Guidance for Uncertain Times: When Kids Attend School from Home—Tips for Parents
https://podcasts.chadd.org/e/guidance-for-uncertain-times-when-kids-attend-school-from-home%e2%80%94tips-for-parents/
May 4, 2020

Objectives:
1. Learn strategies parents can use to help their kids with schooling at home.
2. Learn how to collaborate and talk with children about their schoolwork.
3. Learn how to implement accommodations if the child has a 504 or IEP plan.
4. Get suggestions for taking breaks, handling distractions, and maintaining motivation.
5. Learn strategies for parents who work at home while their children attend school from home.

Intro: Supernus Pharmaceuticals is pleased to sponsor the ADHD 365 podcast. ADHD can be complex. This resource and those you will find at MORETOADHD.com are designed to help.

Speaker 1: Hello, and welcome to the ADHD 365 Podcast. I'm your host, Susan Buningh, and I'm here today with Ann Dolin. Hi Ann. Thank you so much for your time this afternoon.

Speaker 2: Thanks for having me.

Speaker 1: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Speaker 2: Sure. Well, I'm a former public school teacher. I taught fourth grade and sixth grade both as a general education teacher and as a special education teacher—a lot of IEP meetings. On the side, as a teacher, I drove to kid’s homes and tutored them, and I realized after a few years that was my calling in life. So, I quit my teaching job. I started a tutoring company. That was 21 years ago, and now my tutors and I work with lots of kids. Used to be that we still went to kids homes in Washington DC, but now we do everything virtually and helping kids to keep up with their school work, improve their skills, and also to tackle those executive functioning skills too.

Speaker 1: So we're in the midst of this very unsettling time. Most schools have been closed now for 3 to 4 weeks and are looking ahead two more weeks of closure. Also, many parents are working from home. A lot of the parents we’re hearing from are afraid that they're expected to be teachers and to homeschool their children now, and especially those parents whose kids have ADHD are wondering how in the world they will get those kids to pay attention and get their work done—especially if the parents already have problems getting their kids to do homework. So, the parents are stressed and feel a lot of pressure to get it all done. Do you have any tips for parents so they don't feel so overwhelmed?

Speaker 2: Well, the first thing to do is to set up a schedule and think, you know, what will that look like
in your house? Will it be a set schedule with very specific times—like my child will do math from exactly 10 to 11, he'll take a break from 11 to 11:15, and then start language arts from 11:15 and 12:15. Or will it be more like a routine? Well, after breakfast, you do math and then you do language arts, and then you have lunch.

So, for families where the parent has ADHD and the student does, too, it's going to be really hard to stick to a very rigid schedule where there's exact times for everything. It might be better in that household to have a loose schedule like “all right, this is generally what I'm planning, but it's going to be flexible, and it may not be that we start lunch every day at 12. It might be 12:30.” You know it, it just is a little bit different, but you still have a framework that I found is a happy medium, a loose schedule rather than no schedule or just kind of like a routine. So I would start there.

And then the second thing I would do is really think, “How can I get my child to do a lot of this stuff on his own?” And that's where software comes in. You know, a lot of these programs at once costs money. Scholastic has one called Learn at Home. There's Blame Pop and Brain Pop Jr There's also IXL, which is now free for 30 days, and then you pay. But the former two are totally free now. So as much as you can get software to instruct your child, it's going to be better than you fighting battles on getting them to get stuff done.

The software today has evolved tremendously, so it's interesting, it's hands-on, it makes kids excited about learning. So if we can set a timer for, say, 25 minutes and say “You know, why don't you work on your math IXL for this 25 minutes.” That's probably going to be better than you trying to teach your child how to do long division and then your child saying, “Well, that's not how Mrs. Anderson does it in my class.”

Speaker 1: Now, of course, some schools are more proactive than others. But would you recommend that parents kind of wait and take their cues from the school or get started really on their own?

