A Parent's Guide to Virtual Learning: 4 Actions to Improve Your Child's Experience With Online Learning

COVID-19 has catapulted us all into a new reality: Workplaces are closed, social distancing is the "new normal," and kitchen tables have replaced classrooms. The sudden shift from in-person to online learning has not been easy for all parents and kids. And for those who are entitled to (and depend upon) specialized instructional services and supports to deal with disabilities, the transition is even more complicated.

Parents and school personnel in school districts across the country are working hard (and fast!) to stay in close contact, share information and feedback, and overcome barriers to ensure that children make progress during what will likely be many weeks — perhaps even months — away from their school buildings.

Here are four things that you should know, and actions you can take, to guide your child's journey through these unusual and unprecedented times.

1 **There are best practices for children with disabilities who are engaged in online learning. Encourage your child's teacher to use them!** These practices are useful for any student in online programs, but they're particularly beneficial for students with disabilities in online programs.

- *Face-to-face interactions are key.* It's important for children with disabilities to have virtual face-to-face interactions with their teachers. Using video will allow teachers to pick up verbal and physical cues and gauge your child's confidence and understanding during online instruction.

- *Measuring understanding needs to be ongoing.* Frequent surveys, online quizzes, chats, and other ways to check understanding will be particularly important when using distance learning.

- *Students need multiple ways to engage with curricula.* Online information needs to be represented in different formats, and students need options for engaging with and demonstrating their understanding. These are the hallmarks of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Encourage teachers to integrate UDL into their online instruction.

2 **Your child may need help organizing time.** Online learning provides less external structure than your child's brick-and-mortar school. Many children with learning and attention issues, particularly those who struggle with executive functioning, will need targeted help in getting and staying organized, remaining on task, and completing assignments. Consider setting up specific spaces in the home where your child will engage in schoolwork. Create a calendar and clear expectations for work and play. Start with more rather than less structure, and make adjustments as your child establishes new routines.

National Center for Learning Disabilities

3   **Your child will need new ways to access needed services.** In school, your child receives and is entitled to a number of services. These might include access to reading specialists, speech-language therapists, instructional aides, counselors, nurses, and case managers. While the COVID-19 crisis has likely caught your school off guard, the teachers and service providers will be trying to figure out the best way to adjust to the "new normal" and address each child's needs. Look at your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan to identify the individuals providing your child's services. Connect with them to ask about compensatory services to support your child — their plans for the short, medium, and long term — and how you might help.

4   **You and your child still have rights!** COVID-19 did not erase your child's rights to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Schools and districts are working hard to identify how key processes that support education are going to be implemented until schools reopen their doors. These include having a way to hold IEP and 504 meetings virtually, and ensuring that your child is making progress in the core curriculum and receives needed accommodations to access information and demonstrate mastery of content. Figuring this out will take time. Be a ready and willing partner with school personnel in this process.

Just like you, schools are having to figure this out on the fly. Here are some resources that will help you be an effective partner with school personnel and an informed advocate for your child during this challenging time:

- **CAST.org**
  http://www.cast.org/

- **Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities**
  http://www.centerononlinelearning.res.ku.edu/resource-documents/

- **Understood.org**
  https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/coronavirus-latest-updates