

How to foster children's learning while sheltering at home

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U. of I. psychology professor Eva Pomerantz studies the factors that promote children's motivation and achievement at school. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Parents sheltering at home with their kids sometimes struggle to foster their children's continued engagement with learning. Eva Pomerantz, a

professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, studies the factors that promote children's motivation and achievement at school. She spoke to News Bureau life sciences editor Diana Yates about her research on the topic and her own efforts to keep her children academically engaged while at home.

How can parents' practices contribute to children's motivation and learning in school?

It helps when [parents](#) are involved in their [children's](#) learning. For example, parents can ask children about a book they are reading, or engage with them in learning activities such as playing a game that involves math.

However, how a parent chooses to be involved in their [children's learning](#) makes a difference. Our research, as well as that of others, suggests three key principles for optimal involvement:

First, it's important for parents to support their children's autonomy. This means adopting their children's perspective and allowing them to make choices and take the lead.

Second, supporting children's autonomy does not mean parents simply leave them to fend for themselves. Children need clear and consistent guidelines, expectations and rules.

And finally, it can be frustrating trying to get children engaged in learning when they would rather be doing something else or are struggling with their work, but it's best when parents keep negative emotions such as anxiety or irritation in check.

How might this apply to the current situation, with

parents and children sheltering at home together during a global health pandemic?

Every situation is different given differences in how schools are implementing home learning. In addition, children differ in how they engage in learning—for example, in terms of their attention and excitement. However, the three key principles I outlined earlier are likely to apply in most situations. How parents implement them may differ.

A big challenge for families in sheltering at home is that their established routines no longer exist. So, one of the first things for families is to create new routines. It is essential to get children's input during this process. A routine's success depends on children owning it. This means allowing children to take the lead in making the schedule and really listening to their perspective.

Of course, once you have a schedule, it might need to change. Be flexible. Maybe children are not actually getting their work done with the schedule. In this case, parents can communicate that they do not feel the schedule is working in terms of helping their children learn. They can ask children how to change the schedule to fix it.

Sheltering at home is stressful for many families and negative emotions can run high. Parents' attempts to help with schoolwork can lead to negative emotions for both children and parents, so trying to stay out of children's schoolwork is one way for parents to keep negative emotions in check. Parents may also need to adjust their goals for this time of sheltering at home.

Your research has shown that a parent's academic and social goals for their children can add to the

children's stress. How might parents need to adjust their goals for their children while sheltering at home with them?

Our research suggests that when parents get caught up in their children's performance, they tend to be intrusive—for example, by taking over their children's homework or ignoring their children's perspective. Parents also are more likely to express [negative emotions](#) such as frustration and irritation toward their children when their children do poorly at something like their schoolwork.

Parents may want to reframe their goals while sheltering at [home](#). Instead of focusing on the material their children need to cover in areas like math and reading, they might focus simply on what their children can do that is constructive. This might mean that children learn how to bake or make origami. Or children may research a subject of interest and share what they learned at dinner.

What strategies do you find useful in navigating the new situation at home with your children?

Despite all I know from my research, I have a tendency to micromanage. I have a number of strategies to try to stop myself from doing so. Here are three such approaches:

First, I remind myself the goal is simply for my children to do something constructive. I try to be flexible in my idea of "constructive" and in terms of how much can get done each day.

Second, I try to put my children's perspective at the forefront. I ask myself: Can we accomplish the goal of being constructive while doing it my children's way? And if not, how we can do it in a way that would sit

well with them?

Third, I'm also forgiving of my children and myself as we navigate this unusual and challenging situation. When things do not work, I try to find a way to do it better next time, and then I move on.

What policies or practices can school systems implement to improve conditions for their homebound students and foster their engagement with academic subjects?

Schools can provide structure in the form of a schedule that is flexible to some extent so that students can adapt it to work for them and their families. There also needs to be support of students' autonomy in that there are choices for work in each subject or in how students go about doing the work.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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