

Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Support Continuity of Learning for Students With Disabilities

Practices and Resources to Support Parents and Families

Overview

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as of this writing, 21 states and three U.S. territories have ordered or recommended school building closures for the rest of the academic year, with closures impacting at least 124,000 U.S. public and private schools and affecting at least 55.1 million students.¹ In addition, districts in nearly all other states and territories have implemented extended closures with pending dates for reopening. This situation presents challenges for all families, particularly for families of students with disabilities who often must take on a significant role in supporting their children in virtual learning and distance instruction. This brief presents practices and resources that educators, early interventionists, and parent center staff can share with parents and families of students with disabilities to support students' continuity of learning during school building closures.

Families always have a critical role in educating children and are their first and most important teachers. Family involvement in school is linked to positive academic and behavioral outcomes for children and youth.² The current pandemic emphasizes the need for positive collaboration between families and schools. To support student learning during this time, families and schools will need to work together, communicate frequently, and provide students with a range of effective learning opportunities.

Need for Evidence-Based and Promising Practices

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) in education refer to teaching and learning strategies that have been shown by scientific research to be effective in improving academic and/or behavioral performance. Using an EBP does not guarantee that it will be successful with every child but does indicate that the practice has a greater chance of working than those without evidence. Promising practices are those that have shown potential to have positive impact on outcomes for students with disabilities but have not been subject to rigorous testing to demonstrate that impact.

Practice Categories

This brief presents two categories of practices: (a) broad practices to set the foundation for distance and virtual learning at home and (b) specific practices for literacy and math development that families can use to support students' academic skill development while they are home.

Broad practices: A major task for families during this time is to establish a positive learning environment in the home. Families will need to focus on creating structures and routines, establishing expectations, and attending to the behavioral and social-emotional needs of students, so that students can effectively engage in online or distance learning that is provided by the school.

Specific practices: The current circumstances emphasize the important role of families in helping children develop and maintain academic skills. Families can supplement the learning opportunities offered by the school to help students develop key academic skills.

All families have different amounts of time and resources to devote to supporting students' learning at home. The current pandemic presents unique challenges for families of students with disabilities because of the unique learning and behavioral needs of these students. As a result, families and educators must work together to determine the best course of action for their students. The practices presented in this brief may help families support their children's learning during this challenging time.

Summary and Examples of Practices

The following tables describe research-supported practices for parents and families to support virtual instruction and skill development for children and students with disabilities. These tables present the name of each practice or category of practices; a brief description of the practice(s); examples of specific actions associated with the practice for general education as well as, where relevant, students with disabilities, including subgroups; and additional information about the practice.

The first section presents three tables of practices for parents and families of school-aged children. Specific practices are outlined for general online and distance learning, literacy, and math skills. Definitions of approaches, instructional considerations, and additional resources for educators are provided. The second section presents one table of practices for parents and families of young children (toddlers and preschoolers). Categories of practices are provided for each area of growth and skill development for young children.

At the conclusion of each section are Examples in Action: brief stories from educators illustrating several of the practices being implemented through his or her personal experience.

Practices for School-Aged Children (Ages 5–18)

Table 1. Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Support Continuity of Learning Through Online and Distance Instruction

Practice Name and Description	Example(s)	More Information
Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS): Help students build social, emotional, and behavioral skills and reduce problem behaviors. ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish and stick to a clear routine. Establish expectations. Teach, remind, and reward expected behaviors with positive feedback. 	Supporting Families With PBIS at Home
Reinforcement and rewards: Help increase students' on-task behavior and motivation during distance learning. ⁴	Rewards can be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> social (e.g., playing a favorite game), activity-based (e.g., extra time on the computer), tangible (e.g., stickers), and intangible (e.g., positive comments). 	Using Rewards to Improve Behavior Positive and Negative Reinforcement Motivating Children to Do Their Homework: Parent's Guide
Self-regulation support: A common challenge for students with disabilities; help students to adopt habits such as organization and on-task behavior. ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a well-organized physical learning environment. Reduce distractions and disruptions during learning time. Identify the behaviors that you want your child to engage in (e.g., work for 20 minutes at a time without interruptions). Use rewards to motivate your child. 	Distance Learning: 8 Tips to Get Your Child Ready to Learn at Home Helping Your Kid With...Motivation to Work at Home
Home–school communication: Communicate through e-mail, phone, or video conference to share progress and discuss concerns. ⁶	Parents and families are encouraged to contact their child's teachers with questions and concerns about assignments and progress.	Intensive Intervention: Questions Parents and Families Can Ask Conversation Starters to Use With Your Child's Teachers

