

TEACHING IN

WHEN COVID-19 first closed our schools in March, many teachers asked, “Now what?!” Teaching special education is immensely rewarding, but oftentimes challenging even under normal circumstances. It takes a deep understanding of how the mind works along with patience and perseverance to adapt lessons, content, and tasks for multiple individuals daily. Then, we were forced to quickly acclimate to a new format of teaching and learning during a pandemic.

Adjustments to this upheaval were unprecedented, and I was unsure how to proceed. I was concerned for my students and how they were transitioning. Small changes in our classroom routine could wreak havoc on my scholars with ADHD as they attempted to adapt. There was comfort in knowing what was coming next in the day, and I could not imagine what it would be like for them to adjust to digital learning without me next to them.

Surveys became my biggest ally as my class and I tackled each stumbling block we encountered during distance learning. I surveyed students and parents on their schedules and asked what would help them most while learning online. I asked students what worked for them and what was unsuccessful. I called parents every week to learn of any pitfalls they were noticing and how their family was coping in order to adjust my teaching and assignments to address their needs.

Adjustments are vital to better my practice but can be difficult to implement, especially when students are used to a current routine. Shifting to online learning was demanding for some. It required a level of metacognition that they had not had to access before, as far as understanding their own learning needs. Task management was one of the most problematic aspects of distance learning. My learners with ADHD would struggle planning out their week to complete assignments or would forget to do assignments for another class like computer science or art.

Curriculum, attention, and expectations

I have always adapted and differentiated curriculum, but the adjustments I had to make for online learning during a pandemic went beyond the strategies I'd previously learned.

I had to evaluate what areas of the curriculum would give me the most bang for my buck. Presenting memorable content created a challenge as well. In my classroom, I have a notecard on the wall to remind myself that sometimes it can take up to four hundred repetitions before a student creates a new synapse in their brain unless taught through play. I had to brainstorm ways to help the content stick through the use of relatable and comedic content.

Sustaining attention in the classroom for extended periods of time is challenging. I maintain attention by standing near students who become unfocused easily and limit the items in the room that are distracting. I also utilize a lot of transitions, keeping my directions and lessons concise, and implementing a plethora of opportunities for peer-to-peer discussion.

At home, even I found it difficult to focus. My cat is meowing for lunch, there are other members of my household who are working from home, and all the tasty snacks are only steps away. When deciding how to address this for my students, I reflected on online trainings I had attended that supported my learning. I realized that the ability to go back to the video, pause, and rewind as many times as necessary was beneficial for my learning. So, I began recording and posting live lessons and found that creating videos facilitated learning in a digital platform.

Expectations were the last major adjustment my students, their parents, and I had to make. Due dates and grading had to be flexible to allow for feedback to be given and received over the course of hours or days. This was frustrating sometimes, both for myself and my students. However, when we are not in the building I cannot control their learning environment. I usually deliver one task at a time and a set amount of time to complete with my support.

A PANDEMIC

*Upheavals,
Adjustments,
and Moving
Forward*

by Ashlee Van Boening, MEd



Moving forward

Despite the challenges and tribulations of the spring, I looked forward to online learning this fall. Throughout the spring and summer, I devoted a great deal of time to professional development. Teachers all over the country have been sharing tips and tricks for how to engage students and present content. I've watched countless videos on creating interactive choice boards and converting photos into GIFs. This may not have been the ideal situation, but I know all of these skills will be transferrable for when we can re-enter schools full time.

It may be hard to find silver linings in a pandemic, but they are there. First and foremost, through distant learning we know we will be safest from contracting the virus. The pandemic has provided an opportunity to discover new ways to engage with students and their families by linking home and school more closely, such as through the how-to cooking videos my class created. I was able to create deeper relationships with families through our weekly phone calls.

Furthermore, children are developing stronger computer literacy and learning new ways to engage with technology. They are also getting the opportunity to practice more executive functioning skills: scheduling their days, task management, prioritization, developing spaces they learn best in, and self-monitoring progress. While we all may not be entirely pleased with the way things are now, at least there are positive takeaways from this situation. 📍

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SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATE DISTANCE EDUCATION: Tips for Teachers & Parents

1. Set a schedule.

- Allow students to take ownership of the schedule creation.
- Consider creating a visual for the schedule for easy reference throughout the day. Schedules for younger children should include pictures and words in order to support independence.
- Teach your student how to use the schedule for task management, such as checking or crossing off completed tasks or placing a sticker next to it. Demonstrate breaking large tasks into smaller action items.
- Allow for some flexibility within scheduling in case plans change.
- Utilize timers and stopwatches during independent work. A timer is beneficial to know when breaks can be taken or how long to work on a particular assignment. Stopwatches can be used to build stamina. Students work on a task for as long as they can, then they try to beat that time the next day.
- Consider the following items when planning a schedule:

- › What time of day is your student most able to focus? There are certain times when the child may have so much energy that he or she seems to be practically vibrating out of his or her skin. Conversely, know when enough is enough, such as when your student is checked out and cannot retain more information. Their frustration levels may be too high for meaningful work to be completed. Remember tomorrow is a new day and acknowledge the effort they put forth.
- › Schools utilize positive reinforcement throughout the day. Consider incentives and rewards for your scholar. Is there a certain time of day or week that work is to be completed by? Perhaps there is a type of assignment your child is reluctant to complete. Cultivate a goal for your child to strive toward, and then brainstorm appropriate rewards, such as sticker or something bigger to work toward.

2. Provide and encourage clarity.

- Keep directions concise and to the point. When working with your student, try giving a brief explanation at the beginning and

then revisiting throughout the assignment.

- Discuss with your child and confirm the child understands your expectations, as well as their teacher's, for learning time. Children crave boundaries and understanding about why they have to do something.
- Instead of telling your child to "ask the teacher" when they become confused, guide them on how to advocate for themselves. Demonstrate how to word an email or message when requesting help. The more your child sees it done, the more they will take on the responsibility for themselves.

3. Incorporate movement.

- Finally, students need brain breaks throughout the day. This is a time when they can take a break in order to refocus.
- Brain breaks can be active, incorporating activities such as jumping jacks or running in place. They can be mindful, such as doing a short meditation or yoga poses. They can also be creative, such as engaging in an interpretative dance or moving through the growing stages of a tree.