

Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home

How You Can Create a Supportive Space for Learning (Part 2: Learning Support)

Young people develop in healthy ways when they experience a variety of support. This includes emotional support and support for learning. Providing this kind of technical support—that is, helping your child understand how to do their work—is even more critical now that you have shifted from parent to parent-educator, which likely requires more in-the-moment response and care from you. In this section, we will focus on:

- **Understanding what it means to create a supportive learning environment:** what it is and why it matters
- **Using this information:** strategies that can help you provide *learning* support at home
- **Things to look for:** what is normal and what may be a potential warning sign that something needs more attention
- **Resources:** materials you can consult to explore this topic in greater detail

As you read through [these resources](#), remember: Every family is different. Everyone's individual circumstances are different. Everyone brings their unique set of strengths to address life's challenges. The information we are sharing here is designed to be flexible and adapted in the ways that work best for you.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The support you provide to your child can take multiple forms, including:

- **Emotional support:** “This problem seems to be frustrating you, but I know that you can do this – let’s do it together this time.”
- **Learning support:** “You seem to be having trouble with that math problem, let’s figure out how to do it,” or “Click this button to submit your assignment to your teacher.”

This piece covers learning support. A companion piece covers emotional support. By using both parts together, you can create a supportive environment for learning at home.

Understanding Supportive Environments for Learning

Children will always learn better with support than without. While supporting your child academically during this time may feel different than when you simply helped them with their homework or a project, it is essential that your child knows that they have your support. As a parent or caregiver, your support will help your child continue to learn and stay engaged while they are at home. Your child is adjusting to a new way of learning in a new setting, and you and they will likely need help finding a routine that works best for everyone.

It is important to remember that all children are different and their needs for support will vary. Some children who have a history of struggling in school or who tend to be hard on themselves may demonstrate higher levels of frustration now, especially if they feel like they are falling short of expectations. Keep in mind that many students with learning disabilities require extra time to practice new skills before they can demonstrate them independently. **You know your child best.** Use what you know about your child’s strengths, interests, and experiences, as well as your family culture and context, to help them learn.

Using This Information

The following strategies will help you create a supportive space for learning at home that meets your child’s academic, social, and emotional needs. To provide **learning support**:

- **Build on what your children know.** When you learn, you build upon your experience and your child’s learning is no different. Plus, learning gets easier when a child can build from what they know. When possible, ask your child or their teacher about relevant prior knowledge and experience.
- **Help your child understand how to do their work.** One of the most important parts of learning is *learning how to learn*. Answer questions when they come up and explain not only what the answer is but how you figured it out. If you are not sure about the content your child is learning, that’s OK. In fact, not knowing presents an opportunity to teach your child about how important it is to ask for help. If you have access to technology, find online resources where you both can learn more. You can also reach out to friends, other parents, members of your religious community, the public library, or your child’s school.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LEARNING SUPPORT AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

To understand the two types of support we describe in this section—learning support and emotional support—it may be helpful to think about teaching someone to ride a bike.

The first part is making sure whoever you’re teaching understands the mechanics: where to put their hands on the handlebars, how to gain momentum, when to bring their feet to the pedals. This is *learning support*.

The other part is being there to catch someone if they fall, and offering words of encouragement to help them try again. That is *emotional support*.

Both kinds of support—understanding how to ride a bike while also feeling that encouragement and motivation to keep trying—are necessary.

- **When you are helping your child, work within their Zone of Proximal Development.** This zone (also known as the “safe stretch zone”) reflects the difference between what can be achieved without support and what can be achieved with support. Consider the learning to ride a bike example from page 2. First, children start with training wheels and the adult helps by holding the bike. Then the adult gradually lets go. When the child has mastered riding with training wheels and without an adult holding on, the adult can take off the training wheels, and go back to holding on as the child learns to balance on two wheels. Once the child has found their balance, the adult can work on letting go, while still watching to make sure the child is safe. To provide learning support, you are looking for that “sweet spot,” where learning is just beyond what your child can do independently.
- **Create some of the same structures that children had in their classrooms.** While children might not be changing classes or going to recess and lunch, parents and caregivers can create space and routines that will help children learn successfully at home.
- **Set clear academic expectations for the day.** When possible, develop and review these expectations with your child. If you can, check in with their teachers to ensure that your child is turning in their assignments on time and staying on track with homework. This discipline is important for success when they return to school as well as in life. For children who need more structure, set a timer to help with work periods, breaks, and transitions.
- **Draw on what you know about how your child learns best.** Build on their strengths while helping to address their needs. If you are not sure what their strengths are or which teaching style suits them, talk to your child. Ask them open-ended questions, such as, “What do you like most about learning at school?” “What helps you to learn new things?” or “What does your teacher do that helps you to understand the lessons?”
- **Offer specific praise and encouragement** to show your child that you acknowledge and appreciate their efforts. Praise is most effective when it is meaningful and targeted. Praise their efforts (“I can tell that you worked very hard on that”), progress, thoughtful actions (“That was very kind of you and it made me feel so happy to know you care”), or when you find them doing the right thing. Try to avoid generic praise—like “good job!”—because this rewards the outcome rather than the process. The more specific you can be, the better. Your child likely does not want to let you down. While you want them to work hard and succeed, you do not want to feel like they failed you or be afraid to do so. Read more about this in the [section on emotional safety](#).
- **If you need to, seek out support to help navigate technology.** As schools switch to virtual learning they will be using new learning platforms, some of which may be easier to use than others. To support your child, you may find that you need additional information and guidance, beyond what is provided, on how to navigate these platforms. When this happens, it may be necessary to reach out to your child’s teacher for additional instructions and support. Some programs might also have resources on their individual websites. If technological challenges persist, consider reaching out to your child’s school for hard copies (e.g., worksheets) of various lessons.