Table 2. Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Support Continuity of Learning in Literacy

Practice Name and Description	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Retelling a story: After reading or listening to a story, the child retells the story by identifying the characters, setting, and sequence of events, leading to improved listening and reading comprehension.⁷</p>	<p>As the child listens or reads the story, have them complete a graphic organizer identifying the story elements. Following the story, have the child verbally retell the story.</p> <p>Older children may write summaries of the story.</p>	<p>Supporting Your Children's and Teens' Home Learning: Retelling a Story Using a Graphic Organizer</p>
<p>Dialogic reading: A shared book reading practice in which the child becomes the teller of the story and the adult engages in prompting, active listening, and questioning. The focus is on improving oral language development, print awareness, and reading comprehension.⁸</p>	<p>During reading, the adult uses the PEER strategy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompts the child to say something about the book, • Evaluates the child's response, • Expands the child's response by rephrasing and adding information to it, and • Repeats the prompt to make sure the child has learned from the expansion. 	<p>Dialogic Reading: An Effective Way to Read Aloud With Young Children</p>
<p>Phonological awareness activities: Activities that promote awareness of the sounds in words.⁹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clap syllables in words • Sing and read nursery rhymes 	<p>9 Ways to Build Phonological Awareness in Pre-K and Kindergarten</p>
<p>Partner reading: Parent and child take turns reading aloud a brief text and discuss text-based questions to improve reading fluency.¹⁰</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a text, decide when to pause to ask reading questions, and develop text-based comprehension questions. 	<p>How Do I Engage in Partner Reading With My Child?</p>
<p>Ask and answer questions: The child develops his or her own questions about a text and answers the questions after reading to improve reading comprehension.^{11,12}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt the child to ask and answer specific questions about characters and events in the text, as well as broader questions about the overall meaning of the text. 	<p>How Can I Help to Improve My Child's Reading Comprehension? Two Useful Strategies for Reading at Home</p>

Practice Name and Description	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Identify the main idea: When reading at home, stop after one or two paragraphs and ask your child to tell you the main idea to improve reading comprehension.^{13,14}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Name the “who” or “what” the paragraph or section is mainly about. Identify the most important information about the “who” or “what.” Write a statement that combines the information in steps 1 and 2. 	<p>How Can I Help to Improve My Child's Reading Comprehension? Two Useful Strategies for Reading at Home</p>

Table 3. Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Support Continuity of Learning in Math

Practice Name and Description	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Math attitudes and growth mindset: Implement a “can do” approach to math, in both parent and child, to improve math performance and achievement.¹⁵</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show the child how math is useful in life. Do not share negative feelings about math with children. 	<p>Growth Mindset for Parents 6 Ways to Help Kids Develop Positive Math Attitudes</p>
<p>Teach children how math is visible in the world: Model and support children’s use of math language and ideas to describe the world around them.¹⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Count objects and encourage your child to maintain one-to-one correspondence. Count and categorize objects. Use blocks to model and solve addition and subtraction problems. Use open-ended questions to prompt children to apply their math knowledge. 	<p>Two Strategies to Help Your Child Learn to Love Math</p>
<p>Teach early geometry and patterns: Help children recognize and name shapes, and identify and create patterns to improve performance specifically in geometry, math operations, and number sense.¹⁷</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify shapes in books and in the world. Teach the essential characteristics of shapes (e.g., triangles always have three angles). Use geometry vocabulary such as sides and angles. Create patterns using blocks. 	<p>Two Strategies to Help Your Child Learn to Love Math</p>

Practice Name and Description	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Visual representations of math concepts: Support children’s math understanding by using number lines, graphs, simple drawings, and concrete objects such as blocks to improve understanding of math facts.¹⁸</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a number line to demonstrate how to solve an addition or subtraction problem. • Use small objects (i.e., manipulatives) to model how four multiplied by two means four groups of two, which means eight total objects. • Use a simple drawing to represent a two-digit addition problem. 	<p>Using Number Lines to teach Number Concepts in the Elementary Grades</p> <p>Using Visual Representations to Assist Elementary and Middle School Students Struggling With Math</p> <p>7 Math Tools for Grade-Schoolers You Can Find at Home</p>
<p>Math fluency practice: Offer brief (10-minute) practice sessions to help children develop and maintain math facts knowledge.¹⁹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use flashcards or technology to provide brief practice sessions focused math facts. • Use games that provide practice with math facts. 	<p>To Master Basic Math Facts: Strategize, Then Memorize</p>

Example in Action

Parents of Liliana, age 11; Bryce, age 9; and Marisa, age 6

The parents of these children in elementary and middle school, two of whom have individualized education programs, describe what strategies have worked best for them to make homeschooling work during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Their philosophy: “We communicate with the teachers frequently and follow their lead as far as instruction. They provide the lessons and we provide the support. We also try to create an environment that facilitates learning even beyond their classroom lessons.”

