



## Engaging Families

### Head Start Heals - Frequently Asked Questions

#### Q. How can teachers and family support staff engage parents around children's learning and development during COVID-19?

When creating family engagement plans and strategies to support children's learning and development under non-traditional circumstances, schools should make sure families have everything they need for their children to learn. Communicating with families around what type of support they need and how they would like to receive this support is important.

The only way to prevent COVID-19 from deepening inequality for an entire generation of children is to equip families to support learning at home. This is especially important in the pivotal early grades, in which children's learning requires frequent adult facilitation. Adults must work with children and through them, otherwise the achievement gap will grow with every passing day of school closures. Be mindful of caregivers' language and literacy skills. Create videos to model activities and provide instructions in caregivers' home language, whenever possible, to support their understanding of activities and their implementation.

- **Encourage joy in learning.** Learning at home will be more sustainable if it feels good for all—caregivers and students. Novelty also goes a long way. Learning under a tree, creating a closet learning station, or using stuffed animals as reading buddies can help to sustain feelings of happiness while learning.

Be mindful of the at-home activities you suggest and the materials they require, since many families may not have access to or be able to purchase them. Encourage learning activities that require non-specific or no materials. For example:

- Parents and guardians can be storytellers and create a compelling and suspenseful story off the top of their heads, with no book to read from or paper to write it down on. Children can be storytellers in the same way, and can be actors by using different voices to take on each of the characters in the story.
- Families can challenge their children to be detectives around their home—searching for specific letters, numbers, shapes, and patterns that already exist all around them, if they pay close enough attention.
- For writing and drawing activities, encourage free-writing and drawing on blank paper. Some families may not have a supply of blank paper and/or writing utensils, so be mindful of the frequency with which you suggest these activities. If you know that parents have access to a tablet, prompt them to download a free drawing application that their child can use to practice writing and drawing with their fingers (for Apple, the preloaded Pages app enables this; for both Apple and Android, the app Kids Doodle is free to download).

- **Know that home learning cannot perfectly mimic school learning.** Encourage open or unstructured playtime, loosen restrictions on screen time, and if your child seems particularly interested in a topic, find ways to dive deeper into that area. While we want learning to happen, we also have to create space around it that allows for fun and relaxation. These are times when our standard sets of rules do not necessarily apply.
- **Share with families that it is very important for students to take regular breaks.** Guide them that if something is not working, walk away for a moment. Trying to push through a spike of frustration (for parents or children) around an assignment or activity rarely proves worthwhile in terms of skill-building. If families feel stress bubbling up, encourage them to initiate a few minutes of independent playtime, host a kitchen dance party, or set the pencils aside and trade them out for Play-Doh or markers.
- **Empower families during a time when many feel powerless.** Give guidance to families on how to integrate check-ins with their children into their days at home. Encourage parents to invite their children to ask questions about what is happening, and ask them questions about it, too. Remind them to offer reassurance that any range of emotions is okay. Consider providing conversation prompts for students to share how families can help others who are in need and ways to engage children in designing solutions. When kids work through the problem-solving process, they develop their abilities to think critically and in an action-oriented way.
- **Create a collaborative community:** Invite caregivers to share their child’s learning with every activity you suggest—they can post a video or a picture of their implementation, or demonstrate a related extension activity. Provide positive feedback on the students’ work and praise families’ efforts in facilitating their child’s learning. Be specific about the aspects of the facilitation that support children’s open-ended and rigorous learning, and offer examples of ways to push the child’s thinking even further, through additional questions and activities. Always provide this feedback and next steps to keep the learning going. This encourages families to continue their efforts while building your students’ confidence and pride in their accomplishments.

By empowering caregivers with the confidence, skills, and knowledge to facilitate open-ended learning at home, we can ensure that our students’ robust learning is continuing even when they’re not in our classrooms.

### **Additional Resources:**

Preschool Creative Learning Tips for Learning at Home

<https://www.usf.edu/education/about-us/news/2020/usf-preschool-creative-learning-tips-for-learning-at-home.aspx>

Distance Learning Solutions

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/solutions>

Supporting Teachers During COVID-19

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/supporting-teachers-during-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic>

Practice Improvement Tools: Practice Guides For Families

<https://ectacenter.org/decrp/type-pgfamily.asp>

Activities For Families And Caregivers

<https://cultivatelearning.uw.edu/resource-spotlight/>

Supervising Family Services Staff Who Are Working Remotely

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/tips-supervising-family-services-staff-who-are-working-remotely>