Learning from Home

How to Craft Your Space for Remote Education Success

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What began as a "quick pivot" during the spring of 2020 has evolved into a longer-term trend. In fact, today's U.S. education structure might be best described as hybrid. It varies community-by-community, with some schools back in the classroom; others online only; and many using a combination of rotating in-person and virtual learning.

For families, the chances are high that at least one family member is learning from home at least part of the time. And whether your at-home learner is an elementary school student still building study habits, a college student who is back from campus, or an adult pursuing continuing education during uncertain business times—there are ways to set up a space for comfort and productivity.

A ready-to-learn atmosphere is especially critical for younger learners who are still developing study habits and processes. And remember: being away from the brick-and-mortar school building doesn't mean learning can't be rich and rewarding. In fact, tackling remote learning together can be a teachable moment about teamwork and flexibility for your entire family!

> According to the World Bank, 990 million children (almost ²/₃ of the world's learners) were still impacted by school closures as of August 30th[i]

Choose Space Wisely

It's not just your dining table or the hallway armoire anymore. Instead, it has become your home learner's classroom. As winter's indoor season approaches and initial short-term fixes look to be more long term, it's a good time to reevaluate your home learning space and adjust as needed.

Identify a "permanent" spot that will be used for school. It's important to give children a fixed location for their home classroom so that they identify the space with "going to school." According to early education organization Waterford.org, a dedicated home learning space can help develop creativity, sharpen focus, and increase motivation[ii] It also shows that your family values learning enough to assign it a consistent place.

Look for alternative spaces. If you are lucky enough to have a finished basement or a spare bedroom/home office, your choice is easier. But most homes don't offer the option for a dedicated room—so instead, consider clearing out a corner of the bedroom or setting up a workstation in the dining room. Even a blank hallway wall where a desk can be placed will work! Indeed, with social entertaining having ground to a halt, areas that used to be focused on guests are now relatively free and can make great classroom spaces.

If you have more than one home learner, take age and personality into account. Younger kids may need to be located where you can more closely monitor them—for example, in a corner of your own work-at-home space. Older kids can often work with less supervision. Additionally, consider whether your kids will thrive if set up near each other, or if it would work better to situate them further apart. As a bonus, having separate spaces for different kids means they can swap during breaks for a change of scenery!

Create a Comfortable and Ergonomic Setting

Keep in mind that remote learning means your child is working in relative solitude—and boredom can lead to fidgeting. So, making him/her as physically comfortable as possible will help ensure that your child is able and willing to stay seated and focused for the various video check-ins that will occur throughout the day.

Start with a good chair. Aim for a flexible, agile task chair that allows the sitter's feet to be flat on the floor; or, make sure your child has a footrest rather than letting feet dangle. This can support a range of postures and accommodate the need to shift between different tasks during the day. Proper posture supports writing skills and helps maintain focus, too.

Tailor the amount of surface space according to age and needs. Younger kids need a flat surface for art projects and other activities, so a kid-sized play table and chair could be a good fit. Older kids need space for writing and multiple devices (laptop, tablet, and/or phone)—so a more traditional desk or dedicated table would offer the setup they require. Kylie Roth, VP of Workplace Research at Knoll suggests that a sit-to-stand desk is a great option, as it allows your child to change postures throughout the day.

Prepare for video calls. Aim to position the monitor at eye level, 20 to 30 inches away from the face. Investing in a monitor arm can help; or, place the laptop on a stack of sturdy books. Try to place a light source to the side rather than directly in front of or behind your child to avoid glare or backlighting. Ensure that devices have access to a power source (and charge devices every night). For video calls that require focus and attention, add a "fidget stone" or stress ball just in case.

## Organize the Space for the Long Haul

Starting and ending each day with a clutter-free space makes it easier to focus on the work at hand. These strategies can help keep remote learners on track.

