7 Guiding Principles for Parents Teaching From Home

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Brain-Based Learning

Understanding the “why” behind teaching practices can help parents create meaningful and effective at-home learning opportunities during the pandemic.

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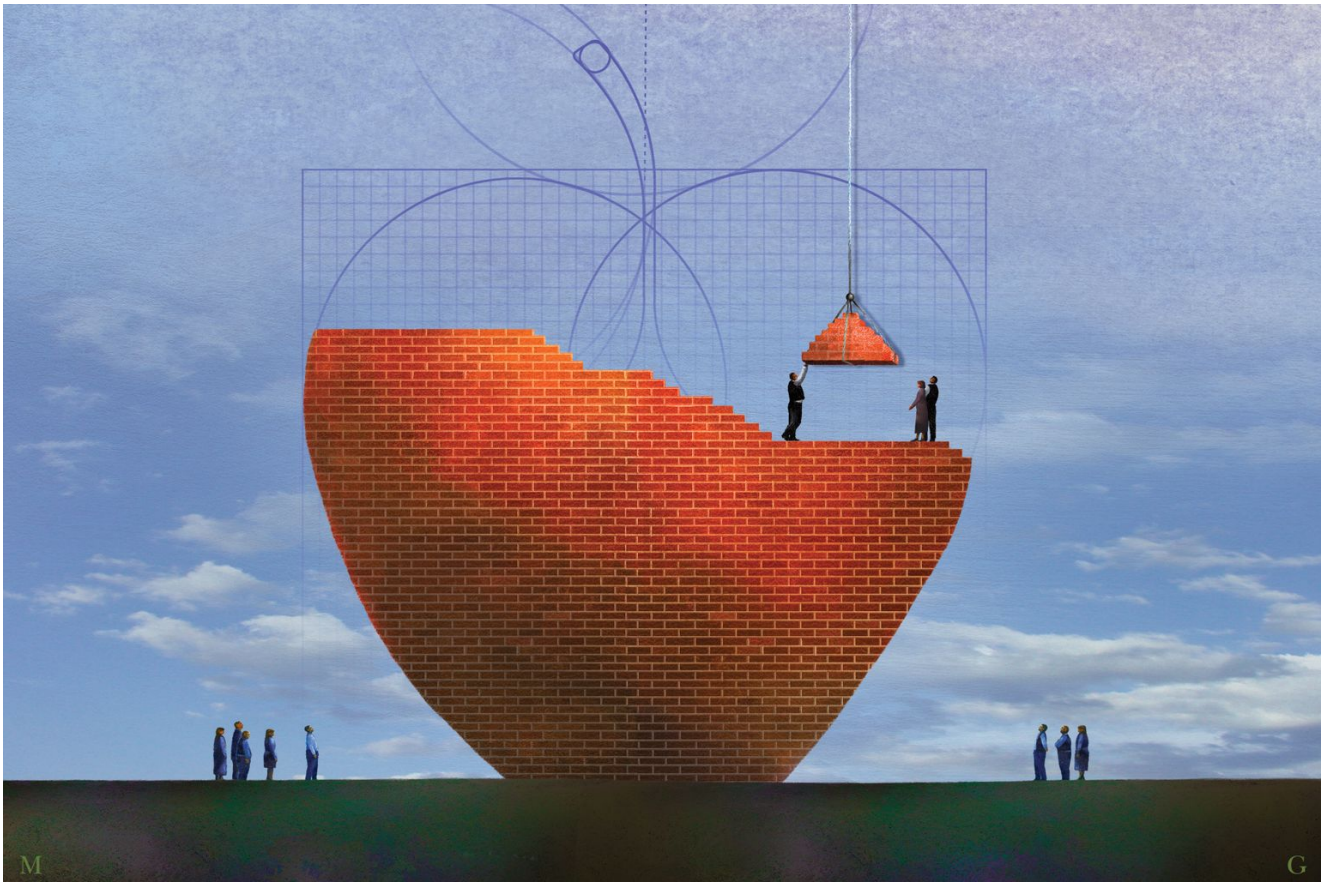

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As millions of students across the K-12 spectrum shift to at-home learning because of the coronavirus threat in the United States, parents are scrambling to understand their new role as surrogate teachers. It will require equal parts patience and tenacity. “This is going to be messy,” wrote educational leadership professor Jennifer Weiner in *The New York Times*, before giving parents and teachers permission to try and fail “and that is OK.”

But messy doesn't have to mean inadequate, nor does it have to be a permanent condition. While you've probably seen a sudden glut of online resources offered by nonprofits and educational institutions—including excellent new opportunities such as Mo Willems leading daily drawing activities or Dolly Parton reading bedtime stories—a library of amazing resources alone won't do the trick. Learning is not just about exposing a child to interesting content.

Here are some basic principles, grounded in research and science, that provide an overarching structure to your approach and make the learning more productive and long-lasting—whatever the learning materials in your home.

The fluid, open spaces that allow today's office workers to be more productive can also be useful for students, says teacher Kayla Dornfeld. "Flexible classrooms"—learning environments that provide a variety of choices for how and where a student might elect to learn—have become increasingly common in schools throughout the country. When students can tailor their space to their work, the research suggests that they feel more engaged and are more productive, so encourage students to move the furniture and props to fit their learning needs.

