

Distance Learning Ideas

Author of this Information:

My name is Alley Hart, and I am going into my seventh year of teaching first grade in Harford County Public Schools, Maryland. I just completed a master's program in Instructional Technology from Towson University. I know distance learning isn't the preferred way of schooling for most. Trust me, I miss my students and being in my own classroom a ton! However, this is out of our control, any of our control.

Below I have listed some tips to help your student be successful and explanations for each. Some of the tips are meant for primary students (PreK-2) but most could work or be adjusted for all grades. Some won't apply to your child, but I tried to think of anything that I implement in my own classroom that helps students, especially those with special needs.

I hope you find these tips helpful and useful, as I don't want to overwhelm anyone. If you have any questions, I'm happy to answer them or help with specific concerns. Also, when school starts, don't ever hesitate to reach out to your child's teacher. WE are here to help. Always.

DESIGNATED SPACE

This helps with student buy-in. If your child has their own area that is strictly for their schooling, there are less likely to be distractions and it will help them get "in the zone". This can be a small table in a distraction-free area, one side of the dining room table (but leaving it there every day), a corner in the kitchen, a small TV tray in a well-lit hallway, etc.

Note: if your child works better laying down or sitting on the floor, the area should accommodate that or at least allow that to be a choice! Another good, cheap tabletop is a lap desk where students can sit anywhere.

OWN ITEMS

In the designated space, have organized items that will be easy for your child to find, put away, and use. Labels help! I recommend those 3-drawer storage bins or something with multiple drawers for different materials (Michaels has them and they're usually very affordable!). Put it right in their learning area. Now they can work in their area for maximum time without needing to constantly look around for needed materials or continuously asking you where things are. Having your child help you get the items ready is crucial. It allows them to see where everything is and keep it organized.

HEADPHONES

Each HCPS student (K-12) will be receiving their very own device to work on. Even if your district isn't providing technology devices, the headphones are a must for whatever device they will be using. Headphones will avoid distractions to others around them when listening to videos or class meetings AND they will block out distractions in the house. For younger students, the round kind will be best as they won't fall out of ears and children won't need assistance putting them on.

TIMER

A timer can be used in a variety of ways. Visual timers are great to keep kids on track and focused. Depending on the age of the student depends on the amount of time you'll use. For example, if you have a child who is very reluctant to work on their assignments, set the timer for 10 minutes to start. They have to work for the whole 10 minutes. If they stop, pause the timer. When they start again, start the timer. If they work the whole time, that's truly 10 minutes of working. If they pause many times, it'll take longer. After the timer is up (no matter what they are working on), allow them a 2-3 minute break doing something they like (ex. take a quick walk to the end of the driveway, dance party, grab a snack, play with play dough, etc.). Set the timer for the break as well. Remind the child they have a time limit for the break and after the timer goes off, it's time to work again. Repeat the process until they're finished whatever it is they are working on.

Note: you can do as many or as little "work times" as your child can handle. Once you get to the point of a meltdown, it's hard to get focused again. Continue to be positive and remind your child that "once you work for 10 minutes (or however long you have), you can take a break doing xyz". This especially helps with children with special needs. It gives them an end point and allows them to KNOW how long they'll be working. It puts the control in their hands.

If your child doesn't need as much guidance or direct attention with the timer, just use it as a simple countdown for an assignment. Giving an allotted time helps with routines and structure. Think about subjects in school: once the subject is over, you move on and pick up the next day. It's okay not to finish an entire assignment in one sitting!

CHOICES

This is a simple thing to do to allow your child to take control. This or that. 2-3 choices, max; too many will be overwhelming. For example, do you want to start with writing or science? You'll want to give choices that make sense. If your child dislikes writing and science, put those choices together. If your child likes watching a video but hates writing answers, those may not be the best choices to put together because the obvious will be chosen. Choices work well with activities that may be hard to get your child to do without a choice. Giving them the choice allows them to be in control.