Place supplies in easy reach. Make it easy for kids to grab what they need without having to leave their "workspace." This not only aids productivity but keeps the desktop clutter-free and more comfortable for working. Using small bins and cubbies can really help. Wheeled storage units that can be moved around easily

(and stashed out of sight if need be) are great choices too. If you have multiple kids, try color-coding storage to keep everyone's supplies in the right place.
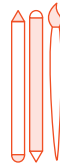
Encourage an orderly desktop. As you setup the space, gather all required items (paper and writing utensils, workbooks, tablet, laptop, books, chargers, etc.) and make a plan for stashing it all in appropriate containers. Make use of a bulletin board, dry-erase board, or tackboard to post class schedules, assignments, and other reminders. Use a cubby, bookshelf or bin to get books not in current use out of the way.

Add a calendar or tracker for productivity. An "analog" tool can help to keep tasks and to-dos top-of-mind. This visual reminder can help even if your remote learner also uses a digital calendar. Timers and device alarms can add structure to a day filled with classwork and video calls. Be sure to schedule breaks and recreation time, too!

Enhance the Vibe

Whether your learner's space is a spare room, a hallway nook, or a repurposed closet, it can still feel welcoming. Designing it as a fun place to spend time enhances your primary goal of setting the space up for learning success!
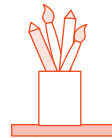
Make the space feel inviting. Consider relocating favorite books and kids' artwork—just like a formal classroom would. Even a simple glass jar filled with colored pencils or markers can brighten up a desktop! One caution: avoid including toys for younger kids, as these can be as a distraction and "blur the lines" between schooltime and play time.

Replicate classroom faves. Other productivity ideas borrowed from traditional classrooms include small chalkboards, marker boards, or cork boards—these can hold printouts and showcase seasonal décor. Laminated maps and an easy-care plant are fun additions too. For younger/emergent readers, consider brightly colored letters and numbers.

Add color and cheer! This could be a newly painted wall or a vibrant poster. Have your child help choose wall art that speaks to their hobbies and interests and select the colors/styles for any furnishings or desk supplies. Help them choose an easy-care plant and a couple of photos of friends to display. As Kylie Roth notes, "Let them feel like the space is theirs!"

Offer Alternate Spaces for Lunch and Breaks

Remember: In-person school includes physical education, recess, and lunch breaks. Remote learning should, too.

Enjoy lunch in a separate space. No one likes to eat at their desk. Encourage kids to take lunch in the kitchen, on a tray table in the living room, or outside if weather makes this possible.

Offer options for homework and reading.
Spreading out on a large table for a science project or curling up on a soft chair with an assigned book can offer a nice break from desk time. Also, enable siblings to a break from each other if needed. Children can study in shifts; while one is taking a snack break, another can focus on tackling a challenging homework assignment uninterrupted.

Go play outside. Try to get your learner(s) outside—to enjoy nature, stretch, walk, or practice a sports skill. Not only is it energizing, but it can relieve stress and increase their focus to power through the rest of the day.
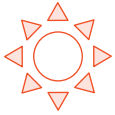
Above All: Strive to Thrive–but forgive yourself (and your kids) for "growing pains"

Remote learning offers a way for you and your family to brainstorm together and continue to assess what works and what could be improved. Certainly, most kids would much rather be "out of the house" and in a more traditional school setting with their friends. But with a little preparation, planning, and a good setup learning-from-home can be enjoyable.

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For Further Reading

"How to Set Up a Remote Learning Space for your Kids." The New York Times, August 19, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/blog/remote-learning-space-set-up/

"Helping Your Teen Succeed at Remote Learning." Camille S. Johnson Ph.D. Psychology Today, March 20, 2020. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/its-all-relative/202003/helping-your-teen-succeed-remote-learning

Designing Classrooms to Maximize Student Achievement. Sapna Cheryan1 , Sianna A. Ziegler1 , Victoria C. Plaut2 , and Andrew N. Meltzoff. Sage Publishing, 2014. http://ilabs.washington.edu/sites/default/files/14Cheryan_etal_Meltzoff_Designing%20Classrooms.pdf

[i] http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/752801599061139422/EducationSectorBriefAugust30th.pdf

[ii] https://www.waterford.org/resources/how-to-create-an-at-home-learning-space/

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