Speaker 2: I think kids need to be doing something. But if you think about homeschooling in the sense of, what do people do that chose to homeschool their kids? Not they were thrown into this through coronavirus, but what about those people that want to be a homeschool teacher? They don't try to recreate the school day from 7 to 3. They only homeschool for about two hours. I live in Virginia, and in the state of Virginia, the homeschool regs say you only have to do language arts and math. So, you want to think as a parent, if your child is going to, you know it's going to be ripe for frustration, What is something little my child can do in a small amount of time? So maybe it is just work on a little bit of math every day, and maybe they listen online to an audible book, or they listen to the book and follow along in the hard copy. Those would be very low barriers to entry. Kids probably won't fight you about that too much. But if you have these overarching expectations that make it feel hard to kids, that's when they're really going to push back.

Speaker 1: So while they're attending school online through Zoom or through other platforms, some children struggle to stay focused. Can you suggest any tools that are effective that might help eliminate online and environmental distractions for those kids?

Speaker 2: There are a couple of things. One is, I wouldn't have the expectation that the student can sit there for a prolonged amount of time and be responsible for learning. So, for example, if you say, “Why don't you do this for an hour or just for two hours? Get this stuff done,” it's unlikely to happen.
So, I found that using timers are incredibly helpful for kids. For most kids, some really anxious kids, they don't love timers, but most kids do well with timers. You set the timer for a short amount of time, say 25 minutes, and you say, “Work as hard as you can, focus as best you can, get as much as you can done.” And at 25 minutes, then take a break, which is usually about five minutes, and then you set the timer again. So I think chunking work into smaller increments is helpful.

If the work is online, then you know, one of the things that I've seen happen to many of our students is they go down the rabbit hole doing something they're not supposed to do. Usually it's on YouTube. What can you do to prevent that? So first, it's all right. Where is this work going to be done? Ideally, it's in a public place, and by that I mean by a place where people congregate, like your kitchen or the dining room, not in our bedroom, unless they're older, you know, an older high school student. But an elementary school student, the bedroom is inherently more distraction. So, have them do it in a place where you can kind of keep an eye out as much as possible. If they don't need their computer, don't have it open, do what they have to do without their computer. They almost always do not need their phone—that can go in another room.

If they do need their computer helping them, start out asking them, “You know what might help you to stay focused on this activity?” instead of you saying “You better not open anymore tabs. If I see you on YouTube one more time, listen, you're in trouble, buddy.” It's not going to go so well, so it's better to ask the question, “What you might do to make sure that you can get this done?” and throw it out to them first. There's lots of apps out there that help kids stay focused and self-control allows kids to blacklist websites they deem to be distracting. In general, as much as possible, putting a little bit of ownership on your child and allowing them to buy into “All right, it is my job to get this done,” they're much more likely to do it.

Speaker 1: Do you think parents should try to mimic what they think happens in the classroom, or are there better approaches?

Speaker 2: I think they should lower their expectations for themselves and figure out, What am I good at? What can I do well with my child? Maybe it's just reading with your child. Maybe you're really good at that. You love literature, and this has always been a pleasurable thing that you've done with your child. Maybe limit your engagement to that and let the software do the teaching. But you absolutely do not need to mimic what's going on in class. Nobody expects that of parents.

I've found that parents are putting an awful lot of pressure on themselves. It's just what we do as a parent. We're always worried. We're worried. You know, “What if my child doesn't have enough? What if enough learning does it take place? What is it going to be like in the fall for him? Is he going to fall apart? Will we be able to keep up?” As parents we’re always worried about these things and about the future. Actually, everybody's feeling like that and everybody's child is going to go back to school a little bit rusty. But what it might mean is, you do the best you can now and then over the summer, you have expectations. You talk to your child about it now. “Look, over the summer, we're going to have to do a little bit of learning and that's just what it is.” So, they know it's not a traditional vacation where nobody does anything, but it's likely they're going to just have to chip away at a few things over the summer so that they're ready for school.

Speaker 1: Do you have any suggestions for parents whose kids have accommodations, either through 504 plans or IEPs, and now they're at home with the child?

