

HELP YOUR

with Screen Resistance or Anxiety
in Distance Learning



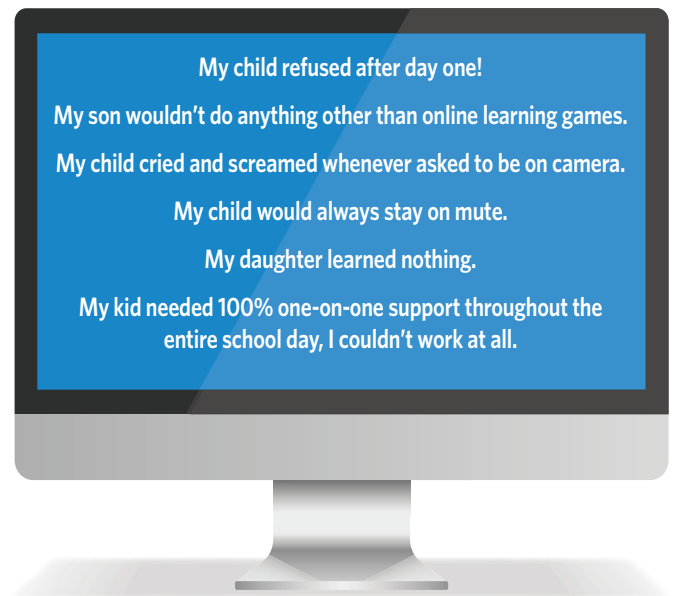
CHILD



by Allison Sibley, PhD, LICSW

VIRTUAL LEARNING leads to challenging circumstances and struggles for many children and teenagers with ADHD. While some are doing well, others suffer mightily. Despite the hard work of dedicated teachers and loving, committed parents, many students are resisting, avoiding, or shutting down in the face of virtual learning demands.

As a family therapist, I have been treating many families with children who crashed and burned from virtual learning. As a mom, I experienced it firsthand. I've heard countless stories:



And now, months later, here we are doing the same thing. Kids are discouraged, parents are tired, and teachers are trying.

When I was frustrated last spring, I spent time developing strategies to help my family with distance learning. Some of my colleagues worked tirelessly over the summer to develop specialized tutoring and support programs to help families manage during this crisis. As a family therapy practice treating hundreds of families weekly, our team gathered tips and suggestions as we all learned from distance learning. Here are some things you can use to make this school year better.

Starting from the bottom of the ladder, pick a strategy your child can use to help them get more comfortable working on-screen.

Distance learning is not a one-size-fits-all method.

Distance learning in this manner and for lengthy periods of time, especially for school-aged children, is not developmentally appropriate. Under normal circumstances, teaching professionals would not support this model. Teachers are working hard to offer the best version of learning through online experiences, but it will still have challenges.

Be kind and flexible with your child and yourself.

Every child and family is different. There are no absolutes in what will or what won't work. Commit to a flexible schedule and plan, and be willing to revise it.

Communicate with your teacher about your child's specific plan and goals.

Communicate with your child's teacher about how distance learning went last year and what your child's goals are for school this year (for example: stay on camera, participate in live classes more and more, raise their hand on camera, listen off screen and on mic until more comfortable, etc.).

Create a productive learning space.

Try creating a designated learning space for your child, ideally with their own laptop, headphones, and wireless mouse. Help your child keep this area clean and clear of distractions. Add a schedule and organization space for printouts, pencils, books, and other learning materials. Add some fidget toys, they're great for focus!

Prepare for siblings learning together.

Consider having break-out learning spaces for siblings so they can work together and apart when needed. Use headsets for kids to minimize distractions. Separate desks at least an arm's length apart if possible. Designate a person for certain blocks of the school day, or hire a childcare provider to help facilitate distance learning while you work.

Buy or make fun school supplies to get prepared and excited.

Everyone loves new notebooks and pens. Get something fun like erasable highlighters or a new wireless mouse, fun gel pens, and composition notebooks with cool designs. Try upcycling old school supplies by decorating notebook covers, using washi-tape, and getting creative.