Strategies that have worked for them are as follows:

Daily Schedule

- They communicate with their children’s teachers to establish and, where necessary, modify the daily virtual learning schedule for each child to meet their needs. For instance, they sought longer and more frequent one-on-one check ins to ensure one child (who was struggling with content) understood their work from the day.
- They build in time for each child to have breaks during the day. They build in time for physical activity and encourage other beneficial activity away from a screen.
- Together with their children, they do quality activities such as work a puzzle, play a strategic game, or do other activities that engage them.

Accountability

- While they support their children's work (particularly the youngest child who needs help accessing the virtual classroom platforms), they encourage their children to take ownership of their work and maintain their successful classroom habits just like they would at school.
- They refrain from joining each child's on-screen interactions with their teachers, and instead let the teachers tell them if they need to involve them or communicate with the teacher about the child's progress separately.

Social and Emotional Engagement

- They build in time for each child to engage with another friend or family member outside the home via electronic communication.
- They encourage each child to take time to themselves and separate from the family for their "alone time" during the day.
- They talk to their children one-on-one to ask how they are feeling, ask how they can support the transition to this new structure, and ask if the child has any fears about the COVID-19 crisis.

Practices for Young Children (Ages 2–5)

Parents are the true experts on their children, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to raising and teaching children. Each child comes with a unique set of experiences, abilities, needs, and backgrounds. Parenting and educating young children, ages 2–5, encompasses unique challenges and opportunities, as young children learn and grow rapidly, both socially and emotionally.²⁰ Nurturing, coaching, and playing with your child can be a key to success as they grow.

The practice information, examples, and resources align with the following areas:

- Early language and literacy and early numeracy and mathematics
- Social and emotional development, which involves several interrelated areas of development, including social relationships and interaction, emotional awareness, and self-regulation and cooperation
- Motor skills development and functional abilities
- Positive parenting

Keep in mind that children develop skills and coordination at different paces. Being aware of each child's specific needs and their developmental level can help you adjust your expectations and daily activities.

Many resources are emerging for virtual learning in response to the closing of schools of schools and early care and education centers. Although online tools are likely essential to maintaining the level of engagement your young child is accustomed to, technology use should be balanced while being used to enhance learning and development. However, for younger children, it could be more beneficial to find resources and activities online to then use with young children face-to-face.^a

^a For more guidance about the research behind and guidance for using technology with very young children, please visit: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/screen-sense>.

Table 4. Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Support Continuity of Learning for Young Children

Practice	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Early language and literacy: Provide multiple ways for young children to engage with words and texts to promote early reading skills, such as interpreting pictures and symbols, letter recognition, sound knowledge, vocabulary, and sight word recognition.^{21,22} This will prepare them for stronger reading skills as they get older,^{23,24} developing skills for decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing, and spelling.²⁵ Preliteracy practices are especially important for children who are most at risk for reading delays due to poverty and disabilities.²⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for children to see, hear, and explore throughout the day to build early literacy skills. Children think differently from adults, so take your time as you answer their questions. Also, children, including those with special needs, tire easily so try to keep their interest but do not push too hard.²⁷ • Read or just share a book with the child to help with later reading achievement.²⁸ • Use electronic books (or e-story books) to promote literacy development by supporting vocabulary development, engagement, and comprehension.²⁹ • Allow limited use of high-quality literacy apps and games on tablets and other electronic devices. 	<p>Accessible Games From PEEP and the Big Wide World</p> <p>Khan Academy Kids</p> <p>Reading Rockets</p> <p>Story Mentors</p> <p>Storyline Online</p>

Practice	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Early numeracy and early childhood mathematics: Help children learn to understand their world in terms of numbers and shapes and begin to connect ideas and think logically,³⁰ building toward developing an early understanding of math skills, such as understanding quantities, counting, and matching and sorting objects³¹ through everyday routines and activities.^{32,33}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play with shape sorters and count the number of sides, talk about the shape, and describe the colors. You can make your own shapes and ask your child to “hop onto the green triangle” or “jump onto the blue circle.” • Gather objects, such as toys or pebbles, and then count and sort them based on size, color, or shape. • Read children’s books that rhyme, repeat, or have numbers in them. • While going on walks, point out numbers such as addresses on houses and show how each house has its own number. You can begin to teach your child your phone number. • Point out the different sizes of objects around you, ranging from small toys to cars and trucks to pets big and small. • Cooking is a fun activity that teaches children how to count, measure, and add as they help you fill, mix, and pour the ingredients together. • Have your child help you with laundry. Ask them to sort out the different types of clothing (shorts, shirts, pants), or by color. They can help you to match socks. • Work with different groups of objects to match sets according to color or shape, or count and compare sets of items. Identify, for example, which group has four and which has five items. 	<p>Bedtime Math Help Your Child Develop Early Math Skills</p>