- **When possible, transform family responsibilities into learning opportunities.** Learning goes beyond academic content and much of their academic content can be incorporated into everyday life. For example, many mathematical skills can be taught in the kitchen such as ratios and measurements and you could spend time baking cookies or preparing a meal together. Teaching children how to fold their clothes or help with cleaning can teach them life skills that will help them function independently and learn responsibility.
- **For children with learning disabilities,** there are additional strategies to consider. If you start to see your child becoming frustrated—especially when it is time to complete certain subjects or types of problems—this is likely a sign that they don’t know how to do the task, are feeling overwhelmed, or are frustrated because they have struggled in the past. Your child’s reaction is likely because of stress, not defiance. In these situations, you may find it helpful to:
 - Sit with them as they begin a challenging subject/task and model how to do one or two problems. Talking through your thought process might help: *“I’m going to start by ...” “Then, I’m going to do ...” “Finally, I ...”*
 - Break up the content into smaller “chunks.” It may help to focus on two to three questions at a time rather than a full worksheet or guide your child through specific problems using the same steps: *“How should you start?” “That’s right!” “Tell me what you will do next.”*
 - Help your child practice on their own while providing prompts or feedback until they can perform the skill without your support: *“You did the first two parts correctly, but it looks like you’re missing one thing. Remember how we...”*
 - Build in additional, planned breaks during the day and give them choices or a menu of options so they are not just “sitting idle.” Remind them of expectations for transitioning between tasks: *“Right now we are going to focus on science and we will take a break in 15 minutes. What would you like to do to give your brain a break?”*
 - Communicate with your child’s teachers. They may have additional strategies that they have used in the classroom that you can try at home. You may also share new information with them about how your child learns best that can help them—and your child—in the future.

Remember: All families are different and will likely have different levels of access to knowledge, tools, technology, and time. While there will be things you don’t know or feel like you can’t do, it is important to **remember that there is still a lot that you can do**. YOU can provide the emotional support your child needs to feel motivated, encouraged, and to keep on going if and when they are frustrated.

Things to Look For

While some children are better able to communicate when they need support, others might show you they need support through their actions. Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues.

Preschoolers may act out, throw tantrums, whine more than usual, or have difficulty transitioning to new activities. They may refuse to engage in any learning activities, even ones they had enjoyed previously.

Elementary school children may express self-defeating statements such as “I can’t do it,” or “It does not matter how hard I try.” You may also observe defiant behavior or your child refusing to engage in learning activities or complete their assignments.

Adolescents’ need for support may show up as disengagement, frustration, anger, stress, or anxiety. You may hear, for example, more frequent questions or concerns about grades, returning to the normal daily schedule, connecting with peers, or transitioning into a new grade or school next year. Your child may also seem less engaged in their learning or in completing their assignments.

Resources

Remember, children take their cues from adults, so it is equally important to take care of yourself and know your limits. Look for signs that you may be feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, upset, or exhausted. The [section on readiness](#) has more information to help you stay well. In addition, these resources will help you to provide support for learning at home:

- [Kahn Academy](#): Offers free daily learning schedules and remote learning resources for all ages.
- [Working and Learning from Home During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#): Offers tips and links to other resources by the American Academy of Pediatrics on how to educate children at home, including ways in which to keep media and screen time use positive and helpful.
- [Virtual Resources for Health and Physical Education](#): The Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) website offers tips to teach physical education and health at home. Includes a downloadable packet of fun activities for children to do without the internet and meets health and physical education standards.
- [Home-schooling Tips During COVID-19 Pandemic](#): Military OneSource, a website of the Department of Defense, offers tips, resources, and links for assistance for military families while they educate their children at home.
- [Learning Together at Home](#): Developed by Colorin Colorado, this resource has ideas for activities that you can do around the house, outside, and in your neighborhood.
- Resources from your public library, school, school district, or local colleges and universities. Depending where you live, there may be additional phone, digital, or cable TV resources available to support learning.