

# BALANCING VIRTUAL AND CLASSROOM LEARNING

How to keep  
kids with  
ADHD  
on track

by Ann Dolin, MEd



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**T**HERE'S NO DOUBT that the fall of 2020 will be like no other. As parents, we hoped our kids would be sitting at their desks on that first day of school, but the reality is very different. If you're sad, anxious, disappointed, angry, or feeling any other emotions, please know you are not alone.

Depending on where you live, you're experiencing some mix of in-classroom instruction and virtual at-home learning. And therein lies the problem. It's getting our kids with ADHD motivated and focused for the at-home portion that can cause the most frustration. So, if you're in a school district with this hybrid approach, say two days in the classroom and three days in the living room, here's help.

### 1. Create a schedule or routine (and put it in writing!).

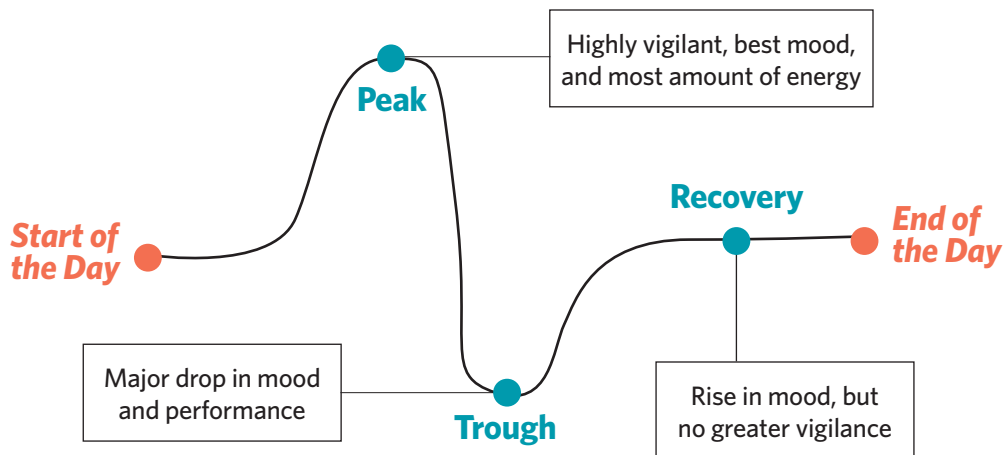
Kids thrive on routine. Don't consider yourself the color-coded-planner type? That's okay! You can keep this simple and it will still make a big difference in your kids' at-home days.

First, start by determining set times for "The Framework Five":

1. Up and out of bed (yes, kids should have a time to get up, even on "off" days)
2. Breakfast and shower (the latter important to start the day)
3. Lunch
4. Dinner
5. Bedtime

By establishing times for The Framework Five first, it becomes easier to plan for the rest of your day. Next, decide whether a schedule or routine will fit your family best. A schedule can fall on a continuum between rigid and loose, but it's a timed plan with specific start and end times. A routine is a broader plan that

## The 3 Stages of Timing in a Day



Credit: Daniel Pink

hackmytime.co

provides consistency in general routines without the specific time boundaries of a schedule. For most families dealing with ADHD, I've found that a routine tends to work better than a strict schedule that's hard to adhere.

Whether you choose a schedule or a routine, some consistency will help you and your kids feel grounded in a season where everything seems unpredictable and up in the air. But know that you will still have to bend and flex from time to time.

As you decide how to plan out your days, keep in mind that kids focus best before lunch. This is their "peak" stage, where they're in the best mood and have more energy. As the afternoon goes on, energy and focus will start to wane. That's normal and okay! Even adults often have a 3:00 slump. While they may recover some of their good mood later in the day, they still won't have the same energy they had in the morning. Whenever possible, make the most of your child's best hours by planning to do school work before lunch.

Once you decide on your new routine, put it in writing and post it on the refrigerator for everyone to see. When we simply tell kids a new schedule, they tend to take it "in one ear and out the other." When you have visual reminders of your routine in your home, however, kids will be far more likely to abide by the new rules and rhythms.

## 2. Work with your kids to establish a structure.

These coronavirus closures are uncharted territories for not just parents, but educators as well. Some schools and teachers are establishing structured routines with minimal instruction times and assignments on at-home days, while others aren't.

On the other hand, if your school is leaving it up to you or presenting work as optional, you may have to create this structure and routine on your own. In this case, it can be easy to feel like the bad guy—especially if your child thinks this should just be time off. The trick here is to strike a balance between authority and compromise. Try inviting your child into the conversation to establish some structure for the whole family.

With older kids, explain that you have to decide how to adjust to this new reality together. What expectations do they think would be fair? Would they like to try a block schedule, where they only focus on a couple of subjects each day? Having these open discussions will encourage older students to take some responsibility for their education and reduce pushback over the coming weeks.

Even younger children can respond well to more choices and responsibility. Try giving your child broad choices on what subject they can work on now and what they're going to do later. If they seem to avoid certain subjects that still need to be studied, try giving more specific choices on ac-

tivities they can do within a subject. Choosing from a list of choices gives young students a sense of independence combined with clear boundaries and expectations. This can spur them on to do more work with less pushback.

## 3. Set realistic expectations.

While having some structure and routine will certainly be helpful, it's also important to balance that with realistic expectations.

Kids are processing a lot right now, and this isn't the time for loads of discipline. Instead, focus on preserving your relationships with your kids. Think about what you want them to remember and take away from this time. Consider planning one family activity a day, such as a family walk or a board game after dinner. And be prepared to negotiate and compromise (for example, "You can watch Netflix if you're willing to do these two things each day..."). That's not losing—it's finding solutions that work for everyone!

When it comes time to work on homeschooling, remember that kids can only sustain their attention for so long. It's unrealistic to think they'll be able to sit still for hours on end and power through a long list of assignments. Instead, dial back your expectations. You shouldn't feel pressure to recreate a normal school day. Two to three hours of academic work a day is plenty, and it can absolutely be broken into smaller chunks throughout the day.

One approach that can help you break work into more manageable study periods is the Pomodoro Technique. This timer-based strategy is quite simple. You set a timer for 25 minutes and say, "We're going to work as hard as we can for 25 minutes. Then, we'll get a break." Then, you take a 5-minute break to reset. After doing this four times in a row (two hours total), you can take a longer break.

This is a great guideline to follow, but remember it's just that: a guideline. You can experiment to find the rhythms that work best for your kids on these at-home days. Younger students may need shorter stretches of "study" time. The important part is to maintain realistic expectations for how long your child can focus so they don't get burned out on day one 🍷

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