Practice	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Social relationships, interaction, and cooperation: Help young children develop socially by taking turns, playing together, helping friends and family, communicating about emotions, and learning to cooperate with others.³⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide age-appropriate toys and books so toddlers can explore their environment safely and independently.³⁵ • Offer children choices throughout the day, such as choosing toys, books, snacks, or activities. This allows children to feel engaged and in control. Also teach children to share and take turns throughout the day. • Identify and talk about emotions to help young children understand their own and others' feelings. You can play games where stuffed animals are fighting, or you can practice how to share. Pretend play and reading stories can also provide opportunities to discuss feelings and teach social skills. • Be aware of how much stimulation is comfortable for your child. Some children may need more play, stimulation, or attention, so figuring out the right balance can help keep children interested and engaged. 	<p>Accessible Games From PEEP and the Big Wide World</p> <p>Building Social Skills in Young Children</p> <p>Fostering Healthy Social & Emotional Development in Young Children: Tips for Early Childhood Teachers and Providers (from the U.S. Department of Education)</p> <p>The Incredible Years Strategies to Build Social Interaction</p> <p>The Pyramid Model</p> <p>Talk, Read, and Sing Together Every Day! Tip Sheets for Families, Caregivers and Early Learning Educators</p>
<p>Emotional awareness: Help young children learn to understand their feelings and actions as well as those of other people, and to understand how these feelings and actions affect themselves and others.</p> <p>Research suggests a positive association between social and emotional skills and academic outcomes.^{36,37}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage young children to understand their feelings, which is the first step toward managing them. • Model calming or self-soothing strategies by taking deep breaths to relax, as your child will often follow your lead. • Give choices because a child who takes more responsibility for the outcome may feel more in control and able to cope. • Point out pictures of faces that show emotions to teach children the names of feelings such as happy, sad, and angry. • When reading a story, ask children to imagine they are one of the characters and then ask them what they are feeling and why. 	<p>First Feelings: The Foundation of Healthy Development, Starting From Birth</p> <p>Fostering Healthy Social and Emotional Development in Young Children: Tips for Families</p> <p>Talking to Children About Coronavirus (COVID19)</p>

Practice	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Self-regulation and cooperation: Provide structured environments, supportive relationships, and direct instruction to build self-regulation skills, which include effectively managing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; paying attention; planning; and following through with tasks.³⁸</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For toddlers and preschoolers, talk, read, and sing together every day; young children learn by interacting.³⁹ • Provide warm and consistent care by smiling, laughing, and cuddling. • Promote movement and active play, sensory exploration, and self-care exercises. • Implement mindfulness, visualization, and breathing exercises. Try yoga or go outside for nature walks; stop and listen for different sounds. • Children of all ages thrive when maintaining consistent, predictable routines so they know what to expect during the day, which increases their sense of security. Stick to regular schedules for meals, naptime, reading, and bedtime. • Individual differences in development require different levels of support aligned with level of need.⁴⁰ Some young children may be more temperamentally sensitive or more easily overwhelmed by sensory input, which can make it harder to self-regulate. 	<p>Cosmic Kids Yoga</p> <p>Fostering Healthy Social & Emotional Development in Young Children: Tips for Early Childhood Teachers and Providers (from the U.S. Department of Education)</p> <p>Getting Started with Mindfulness: A Toolkit for Early Childhood Organizations</p> <p>The Incredible Years Strategies to Build Social Interaction</p> <p>The Pyramid Model</p> <p>Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: Foundations for Understanding Self-Regulation From an Applied Developmental Perspective</p> <p>Talk, Read, and Sing Together Every Day! Tip Sheets for Families, Caregivers and Early Learning Educators</p>

