

Create a welcoming at-home learning environment with clear boundaries. All three experts agreed: Treat a distance-learning school day the same way you'd treat an in-person school day. Kids need to get up at the same time, get dressed, eat breakfast, brush their teeth and hair and sit down in a specially designated school area. "In the spring, we all got really comfortable in our pajamas, and it took on a world of its own, because we didn't know what to expect," said Amanda Marsden, a kindergarten teacher in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. "Make sure those lines don't get blurred."

Even if you live in a small apartment, you can set up [an inexpensive cardboard study carrel](#) at the kitchen table for your kid, and get a box for them to store their supplies, just to create a visual delineation between their school area and the rest of the house, said Katharine Hill, a learning specialist and parent educator in Brooklyn. Be sure to put toys and other fun activities out of sight during school time, for you don't want a visual reminder of something they would rather be doing. If you have more than one child, try to separate them as much as possible, and have them use headphones.

Get the kids involved in picking out their school supplies, even if you are shopping online, said Dunya Poltorak, Ph.D, a pediatric medical psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Mich. If money is tight, as it is for so many right now, Dr. Poltorak recommended cleaning up and redecorating last year's items, like backpacks, as a family. "You can still pull everything together in a way that makes it fresh and exciting," even without buying new supplies, she said.

Figure out what they hate, and why they hate it. We have heard from many readers that their kids do not like Zoom, and that it's impossible to get them to sit for their classes. If your children are like this, first try to identify specifically what they hate about it, Hill advised. Do they hate being on camera? Do they dislike speaking in front of large groups? When you've identified the particular problem, you can try to mitigate it through camera settings or talking to your child's teacher, they said. For some children, hiding their own video window so they don't have to see themselves "can psychologically make a difference," said Hill.

If the issue is that your child won't sit still for distance learning classes, or, that there is a particular app she doesn't like to use, more than one expert recommended setting a timer, especially for little kids. A timer that children can see is ideal. "We're working on building our stamina," Marsden said — which is something they do in a normal classroom. First, try setting the timer for five minutes and asking the child to do whatever task they don't love for that amount of time. Then try 10 minutes. This may help reduce conflict, because "you're not the one enforcing it — it's the timer. It's not mom or dad's fault," she explained.

If they hate mask-wearing, get them involved in picking out or decorating their own masks, and talking positively about which kids in class have the coolest ones, Marsden said. "Their buy-in is really important this year."

Don't catastrophize. It's easy to stay up nights worrying about your kids' education and working yourself into a fear spiral of "what ifs" — I know I have! And it is true that remote learning and school closures have failed millions of children the world over, [as a new report from Unicef shows](#).

But it's important that we don't show our kids how anxious we might be. "We want to build resilience," Hill said. "And we do that by acknowledging that things aren't the way we hope they are, but we still look forward to specific aspects, and we can learn from the experience as it's happening." Hill also mentioned that there are some things your kids may even prefer about distance learning, so don't assume all the changes will have negative effects.

Dr. Poltorak also emphasized getting kids comfortable with uncertainty — which is all around us, even when we're not in a pandemic. When we're in a rainy spell, "we don't know when we're going to have our next sunny day for sure," she said, but that doesn't mean we can't make the best of a less-than-ideal school situation.

That said, if your children are miserable in whatever learning scenario you're in, you should absolutely speak to their teachers. "You have to be your child's advocate. We don't get to see your kids, all day every day," Marsden said.

“Communication is going to be critical in providing the most effective and social emotional instruction.”

I’m still thinking about what Sinead Smyth, a licensed marriage and family therapist called [“ambiguous loss” in a previous newsletter](#) — that kind of fuzzy grief that comes from recalling all the mundane things we’re missing in the pandemic. But the act of putting together a \$49 desk for my daughter that I had lovingly stalked on the internet for weeks made me feel a bit of hope for a fresh start. And when she saw it for the first time, she squealed with glee.

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Tiny Victories

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I put two rags in an empty Kleenex box and my 1-year-old spent the day taking them in and out. — *Shira Adriance, Montreal*

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