FIRST/THEN

This is a great way to verbalize what needs to be done FIRST (non-preferred task) followed by a preferred task. You can also use a piece of white paper and make a simple T-chart: on the left FIRST and the right THEN; put it in a sheet protector and use a dry-erase marker to write (or draw-you could even have your child do this) -ability to reuse- what needs to be done first and then what can happen once it's completed. These can be as generic or as specific as YOUR CHILD needs. All students are different. For example, a child that needs more frequent breaks may have: FIRST do 3 problems (I like to let them choose the 3 they want to do ex. Math) THEN 2 minutes with toy cars, or earn a Skittle, or 2 minute drawing break. ANYTHING that will motivate your child. After the break, use the chart for another 3 problems or another task.

Note: it should be something quick and simple. This chart pairs well with the timer (discussed above).

VISUALS OF EXPECTATIONS/RULES

On the first day of distance learning or even a couple days before (maybe when creating the learning space), discuss rules and expectations with your child. Make a chart or poster while discussing. Record your child's ideas. It's crucial to do this WITH your child so they understand each of the expectations. Depending on their age, they could even write the ideas or draw them after an adult writes them. Another idea is to take pictures of your child following the rule/expectation appropriately, and glue them next to each expectation. You can always find Google images, emojis, or other icons to help portray each expectation if you can't take/print pictures. Keep them specific and short. (Ex. When in the learning area, work hard and try my best. Try solving my problem before asking for help. Use a quiet voice when mom and dad are working. Take a deep breath and count to 10, if frustrated, then use my words to ask for help. Clean up my space when finished a subject or assignment.) Hang up the rules/expectations poster in the learning area. You can always add to it later making sure your child understands the expectation.

CALM SPACE WITH TIMER

This is something that could be used at any time, not just "learning time". Set up a calm, cozy area for your child to go when they are upset or frustrated. It should be known to the child that this area is meant for calming down. If they choose to go to the area on their own, GREAT. We WANT children to independently calm down and solve (or try to) their own problem. If they need guidance, use a CALM voice and say, "you need some time in your calm space" or "use your words or take some time in your calm space".

Note: it's important to understand that this is NOT a punishment or an area for time-out. This is simply a space to go to calm down. While the child is in this space, set the timer (visual timer works great). Allow the child to calm themselves down by breathing, drawing or coloring with a pencil and paper, etc. If the child is crying, that's their way of calming down. Leave them be for the allotted time THEN talk to them and discuss what's going on. If the child is still not calm, set the timer again and allow more time.

Note: this area should have FEW calm down items (a soft pillow, a bean bag, something squishy for their hands-like a stress ball, a labyrinth, a feelings chart (sad, angry, happy, ready to learn), a weighted stuffed animal-weight and pressure are great for calming down). This area should not be bombarded with items. It should be simple and only 1-2 items that your child responds well to or helps calm them. Ensure your child understands how to use each item. If, when the child is using the area and they are using the item inappropriately, simply tell them "use it correctly or I will take it".

ROUTINE, SCHEDULE, CONSISTENCY

The more consistent you are with keeping a schedule and routine, the more likely your child will become independent in "learning time". Some ideas are to wake up at the same time every day, do the same morning routine, and follow the same pattern of time slots for assignments or subjects.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT & POSITIVE ATTITUDE

If nothing else, be POSITIVE and EXCITED for your child's learning. They will do what they see. If you're excited about the learning space, they will be too. If you're complaining

about distance learning, they will too. We have at least four months of distance learning. Start it off positive!

Another way to encourage positivity is to give positive praise ANYTIME you see your child doing something well (working hard, following directions, staying focused, using kind words, using manners, having a calm body, etc.). Some children require tangible stickers or reusable charts to help them visualize this positivity (if you have questions about this, message me), but most children will be satisfied with a simple compliment from someone they love. Encourage them. Tell them you are proud of them. Smile at them. It makes a difference!

I hope this helps! Good luck and you will do GREAT! Feel free to share with others.

Model Virtual Learning Spaces:



For more information, contact Alley Hart.