You'll want to maintain some structure. Set clear expectations about how and when a space can be used, says California middle school teacher Laura Bradley. Establish a few parameters for what types of work occurs in different spaces, but give students choice. For example, a student may be at a traditional desk for math practice but can transition to a couch or beanbag chair to watch online math instruction. Be crafty: Common household items can be used to change the dynamics of a space. A cardboard box can become a writing fortress, according to one teacher, while a stack of pillows can transform to an art corner. Create a balance between offering structured space and allowing students to choose where they can learn and engage most comfortably.

If you still think it feels a little risky, one comprehensive study showed that "flexibility" accounted for a quarter of the academic benefits attributable to classroom design, making it about as important as light or temperature to effective learning.

Check In Every Morning—And Throughout the Day

Starting school each morning is about more than laying out the academic benchmarks for the day. Decades of research reveals that a sense of belonging, well-being, and connection is a crucial precursor to learning: If your child is upset or lonely, for example, the research suggests that they simply won't be as productive as learners.

You might consider implementing an at-home version of a "greeting at the door," a fun ritual

teachers often use at the start of the day, to check in with your child and ask how they're feeling. Continue the practice throughout the day using lightweight 'checks-ins' and vary the question. According to the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning, asking "If you made or used an emoji that best represents your moods right now, what is it?" or "What color or blend of colors best represents how you're feeling today? Why?" can evoke more nuanced responses than "How are you feeling?"

If your school participates in distance learning, make sure your child regularly engages with other peers through the available technology—or consider snail-mail pen pals to keep your student connected to other young learners.

Allow Frequent 'Brain Breaks'

For parents and students, a back-to-back schedule of activities is overwhelming. The good news? Neuroscience supports frequent "brain breaks," and teachers pepper them throughout the day so students can process the information they've learned more effectively. How do brain breaks work? Studies show that brains at rest—also called the 'default mode'—are still busy processing information below the threshold of consciousness, cleaning up what they've learned and moving critical information from short-term memory to long-term storage.

Generally, younger students need more breaks, but students of all ages benefit from them. For young students, research shows brain breaks improve attention span. Breaking lessons into smaller, more manageable chunks helps students focus. Older students need breaks every 20-30 minutes to maintain focus and energy.

Find a Rhythm That Works

When schools announced closings, a plethora of suggested schedules popped up across the internet, but a rigid, static schedule won't serve a student's needs. Best-selling author and researcher Daniel Pink says 15 percent of people are "larks," or morning people, and another 15 percent are "owls," who perform best later in the day. The rest fall somewhere along the continuum between those poles, so think about customizing schedules to the child—a practice called "differentiation" that teachers use to meet the diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms.

Younger students perform best on analytical tasks earlier in the day, according to research cited by Pink, so parents may want to schedule activities like math in the morning. For the teenage brain, a later start and more sleep can mean better memory and retention. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises starting an adolescent's school day no earlier than 8:30am.

Consolidate Learning

One misconception about teaching is that its primary function is to help students retain information, but retention is just the first step. Effective learning requires that students retrieve information frequently and then make new meaning of it. This process, called consolidation, is often reinforced in traditional classrooms through reviews and quizzes, or through multi-sensory practices like drawing, composing a song, or building a model about what has recently been learned.

At home, prioritize opportunities to engage in active learning through discussion, writing, or producing art, over more passive practices such as re-reading or rote note-taking. Learning requires repeated, active manipulation of the materials being learned.

Finally, many studies reveal that teaching what you've learned to someone else—to a parent or to another sibling—is also a highly effective way to consolidate learning and make it stick. It's called the protege effect, and it works because teaching something requires that you master all the nuances of the topic.

Encourage Productive Struggle

Encourage kids to engage in productive struggle by giving them difficult assignments and praising them for their persistence. Research shows that when students solve problems that are challenging, but still within their abilities, they deepen their learning. Allow students to wrestle with problems before intervening.

When work is completed, try to avoid praising your child for "being smart;" the studies show that praising a child for inherent qualities tends to make them risk-averse and discourages trying new or challenging things. You want your kids to continue to push themselves, and praising hard work is more effective for building endurance and tenacity.

Consider Passions and Play

In many parts of the world, schooling at home will continue for at least several months. Help students move beyond a compliance mindset—"I've completed my work, can I go now?"—by building in time for passion projects and fun. You want kids to have intrinsic motivation to keep working hard, so use school at home as an opportunity for deeper learning where kids use their environment to explore different subjects.

Household activities like cooking or organizing offer the opportunity to develop problem-solving skills. New research shows that music, art, drawing, and dance are highly engaging activities that also improve language skills, mental focus, empathy, and creativity.

Finally, in the hustle of academic work, don't forget the importance of play. Not only does it

provide a respite for the brain after taxing analytical tasks like math or science, but decades of research shows that exercise can actually alter brain structure in ways that improve memory, attention, mood, and cognitive function. Unstructured play with few rules and lots of room for imagination is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics because it gives kids a space and time to practice social-emotional skills and creative problem-solving.