

Advice for frazzled parents on home instruction: 'This is temporary'



All parents now face the challenges long faced by parents like Susan Walterich, who was homeschooling her son before the pandemic closed schools. (Mark Mulville/News file photo)

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Homeschooling got you down?

Can't get your kid to stay focused?

Do two hours worth of school work drag on all day?

We understand.

As school closures and remote instruction stretch into week five, The Buffalo News reached out to three psychologists for advice. All three have expertise in working with kids and parents:

Gregory Fabiano, a former University at Buffalo professor now at Florida International University.

David Meichenbaum, clinical director of the behavioral pediatric clinic at the Summit Center, a non-profit agency.

And Lisa Burrows-MacLean, who has a private practice in Williamsville.

"I just got off the phone with a parent giving her tips on how to help her child get through the school work," Burrows-MacLean said last week.

It's particularly difficult for parents of elementary school children, who need more supervision during this period of learning at home, she said. Parents are expected to step in and help teach the material, but many are trying to work from home themselves.

"Those are the parents I'm most concerned about," she said. "I think there's an underlying fear or worry or anxiety that their children are going to fall really far behind during this period of homeschooling – and they're putting a lot of pressure on themselves."

The three offered some advice to parents – and a little encouragement.

All three reiterated how routine and structure are important right now for kids. They need to wake up, eat breakfast, get dressed, get ready for the day – just as if they were going to school.

This includes finding a regular sleep schedule.

"It's not summer vacation," Burrows-MacLean said. "There's a temptation to want to stay up late and sleep late, especially if their friends are like that."

Meichenbaum is a big fan of to-do lists, both to set the stage for the day and reflect on what got accomplished.

"While kids may resist work and seem content playing video games all day, there is a different psychological impact on those who feel accomplished versus those who have merely wasted a day," he said.

All three also recommended completing school work first and saving the fun stuff – TV, video games, playing outdoors – for after.

"Plus," Fabiano said, "these activities are a big motivator if the expectation is 'When your school work is completed, then you can choose what you want to do.'"

For those having difficulty with their kids staying focused, Burrows-MacLean suggested building in 15-minute breaks between completed assignments, whether it's to grab a snack or just to get up and move around. She cautioned, however, about allowing screen time during breaks.

That's a recipe for trouble.

"Once they do that and they get really engrossed in more pleasant activities, it's very hard to pull them back and get them into work mode again," she said.

No doubt, there has been added stress at home with the shift to distance learning.

So where possible, Meichenbaum said, parents may want to give kids a choice in the order they do their school work – math or spelling, first? – rather than giving direction. That can help reduce some of the daily tension.

"On a typical day, parents give their child commands at a rate of once per minute, and we have all felt the stress when our child does not follow through with our directions," Meichenbaum said.

"Consider how many additional directions or commands we are all giving as a result of spending an additional 6-8 hours per day with our kids," he said. "This is a recipe for much more noncompliance, frustration, and stress."

Likewise, parents may want to try letting their kid's smaller infractions slide, while acknowledging more of their good behavior.

"Perhaps the most important thing for a parent to remember is to remain positive," said Fabiano, who works with children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

"It looks like the home instruction is going to be here for awhile, so parents should work hard to catch their child doing the right thing, and ignore minor negative behaviors," he said. "The goal should be at least three positive comments for every corrective comment or redirection."

Burrows-MacLean encourages parents not to put so much pressure on themselves, but help kids stay on top of the basics -- reading, math, a little writing.

"The fact is this is temporary," Burrows-MacLean said, "and children will eventually go back to school."

Parents, they said, should also remember to keep realistic expectations and that home instruction is overwhelming for most everyone. Unless your child was previously home-schooled, independent learning is a skill that comes with practice, Meichenbaum said.

"Remind yourself you are not alone and we will all get through this," Meichenbaum said, "likely with a greater appreciation for teachers."

Story topics: Coronavirus/ Covid-19


