Virtual Learning with Young Children

COVID-19 has surely caused a shift in how we are experiencing parenting our young children. Everything has intensified, including managing our own stress around safety, balancing competing pressures around job and family, and adjusting expectations around teaching and learning with our children. Now that virtual school is a reality for the upcoming school year, it will be helpful to make plans and decisions that will work for your family.

Keep in mind that many young children are going to be very excited about going to school, especially those starting kindergarten, while some may not be. Meet them where they are with patience and acceptance. While current times feel very different for adults, children have never been to in-person kindergarten and may just be ready to go, even if it is virtual. Follow their lead and encourage their excitement, as it will be a springboard for engagement and learning. Embracing this new way of learning, while challenging for parents, will go a long way toward building your child's confidence. The strategies below may be helpful in navigating this new way of doing school:

1. **With your child, create a workspace that works.**
   a. Make a list of important parts of a good workspace with your child. They may suggest a space away from baby brother or the barking dog. Help them think critically about what they need.
   b. Some children may want one dedicated space. Others may want to be able to move while working. You may need to be creative when space is limited and computers are shared.
   c. Ask your child, the night before, to make a study plan for the next day as to where they would like to learn. Creating three options from which to choose may help avoid power struggles.
   d. Children may enjoy choosing school clothes for the day, but do not allow this to become a battle.
   e. Limiting distractions is important, and helping your child begin to understand how she best learns is key.
   f. As your child becomes more settled in the workspace, have him or her reflect on how it is going. Reflect and comment on how well they are working in the space they chose.

2. **Practice being on-screen with your child prior to the first day of school.**
   a. Some children do not like to see themselves on camera and find it distracting to their own learning. Experiment with camera settings so they can feel more comfortable.
   b. Consider the use of headphones or earbuds and have them practice wearing them.
   c. Play "school" with parents in other areas of the house, so children can practice engaging virtually. Widen the circle to grandparents or friends to provide even more opportunity to interact virtually. Children could also play the role of "teacher" during these times.
   d. For some children, previous experiences around virtual learning may not have been positive, so practicing provides an opportunity to create new feelings around it.

3. **Remember that your child's teacher is still the teacher and wants to collaborate with you.**
   a. Homeschool is very different from virtual school, although the terms are often used interchangeably. Virtual learning requires parent support in collaboration with the teacher, who is continuing to direct the experience.
   b. Connect with your child's teacher and ask about expectations around time on-screen and how to support your child most effectively at home.
   c. Reach out early to the teacher if your child is struggling and form a strong team to support the unique needs and strengths of your child.
   d. Find out about flexibility around getting work done, as you are likely balancing the needs of other children and a job. Can some things be completed on the weekends?

4. **Use as much visual support as possible to help your child build self-regulation and independence.**
   a. Use picture schedules to help your child know what is happening during the learning day.
   b. Using a visual timer will also be helpful for children to understand the length of the learning sessions.
   c. Use choice when possible, so that they will be more engaged in how they are participating in virtual school. Simple choices work better than complex choices. It may be helpful to think about parents managing the "what," with children having a say in the "how."
   d. As your child becomes more confident, they will become more independent and they may begin creating supports for themselves.

5. **Create breaks from virtual learning.**
   a. While screens are often seen as a "break" from in-person school, with virtual school, breaks may need to be reimagined. However, realize that kids may need to be on screens for you to get your work done. That is ok. These are unusual times!
   b. Provide opportunities for children to play outside, have a dance party or have a snack and then return to work.
   c. Create an "I'm Bored box." Fill it with cardboard, craft items, or things they can build with, so children can go to it when they need a break. These items can be used independently and could be changed out often to provide novel experiences. This box can be helpful to pull out when you have to participate in your own meeting during your child's break!

6. **Have a plan ready if things do not go as well as you had hoped.**
   a. Reach out to the teacher ahead of time and ask about stepping away and recording the lesson to be completed at a later time, should challenges occur.
   b. Validate your child's feelings of frustration and remind them that you and the teacher are there to help.
   c. Manage your own frustrations when technological issues come up, as they surely will! Take deep breaths while your child watches you calm yourself. Take deep breaths with your child so they can practice the skill of calming down that you demonstrated.

Helpful Resources:

Remote Learning Tips for Parents from WCPSS
https://www.wcpss.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=107&ModuleInstanceID=43162&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=180613&PageID=4231

Triple P Parenting During COVID-19
https://www.triplep-parenting.com/nc-en/get-started/parenting-during-covid-19/

COVID-19 Free Printable Conscious Discipline resources
https://consciousdiscipline.com/free-resources/type/covid-19/

Helpful Tips for Supporting Online Learning for Parents
https://www.techlearning.com/how-to/a-guide-for-parents-teaching-at-home

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