

Guidance for Parents from Erin Seaton.

From creating new routines to devising project-based learning, she thinks parents can turn a potentially distressing time to an opportunity for new types of learning.

At the same time, she recommends talking with your child about the changes going on in the world. “Take cues from their questions, and respond with honesty and reassurance,” she said. “Seek out support,” she added. “Ask friends and relatives what they are doing to keep busy.” Here are Seaton’s recommendations about how to help children cope with so much time isolated at home.

Routines are important. In a chaotic and uncertain world, schools can provide a structure that is comforting to a child. Losing this routine can leave children unsettled. Think about when your child will do best with more structured times, and when you need your child to be independent for your own sanity or work schedule.

Invite your child to help you create a routine and try to stick with it. Build in breaks, and if you can, try to find time for your child to go outside. Think about spaces that are best for working and learning—sharing these can be challenging. Try to carve out a corner or counter space for your child to consistently work.

Establish screen time guidelines. Talk through screen time ahead of time, so that your child knows what the expectations are. Keep in mind that unsupervised screen time in a crisis might be scary for young children; have to-go and approved apps and programs a child can access on their own.

“Follow the child.” Italian educator Maria Montessori urges parents to “follow the child”—observe a child’s passions and tailor their education to them. Learning at home can offer children a chance to dig deeply into a subject of their own choosing, from baking to politics, video game design to volcanoes, women’s soccer to activist art. Focus on project-based learning; help your child to identify a project they can explore deeply and without too much guidance or adult support. Can your child create their own paper basketball court and use statistics to show how they might pick their dream team? Even though they are homebound for now, could they create a travel plan and budget for a new destination, here on Earth or in space? Can they design their own future city, including the laws and policies they might enact? What would it look like if your child tried to map their neighbourhood? Could they create a cookbook with favourite family recipes to share with others?

Independence is important. Montessori argued that children need to learn through experimentation and practice and that independence can build a child’s sense of confidence. In my family, there is always a tension between wanting my child to do something independently and the need to rush out the door. Right now, parents have the gift of time. Allow a young child to practice tying their shoes or an older child an opportunity to solve a puzzle or problem without solving it for them. Likewise, don’t feel as though you need to rush in to fix every problem.

Invite children to come up with their own solutions or try things first without coming to you for assistance.

Help with household chores. Inevitably, having children at home is going to create more mess, more dishes, more unidentified sticky globs on the floor and chairs and, in my house, windows. Help your child to identify some daily chores they can accomplish on their own as a part of the routine. Have your child make a box or bag or chart that lists activities they can do when they feel bored or you need them to play independently.

Keep up skills, with an accent on fun. It never hurts to practice basic skills, but allow for children to do this creatively. Playing cards and using dice can be a wonderful tool for reviewing math skills. Cooking offers ample opportunities to apply ratios or measure out fractions. Reviewing these basic skills never hurts and can strengthen understanding for more advanced concepts, and it does not require expensive materials. Games and puzzles build skills in logic and reasoning, but also in taking turns, planning, and creative problem solving.

Make time for literacy. Reading can mean many things. Children can read directions to a game, read a book to a younger sibling, read a comic, read a newspaper story, read a biography, cut up a newspaper and arrange the words into a poem. They can write a letter to a far-off friend or a nearby neighbour who might need support or draw a picture of what happens next in a story or movie. Help your child to process information by asking your child about what they notice, or see, or wonder about, or what they think might happen in a story. Listen to a book online. Watch a video of a favourite author or illustrator talking about their work. Have your child film a stop-motion movie scene with toys or act out a story with their siblings or stuffed animals.

Go easy on yourself. Do what you can. These are difficult and uncertain times for parents and children. Parents will feel stressed, and children will, too. Talk about this with your child, explain how you manage stress, and invite children to help think through ways they can be more helpful or ways you can both make a difference in your own community or family. Skype with older relatives or invite them to Zoom in for dinner one night. Seek out support. Ask friends and relatives what they are doing to keep busy.

If you can, have fun. Build a fort. Have an indoor picnic. Take a walk. Make a pie. Create playlists. Have a dance party in the kitchen. Write funny tweets about how hard this is. Try to find a rhythm or a time when you can get the most work done and maximize this. In a world where children often feel over-scheduled and overwhelmed, try to frame this time as a break from the stresses and pressures children face. Offering children opportunities to go outside or experience unstructured play are valuable opportunities. "Play," Montessori argues, "is the work of the child."