

Families of children with special needs face additional challenges during quarantine

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Ever since schools closed for in-person learning in mid-March, my numerous chat groups on WhatsApp have been buzzing with moms asking each other: "What are the schools planning to do?" "Are you

planning to send your child back in the fall?" And expressing concerns such as "I am struggling to keep my child busy, and off the screen" and "I'm worried my child will be behind this year." As a parent, I share their plight and that of many other parents and caregivers across the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the way we manage our professional, academic and social obligations. For families with a [child](#) with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), the pandemic has added an additional layer of challenge: ensuring that the child's unique learning needs are met by caregivers who are not necessarily trained or prepared to provide academic support.

Being in a physical classroom in a school setting provides numerous benefits for students with IDD. It offers much-needed structure and a routine, clear boundaries, an opportunity for socialization and independence, and academic support that is aligned with the needs of each student.

With the likelihood of virtual classrooms for most students in the upcoming academic year, it is imperative that we think ahead for strategies that allow us to support our child and prevent the COVID slide. Similar to the "summer slide," this is a phenomenon where students demonstrate reduced learning as a result of the summer break or in the current case, the circumstances brought about by the pandemic.

What can families of children with IDD do to address the COVID slide? The most important thing right now is to work with your child to create a realistic structure that holds their interest and keeps them engaged, creative, involved and continually learning. Based on my own research and a recent article that offers tips for families of children with autism, the following are some suggestions to get families started.

- Reach out to your child's teachers, programs and therapists to see

if they have any recommendations based on your child's specific needs; ask the school if they can modify the mechanism for learning—perhaps you know from the March to June virtual stint that sitting in front of a live classroom via Zoom will not hold your child's interest; search for a tutor to create a formal academic schedule at home—we all know children listen to other adults better than their parents.

- Look into educational apps that can be built into the daily schedule.
- Check if existing mentors for transition-aged or adult children can continue to check-in once a week to provide support and guidance.
- Schedule virtual time with grandparents where they can take turns reading a book or play virtual games with each other like Ludo. This is a win-win as older family members are also facing loneliness and would appreciate the connection!
- Make family walks and meals a time for fun learning, think "Can you make five equal piles with the peas on your plate?" "What do the numbers on that mailbox add up to?" "What do you see in the clouds?" and then make a story with that image being the main character.

In addition to academic growth, use this time to nurture independent living skills, which are equally important for holistic development.

- Take a walk and teach your child how to cross the street, and navigate the neighborhood using a map app on a phone.
- Create a daily schedule in collaboration with your child that includes both academic and independent living activities. Design slots for basic grooming, chores (such as helping with age-appropriate meal preparation, sorting or doing laundry), creative time, physical activity and tasks such as schoolwork.
- Consider recording a video of your child completing each daily

activity to serve as a reminder of the sequence of steps and as a memorable achievement.

Finally, screen time is inevitable (and we need to stop feeling guilty about this!), but you could establish that screen time is a privilege when all other required activities are complete. Teach your child to set an alarm on a device such as Alexa to prompt them to switch from screen time to the next activity.

Returning to school in the fall will be a new experience for all of us, regardless of the setting. As parents and caregivers, we need to think about how we can support our children, especially those with special learning needs. However, it is equally important to remember that you are their parent first, and a teacher second. If you find yourself losing patience, remind yourself to step back and nurture the parent-child relationship. Perhaps we can all use our mom chat groups to vent a little and share strategies that support learning in the era of the at-home classroom.

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