

# Ideas and Recommendations for Families with Children who have Diverse Learning Needs

*Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators.*

– Gravissimum Educationis #3

As so many Catholic schools have had to close campuses and engage students in distance learning, parents are experiencing the role of teacher in new and sometimes challenging ways. This is especially true in families with children who have diverse educational needs. The following list is intended to spark some ideas that would work with your child(ren).

## For all ages:

- Structure is good but will look different for different families.
  - Set-up a “workspace”, with your child’s input and help. Gather materials your child might need.
  - *Maintaining* what a student has learned, rather than learning new material may be best for some students who are feeling overloaded.
  - If you or your child has a library card (or if your local library lets you enroll on-line), listening to audiobooks will help to introduce new vocabulary, teach pronunciation, and help children who cannot look at a screen all day or who have no computer at home but do have a smartphone available.
  - Look around your house for items that can substitute as fidgets or as seat cushions.
- Better yet—ask your child to do a scavenger hunt to find them.
  - If your child is struggling with the transition to learning at home, go slowly. A little positive is better than a lot of negative.
  - Do not worry about too much screen time right now. Some children will need this to stay calm. Do monitor for wholesome content.
  - Set-up a family “Quiet Time.” Make a list of what can happen during this time. Ideas may include: reading, drawing, coloring, making a puzzle, writing a letter to a relative, building with legos, stretch exercises, a bubble bath, etc. Anything that is very quiet and restorative for each individual—no screens.
  - Check with your provider to see whether teletherapy and telecounseling is available to your child. If you are not sure if it will help, try one or two sessions.
  - Being of service is critical now. Can your child call an elderly relative or neighbor to check on them? Help to sew masks for healthcare personnel? Make a card for a grandparent in quarantine?

- If your child is already familiar with having to stay inside due long illness or being immunocompromised, suggest that he or she share ideas with classmates that have not had this experience.

### For younger children:

- If you are helping your child learn: a cardinal rule is you must give 9 different examples of positive feedback before you correct. This means nine things such as : a thumbs up, a smile, a high five, “You are working so hard!”, “Great focus!” etc. This can be hard, but the encouragement can help students to not shut down.
- Make a picture schedule to help your child learn new routines. Or, have your child take photos of each part of the day to use in a picture schedule.
- Social stories can help children understand what’s happening. Many fine stories are being shared on-line, or if you are familiar with them, write one with your child. Basically, each page tells one fact of what happened in a difficult or complicated situation. Children can color and decorate each page. (Ex. Page 1: In March of 2020, I heard the words “corona virus.” Page 2: I did not know what corona virus meant. Page 3: Our teacher showed us a special way to wash our hands to fight off germs, etc.)
- Brain breaks are essential. Let children show you a funny dance, tell some jokes, see how high they can stretch, at least every 15 minutes or so.
- If your child will only eat specific foods, and you are running out, see if you can recreate the look the look or consistency of such foods with items you have at home.
- Go easy on stickers and reward charts. If they were not part of your child’s learning before, now may not be the time to start.

- If you do not know the parents of other children in the class, ask your child’s teacher if there is a family that might enjoy exchanging a video chat with you and your child, or a virtual playdate.
- Think of exercise you can allow: Bedroom Volleyball (where you hit a balloon or wadded up paper back and forth over a bed) is an example. Or do you have the makings of a jump rope at home?
- If your child is particularly obsessed with something, for example trains, dinosaurs, or dogs, you might consider letting them focus on this topic to exclusion of others for a while, if this keeps them focused and calm.
- If your child balks at having you for a teacher, ask your child to teach you. “Show me what you are learning in math.” Just ask questions as your child goes through the material.
- Ask your child to think of something he or she has always wanted to learn. Tying knots? Sign Language? Magic tricks? Help them identify sources and then show you what they have learned.
- If you cannot go outside, playing “I Spy” out the window may be an option to at least get a view of nature each day.

### For older children:

- Encourage them to make a prayer space or help you with the one you are creating.
- Go easy on worrying about grades. There will have to be long conversations about grading when this time has passed. Meanwhile, focus on *learning*. Rather than ask your child what grade they received, ask them what they learned.
- Try to radiate “I trust you (your child) to learn this and do this.”
- Allow educational games, even if they are on-line and increase screen time.