Speaker 2: I would keep in touch with the teacher constantly. And if you get an assignment that you feel
like, “Oh my gosh, this is torture for my child. They've been working on this for an hour and a half and they're just spent, we're fighting over this.” It might be that an accommodation was not made, so I would email the teacher and use the words “I've noticed Johnny is really struggling to get this done. Has an accommodation already been made? Or is it possible that he only does half of this or per his IEP, after a half hour doing something, he's allowed to put it down. Would that be okay with you?” I think that teachers are really stressed out right now, I think that teachers, some of them, are not technical. Not only are they trying to figure out how to get this stuff online, but now they have to deal with kids that are playing Fortnite while they're sitting in front of their computer with live streamed interaction, and they're not paying attention. So, they're having to not only teach material but deal with inattentive kids all while this is online, and they may forget about accommodations. It doesn't mean they're a bad teacher. It just means there's a lot on their mind. So, I would say keep in regular touch with your teacher or your case manager to make sure that accommodations are being granted.

Speaker 1: Let’s talk again about scheduling. What kind of learning schedule might be more effective for the kids with ADHD? You mentioned a little bit about this earlier—some people suggest work for an hour, have a break for an hour and alternate like that throughout the day. Do you agree with that? Or do you think maybe there's a more effective way to schedule their time?

Speaker 2: We need to think about that human beings, in general are most productive—and actually there's a lot of research on this—we know that when you wake up in the morning, your energy and your attention is kind of low but it increases throughout the morning, and it really reaches a peak right around lunchtime. After that, it starts to wane, and it goes down until about three o'clock you're in this thing called a trough. And a trough is when you don't have a lot of motivation, you don't have a lot of energy, and you don't have a lot of focus, you're easily distracted. So when we think of it, right when our kids are on the upswing or when they are most productive, it's before lunch for its right around lunch or its right after lunch. For that reason, I don't think kids with ADHD should have the expectation that they do work after, say, two o'clock. It may not be realistic for them because they don't have that mental energy to sustain focus well enough. So we think, are we going to do an hour on an hour off? If that works for you, great. I would encourage you to do it before say one o'clock.

However, if you find that you give your child a break and before you know it they’re on Xbox or they’re on Call of Duty or Fortnite whatever they're doing, and they've gone down this rabbit hole of distractions, then you cannot offer anything electronic during that break because it's just ripe for frustration. That's when you're going to say “All right, Johnny, you've had your break. Let's start again.” And Johnny is going to say, “Wait, Mom, when I get to the next level or I'll do it later” and it never goes well. So I think personally an hour is too long for break. However, if you've done that in the past and it works for you, keep doing it. But in general, if you can chunk things—like for an elementary schooer, we're going to do 25 minutes, take a five-minute break, 25 minutes again, take a longer break—and you chunk it that way, with no more than four timed increments, that's going to work well. Same for an older child. But in general, for most kids, too long of a break can be counterproductive.

Speaker 1: What would you say to parents whose kids are taking this lockdown as though it’s spring break? And what would you say if this is going to continue for a while, for example if we have multiple waves of shutdown? Because soon it’s going to be time for summer break.

Speaker 2: Yeah, it's true. If you feel like you're constantly in a power struggle with your child over this stuff and they're on vacation mode and you want them to be in study mode, I really would suggest setting
up an appointment with them and saying to them, “Hey, you know what, I can tell we're fighting a lot about this. Can we talk about it tonight after dinner? How about 7:30?” I like the idea of setting an appointment with your child, no matter what their age, because it makes them feel like they're a player in the discussion, like they're an adult, like they have a say. And then, at 7:30, nobody’s upset. Everybody's calm, it's not like you're in the moment with your student at that point.

Then you can say, “How do you think things are going? Do you feel like you're able to get this work done? Tell me, on a scale of 1 to 10. Where is your motivation level?” Just opening up the dialogue for them to talk to you about it, and the goal is not to come up with this master plan that fixes everything, and makes things right. That's not it at all. The goal is just to have a discussion with your child and to try to respect their feelings and have a genuine conversation. “I care about you. I know this is hard. I know that sometimes I take on the role of taskmaster and I don't want to do it anymore. What do you think is a happy medium? How will I know that you have this done?” And really put the ball in their court and see what they come back to you with.

If you feel like it's a one-sided conversation, you might say, “You know what? I can tell that I've done a lot of the talking. Can we come back tomorrow morning and talk about this a little bit more?” Give them time to think and to sleep on it and then come back with a fresher mind.

