



Eight Ways to Help Your Child with Special Needs Succeed with Online Learning

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The COVID-19 pandemic created a sudden shift to online learning, throwing children and parents into a whirlwind of changes that few, if any, were prepared to handle. Even now, with vaccine distribution, it is unclear when in-school classes will fully return to a pre-pandemic state.

Remote learning is challenging for many students. It is especially difficult for children with special needs because the individualized tools, assistance, and routines in their school-based classrooms are now unavailable or substantially different. Their parents are faring no better. Becoming at-home education facilitators is challenging, and parents are dealing with the demands of increased hands-on involvement with their children's education, including staying on top of IEPs and attempting to replicate a special education classroom in the home. All of this can leave parents feeling overwhelmed and wondering where to turn.

Fortunately, there are steps parents can take to improve the situation. Below are some strategies to help both you and your child with special needs succeed with remote learning.

1. Manage Stress, Practice Self-Care

Stress levels can be high for parents of children with special needs. The added responsibility of your child's online learning can make it almost unbearable. You might think that by suppressing your stress and anxiety when around your child, they won't be affected by it, but research suggests otherwise. Kids can pick up on your stress. When this occurs, their own levels of stress increase, affecting their ability to learn.

Self-care is essential so you can do your best when helping your child learn. Relieve stress by practicing stress-reduction techniques such as mindful breathing and getting exercise, and adequate sleep. Stay socially involved and avoid becoming isolated. But also work on modifying your mindset about helping your child with remote learning. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to education. You know your child better than anyone. Believe in your ability to oversee their remote learning and if you overlook something, learn from it, and move on. No one is perfect. Give yourself a little grace.

2. Look at the Bigger Picture

Step back and consider your child's learning needs from a broader perspective. Don't allow yourself to get so caught up in every detail in your child's schooling and lesson plans that you lose sight of the bigger picture. Select five to seven learning categories, then identify everyday activities that fit into them. For example, a math assignment covering basic fractions is more than just learning fractions; it is about being able to master life skills that require knowledge of fractions. Food preparation is a necessary life skill, so make a pizza from scratch with your child to introduce measurement and fractions concepts. Even slicing the pizza is an opportunity to explain and compare fractions.

3. Create a Productive Learning Environment at Home

You might think that using a spare room such as a guest bedroom, if you have one, is an ideal situation for remote learning. In reality, it depends on your child's learning preferences. One child may need silence while another prefers some background noise and being closer to light household activity. For some kids, a spare room will work well, while a spot near a parent's home office is better for others. Have your child try different options to determine which works best for them.

Create a sense of order and familiarity by defining "centers" for different learning activities. For instance, a math center would include a bin of math-related materials and tools. An art center would consist of art supplies and the space for drawing, painting, and making crafts. You can create different centers in the same room, or if space does not permit, designate a specific learning center area in multiple rooms.

4. Develop a Schedule

Special needs children benefit from structure and predictable routines. Create a daily school schedule that breaks down activities into concrete tasks and stick to it to instill a sense of routine and order. You're going to have to make a schedule anyway, so why not make it engaging and fun. Develop checklists or charts for various school activities as well as built-in breaks throughout the day. Use pictures to portray various tasks for younger children or for those who cannot read.

Remember that choices can be woven into a schedule, such as choosing between a pencil or a pen and selecting the paper color to use when writing. Be creative while keeping in mind that your schedule will dovetail with your child's IEP.

5. Think Outside the Box

When things do not go as planned, get even more creative. For example, some special needs children have difficulty sitting still in their seats for long periods. If this sounds familiar, did you know that sometimes learning and movement can be combined? Create a

hopscotch grid and have your child jump out the spelling of words or do math flashcards while pacing the floor. Check with resources and search online for [different ideas you can try to help your child learn at home](#).

6. Schedule Break Time

Breaks are an essential component of daily life for everyone. Leave the home teaching area to take a break and have some fun. Go outside for a walk. Sometimes you can sneak in a little learning into the activity, such as making geometric shapes out of pretzel sticks at snack time.

7. Take Action if Your Child is Struggling

Keep in mind that IEPs or 504 plans are not set in stone. If your child struggles with remote learning, it could be time to change them to support more online learning accommodations. Be prepared to provide a detailed explanation of the problem so their teacher can recommend the right strategies and solutions. Give them a chance to work and check back with the teacher in a week or two to review what worked and what did not. If a teacher cannot help, request an IEP or 504 meeting to discuss the development of a specific remote learning plan.

8. Use Special Education Resources

Knowing where to find resources and constructive advice and using them is essential, particularly if the current remote learning option is not meeting your child's needs. Keep in mind that you are also a resource. Share helpful information and strategies you find with others.

Child Mind Institute's [Family Resources for Remote Learning](#) offers helpful information as well as the Iris Center and the Council for Exceptional Children. [EducatingAllLearners.org](#) provides practical ideas to tailoring online learning for children with special needs during COVID-19.

Above all, be aware that you are not in this alone. Resources and support systems are available to help you and your child navigate through remote learning. [Wonderschool](#), for example, has put together some easy and enjoyable ways to create online communities to support one another.

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