Practice	Example(s)	More Information
<p>Motor skill development and functional abilities: Incorporate physical, gross and fine motor skills, and functional abilities. Fine motor skills involve the smaller muscle groups in the hands, fingers, and wrists. Gross motor skills involve the larger muscle groups, such as arms and legs. Functional abilities include self-help skills and behaviors, such as dressing, feeding, toileting, and organizational skills.⁴¹ Developing these skills and abilities is important for a child’s growth and independence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build block towers or play with plastic brick toys. • Use coloring books or encourage scribbling on paper. Do arts and crafts, such as finger painting or playing with clay. Use scissors to cut paper. • During meals, practice using a spoon and a fork correctly. • Allow children to put on their jackets to learn how to use a zipper and eventually buttons. • Movement is important for physical and intellectual development.⁴² Allow time for children to play, dance, run, skip, and jump. 	<p>Cosmic Kids Yoga</p> <p>Healthy at Home: A Toolkit for Supporting Families Impacted by COVID-19</p> <p>Help Your Child Build Fine Motor Skills</p> <p>Romper online exercise classes</p>
<p>Positive parenting: Provide encouragement and set limits in a gentle way to help young children develop positive behaviors. This approach recognizes each child’s individual needs and addresses typical challenges with empathy and respect.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide age-appropriate guidelines and consistent limits to your child’s behavior. • Show interest and respond with sensitivity to your child’s cues and communications. • Focus on your child’s positive behavior and provide praise when they are learning a new skill, such as sharing, taking turns, or putting away a toy. • Create a special, safe space such as a “cozy corner” where children and parents can go when they need a break. Parents can use this space to model “time out,” and children can use it to calm down and regain control of their feelings.⁴³ 	<p>Fostering Healthy Social and Emotional Development in Young Children: Tips for Families</p> <p>Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)</p> <p>Positive Parenting Approaches</p>

Example in Action

Parent of Trina, 18 months old

Trina's father describes how the early childhood practices he implemented at home are helping Trina develop. Using fine motor exercise with blocks, she manipulates the objects and uses her thinking skills to execute her plan to make a tower. Practicing her social skills, she asks her father for help when she needs assistance with the tower. Her effective communication allows her father to respond and provide the helps she needs (further enhancing her social skills as she sees herself as important and a good communicator). This then further builds her thinking skills as she learns how to solve the problem of making the tower taller.⁴⁴

Trina (18 months old) was stacking blocks. She had put two square blocks on top of one another, then a triangle block on top of that. She discovered that no more blocks would balance on top of the triangle-shaped block. She looked up at her dad and showed him the block she couldn't get to stay on top, essentially telling him with her gesture, "Dad, I need help figuring this out." Her father showed her that if she took the triangle block off and used a square one instead, she could stack more on top. She then added two more blocks to her tower before proudly showing her creation to her dad: "Dada, Ook! Ook!"

Additional Resources

[A Parent's Guide to Virtual Learning: 4 Actions to Improve Your Child's Experience With Online Learning](#)

This guide provides a brief list of four things that parents should know, and actions they can take, to guide children's learning in a virtual setting, including links to additional resources.

[Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!](#) This resource outlines the coordinated federal effort to encourage healthy child development, universal developmental and behavioral screening for children, and support for the families and providers who care for them.

[Bookshare: Learning at Home During COVID-19](#) These resources for parents will help students with dyslexia, blindness, cerebral palsy, and other reading barriers to continue learning during school closures.

[Doing the Math: Supporting Students With Disabilities in Online Courses](#) This article from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) describes specific considerations and strategies for parents when supporting their students with disabilities in beginning online instruction.

[Education Modified](#) This website provides two research-based strategy bundles for families of special populations students (or all students) that contain strategies and activities parents can use at home to complete schoolwork or provide enrichment learning activities for their children.

[How to Keep School Rhythm and Routines for Young Children at Home](#) This resource shares what parents, caregivers, and teachers can do to provide hour-to-hour care and learning opportunities as they co-teach young children sheltering-in-place at home.

[Khan Academy](#) This website includes daily schedules, quizzes, and other tools and resources to support children's learning at home.

[Online Learning for Students With Disabilities: Recommendations for Parent Engagement](#) This information brief helps parents of children with disabilities understand how virtual instruction will meet the needs of their child and what their level of engagement will be in supporting their child's learning.

[National Head Start Association: Free Resources to Support Learning at Home](#) This set of resources and online tools and videos can help parents with young children continue their growth and development at home.

[Scholastic Learn at Home](#) Day-to-day projects and activities can keep kids reading, thinking, and growing.

[Top Ten Tips for Parents \(Adapted from the Triple P Positive Parenting Program\)](#) These 10 tips for parents demonstrate how to cope with stress and anxiety during an outbreak. This tip sheet was created by the Arizona Department of Child Safety. It is presented in both English and Spanish.

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