Try to start the same way daily.

Develop a routine, preferably during the first few weeks. Have the same point-person start the day if you can. Try to have a routine and a fun outing daily to do during lunch break or recess (for example: walk the dog, run a fun errand, etc.).

Follow the learning schedule flexibly.

Each morning, write out the day's schedule and cross off items as things get done. If your child is overwhelmed by schedules, try breaking the day into morning and afternoon, or only write out half the day at first. Let your child take breaks when needed.

Create realistic and customized goals for your child.

If your child is scared of being on screen with the mic on, try having them participate off-screen and off-mic at first. Tell their teacher your plan for working on increasing your child's comfort. Gradually add a feature—turn on the mic, turn on the screen during fun activities, help your child respond in chat, or raise their hand virtually.

Ask the teacher not to call out or on your child at first.

This is specifically if your child has screen anxiety. You can advocate for your child's feelings while still expecting them to grow. Expose them to other less threatening virtual interactions (Zoom call grandparents regularly, interactive apps or FaceTime with friends, etc.).

Create a ladder.

With your child, write out their fears or resistance to virtual class on a scale of 1-10; 10 is *most scary* and 0 is *all okay*. Help them think about instances that might make them anxious and write them down and rate them (for example: being called on in class, getting the answer wrong in the chat, having everyone see my face on screen, having to look at everyone's faces all at once). Try to build a list of coping strategies for each level of concern.

Be willing to accommodate and adjust your child's learning experience.

If your child is fearful or averse to looking at everyone fully in the face on-screen, try having your child sit to the side at first. They can doodle or play with a fidget tool. You also can have them minimize the Zoom window so they don't see everyone, or they can hide their image.



Expose them gradually, kindly, and steadily.

Starting from the bottom of the ladder, pick a strategy your child can use to help them get more comfortable working on-screen. For instance, they might take a screen break or “shake it off” after showing up on-screen. Or they could play with thinking putty while they are off-screen but on-mic and answering questions. We are working toward progress, not perfection!

Recognize that they are learning a lot at once, which could cause information and emotional overload.

Your child may experience information and emotional overload. Trying to learn math, while using OneNote, and typing their answers while also talking and listening and watching on-screen may just be too much, right? Have paper and pencils ready to replace OneNote if needed, and offer to type their answers for them. Consider practicing a typing program to build confidence.

Emphasize, empathize, empathize—and still retain certain standards.

When your child complains, share in those feelings: “This IS awful!” Match their emotion and intensity and then return to a calm voice. Try returning to certain goals and standards (even if just silently to yourself in that moment) and consistently ask your child to participate. If we give up, we teach our kids that they can’t do hard things and

that we can’t help them overcome difficult tasks. Don’t pressure, but do be kind and firm.

What we are doing now as parents is really, *really* challenging—working, teaching, coping with chronic stress and uncertainty. It can feel impossible and insurmountable in the moment. Try to acknowledge the worry that you wake up with, honor it, and then calm yourself for a minute. Then, if you can, visualize how you want to feel with your child and imagine the relationship you want to create. Despite all the chaos, you can do it and so can your child. If your child is resisting or avoiding, take a minute to reconnect with them through a five-minute break that is light and easy, then start again. And, if you find you need additional help, give yourself that help. 🗣️

Allison Sibley, PhD, LICSW, is a licensed independent clinical social worker in Washington, DC, with more than twenty years of experience treating children, families, couples, and adults. When counseling children and adolescents individually or in groups, she uses a practical, hands-on approach derived from cognitive behavioral techniques. Her approach to family therapy combines a family systems approach and Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT), so that families can take on and resolve their communication problems and live together with more satisfaction and mutual respect. Sibley has taught at the Washington School of Psychiatry and Catholic University of America’s School of Social Work, Council for Social Work Education, and the Smith College School for Social Work. She speaks on topics that include social competence in children’s friendships, therapeutic play techniques for parents, parenting tweens and teenagers, and varied important topics related to family health and well-being.