presented more than 50 times at state, national, and international psychology conferences and has published book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles on assessment. She is the author of the book *Essentials of Rorschach Assessment: Comprehensive System and R-PAS*.

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