- Introduce chores. They may balk at first, but performing these daily tasks will give them a sense of pride and accomplishment.
- Checklists are your friends. Instead of constant reminders: “Did you do this?” “Did you do that?” or answering constant questions, “Mom, what do I do next?”, refer children to their checklists. You can make a list for anything that is a daily routine. If it goes well, and helps the child to be independent, don’t forget to communicate pleased you are that they followed through.
- Do not try to motivate your child by suggesting that they will “be behind” when school starts if they do not continue with their work. Give this worry to God and then let it go.
- Sometimes we cannot make everything right for our children. Sharing in their pain and frustration is a way of showing them we love them.
- Explore Mass somewhere new. With so many virtual Masses available, try one in a state or country you have always wanted to visit.
- Remember when Jesus stayed behind in the Temple, and Mary and Joseph could not find him. (Luke 2:41-52). Trying times are a part of parenting.

### Reflection: Parenting and Educating in a Challenging Time

Whether by birth or adoption, God believes that you are the right parent for the children that you have. In these extraordinary times, begin by trusting your relationship with God and with your children. Be kind and gentle with yourself, and this will help you to be kind and gentle with your children.

Children are learning all the time. They never stop! We call “education” the guided learning that teachers and parents put in place that encourages the things we want children to learn. Right now, your child will keep learning. Their education, however, may change.

Parents of children with different learning needs often feel worry that their children may be “falling behind.” This can lead to terrible stress and enormous pressure on both the child and the parent. Keep in mind that your first obligation is to be their parent. Many people can be a child’s teacher, but lucky children have two loving parents. You must never give up that role, no matter the outside pressures.

With this in mind, remember that you know your child best. Think about what a day would

### For you (the parent):

- Trust your judgment.
- If your child’s school is teaching virtually, but it does not work for your child, tell your child’s teacher. Ask which lessons are top priority and focus on those.
- Do take some down time for yourself. One idea—make a schedule with friends and colleagues who will call or video chat with your child every day at a specific time. Callers can read a book, trade knock knock jokes or do whatever would amuse your child. Your child will benefit from stimulation provided by someone not already in the household, and you can take a break from being the main point of focus.
- Set up a prayer space for yourself and for your child. Put items there that you enjoy looking at: sacramentals, pictures of family and friends, a family bible, a candle, etc.
- Think of a prayer you love or write a short one now. Ask God to guide you in your parenting.

look like that would be best for your child. How much of that can be re-created at home? If your child needs large amounts of exercise—offer what you can in your house or yard or wherever may be safe. If this means that your child can only work on “educational activities” for a small amount of time each day, then that is probably best for your child. If your daughter is fearful in the current situation and letting her watch wholesome videos is helping her cope, then do not feel guilty about her screen time. If you are not that tech savvy, and you cannot negotiate the virtual world as well as you would like to, be at peace with that. Many of us struggle in that realm. Maybe you will help your son bake a cake to leave on the steps for a neighbor who lives alone. Your child will learn so much from that—even though normally it would not be a part of his formal “education.”

If you worry that your child will lose hard won skills—ask your child’s teacher for advice. Maintenance plans will be the best course of action for some children right now. They will not improve their reading—at the moment—but by reading (or listening to) books they enjoy they will maintain the level of reading they have learned. They will not acquire new math skills but may see the presence of math in everyday life in a new way, which may help them to embrace math more enthusiastically when school re-opens, and lead to long-term gains. Finally, do not forget how calming the arts can be. Instituting a “quiet time” in your family, where everyone must draw, make a

puzzle, read, dance (quietly), or listen to calm music through headphones might be a way to help everyone survive being indoors together.

If social interaction is critical for your child, ask the parent of a friend if the children can have a chat on the phone or a video chat. And yes, if your child is someone who does not yet have a close friend, ask the teacher to recommend the right parents and families to contact for a video “playdate.”

Children often experience bursts of achievement—when they are happy, calm, respected and included. This is not to say that the therapies and instruction your child is missing are not valuable, because they are. But they are not as valuable as the love you have for your child, and your confidence in their ability to learn.

It is certain that our Blessed Mother experienced fear and uncertainty when her family was called to flee Egypt out of fear for the life of the Infant Jesus. In that difficult time, the Holy Family turned to God the Father for strength and direction. We must do the same.

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