Speaker 1: You put together a wonderful resource with excellent strategies for parents during this time. Would you talk about those for us?

Speaker 2: The first one is setting up that schedule, and if you're struggling with where do I go from here if I haven't been successful. Really the first step is to determine, Do I want a rigid structure? Or do I want a loose schedule? Or do I just want a routine? And that is the first thing.

The second thing is to figure out where your student is in terms of what's been given to him from the school. So, for example, a lot of kids don't yet have streamed instruction, meaning the teacher doesn't pop up on their screen and say, “All right everybody, it’s time for math, here’s what we’re doing today.” But instead, the instruction is more like “Okay, everybody, do page 61 through 10 then unit test after that.” And they have this list of things that they have to get done. Well, that's an ADHD kid’s biggest nightmare—to have all this stuff they have to get done, and then on their own, they have to break it down and figure out what they're going to do every day when they have to turn it in. Their initial reaction when they feel overwhelmed is just to avoid, it just feels like way too much work. “I don't know how to get started, so I am just not going to do it.” And that's really where the parent comes in.

During the school year it's usually once a week where you would sit down with your child—I like Sunday nights—to say, “Tell me what you have coming up. What's big? Meaning, is there a test, a project?” Something like that. Let's talk about how you might break that down, but in this situation, it needs to be daily. “All right, so let's see you have this for science, of this for math. You have this for reading.” Ask them about their priorities, have them create a little to do list, doesn't have to be extravagant. Ideally, they can put it on a white board where they do the writing, not the parent. And the white board goes in a visible place so that you and your child know what needs to get done.

And when they do it, they put a line through it. They cross it out and you're all good. Honestly, I would not check for accuracy at this point. I would not. “I don't care if you have misspelled words. I really don't care if you put a negative when it should have been a positive. All I care about as a parent is that you have this work done, and I'm not going to micromanage.”
**Speaker 1:** Is there anything else you'd like to tell our audience today?

**Speaker 2:** Sure. You know, one thing that I've seen more recently is that kids are okay in the beginning with all of this. Meaning at first it was kind of like, “Yeah, I'm not a school.” And now it just feels like it’s torture, and for the parents, their attention is easily diminished, and they're struggling with it, too. I think the most important thing for us to realize is we're in this for another couple of months and to ask ourselves what's important here. What is it that my child needs to know? Just focus on those things, and don't beat yourself up about it as a parent.

There are going to be good days, and there will be bad days—and some weeks there will be more bad days than good days. We're all doing the best job we can.

And then lastly, if you are a parent that needs to work from home at the same time, when you are parenting a distractible child, be okay with setting boundaries. For example, it's okay to say, “All right, listen, between 10 and 10:45 I'm going to put a red piece of construction paper on my office door, and that means I can't be bothered unless it's an absolute emergency.” Have a system where a red means please don't bother me, yellow means if you need help, let me know, and then green means come on in any time. Having an open door policy is really good for defining parameters for parents that need to work from home and for kids that don't have a lot of emotional regulation, because those kids may not have boundaries like other kids do.

When some kids see their parents on the phone and it's clear they're on a conference call, they know, “You know what? I don't like having to go in there. But some of our kids without a lot of emotional regulation don't take those cues and burst in when you're talking to your boss, and scream at you that so-and-so just punched him and that’s a separate thing. Giving kids those visuals to know when it's okay to come get you when you really need to focus on something else can be helpful for working parents.

**Speaker 1:** Thank you so much for your time today. I think this will be very helpful for our parents.

**Speaker 2:** Great. Thanks, Susan.

**Outro:** School can present challenges during the most ordinary of times for a child with ADHD. Home quarantine and the need for homeschooling have likely presented additional challenges. No doubt you learned some new tips and tricks in the podcast you just completed. MORETOADHD.com is another resource from Supernus Pharmaceuticals that offers additional suggestions you can use at home to create a classroom environment to help your child succeed in your home school. Stay safe and healthy. Thank you for listening to another episode of ADHD 365. Stay up to date on the latest ADHD information by connecting to CHADD’s social media page at CHADD.org/social that will link you to all of our social media channels—Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube.