education otherwise™
The home education charity

Guidance for families of school children currently learning at home

GUIDANCE IN SUMMARY

Education Otherwise is a charitable organisation which has been supporting home educated families for over thirty years. As a charity, we would like to share with families of school children who are currently learning at home, skills developed by home educating families and so help children thrive and flourish during the current and unprecedented Corona Virus (Covid 19) crisis. We have produced this guidance to assist:

- **Local Authorities, to be an accessible reference document to circulate to schools.**
- **Schools to distribute to parents.**
- **Parents as a guide to supporting their children.**

Key Messages

1) **Maintain physical and mental health:** A stressed child cannot learn readily and children pick up on their parents' anxieties. Children need to sleep well, eat healthily, enjoy daily exercise and stay in touch with friends.

2) **Home environment:** A comfortable home environment is an excellent learning environment and a comfortable child will learn well.

3) **Routine:** Maintaining children's routine will help them to cope and also help them to readjust when they return to school.

4) **Continuing education:** Parents understandably want to ensure that their children do not fall behind with their education, but they need not replicate school at home, nor follow normal school timetables.

5) **Encouragement:** Positive praise when appropriate helps to encourage children to learn. If children are struggling, parents should take a break and then adjust the learning to help the child to understand.

6) **Reading, writing and arithmetic:** Children should be encouraged to read, write and do maths daily.

7) **Engaging Children:** Parents should endeavour to make learning 'fun' by making the experience as engaging as possible, when possible parents can learn alongside their children.

8) **Time to Relax and Play:** Children should take regularly breaks and be allowed time to relax, to play.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education Otherwise is a charitable organisation which has been supporting home education and home educating families for over thirty years.

Home education is a lifestyle choice for most families, requiring significant commitment in terms of time and resources; it is not something that parents should decide to do without a great deal of research and thought.

'Home Education' is the accepted term in the UK and means that the family has elected to educate their child outside the school system and without their local authority making provision for their child. [1]

Currently, parents of school children are facing an unprecedented situation as a result of Corona COVID - 19 virus, where schools have closed, and their children are at home during term time. These children remain registered pupils at their school. Whilst these children are not home educated children and their situation is different to that of home educated children, their families are facing similar challenges that home educating families have had to address.

This guidance is to help those families of school children to cope with this current situation in a way which will help them to thrive and flourish. The intention is not to provide a prescriptive set of dos and don'ts, but rather a range of considerations and actions that have been beneficial to children being educated at home.

Most children will be returning to school once the current crisis is over and therefore are highly likely to benefit from their home learning being scheduled during normal school hours so that day - to - day life feels more familiar to the child.

[1] Some people refer to home education as 'home schooling' which can and does lead to confusion. This is because home educated children are not required to follow a timetable, do set lessons, follow the national Curriculum, take examinations, or otherwise replicate school at home. The choice of how to educate the child is that of the parent, provided that the education is suitable to the child's 'age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs (the child) may have'. Parents who do not home educate their child can elect to discharge their duty to ensure that their child receives a suitable education, by registering their child into a school. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/absence-and-attainment-at-key-stages-2-and-4-2013-to-2014

2. PRINCIPAL PARENTAL CONCERN

Parents understandably want to ensure that their children do not fall behind with their schoolwork or fail to achieve their potential. Recent years have also seen a stress on the importance of school attendance and the emergence of research that missing school for just a few days a year can damage pupils' chances of gaining good national examination results [2]. This has understandably increased parents' concerns, but the reality is that a child being educated at home does not automatically mean that they will fall behind or fail to achieve.

Academic Performance

Discussions around improving academic performance usually focus on teaching methods, materials, platforms and how students absorb new skills, in order to answer the question, "holistically, which is the best way to study?". With schools closed and therefore children being educated at home, is it more important now to pay attention to the myriad of other elements that can affect learning. Primary among these is overall student wellness.

The majority of parents are now faced with the challenge of how best to merge the many elements of wellness and habit development to ensure that the educational progress of their child or children remain, as best as possible on target.

Wellness

Loosely defined, wellness is when you are in good overall health, physically and mentally prepared to actively pursue a goal. The goal here is clearly for children and parents to reach the end of this crisis period thriving and feeling positive about themselves. This document will therefore focus on specific elements of wellness relevant to your child's education, including sleep (quality and quantity), nutrition, fitness, mindfulness and posture. These five elements combined are measurable indicators of wellness that can influence how children learn and perform when studying.

[2] Gibb, N. (2016) 'Just One Day Off can Hamper Children's Life Chances' https://www.gov.uk/government/news/just-one-day-off-can-hamper-childrens-life-chances

3. STRESS

The most crucial first step for parents to take is to protect their children's mental health. A stressed, or anxious child cannot learn as well as a child who feels confident and secure. This is because stress adversely affects a child's ability to remember what they are being taught.

Some Causes of stress:

- **C**hildren will be aware of the current crisis through media exposure and hearing adults talking about it; even very young children can be surprisingly aware of the situation.
- Children invariably respond to parental stress by becoming anxious.
- Media reporting centres on numbers of deaths internationally and in the UK. Children may fear that they, or their parents will die.
- Children will miss the social opportunities they usually have, such as playing outside with friends, team sports and class groups. Social isolation is bad for everyone's mental health.
- Children may be concerned about older relatives such as grandparents.
- Significant disruption to what their day-to-day routine, which included attending school, regular meals and bedtimes, can exacerbate stress.

What can parents do to help their child to feel confident and secure and reduce the impact of stress caused by these concerns?

Efforts should be made to limit exposure to news media and discussion about the Corona COVID - 19 virus. Overall, we should all limit our access of reports to reputable sources which provide factual information, in order to avoid some of the misinformation about the virus which is circulating. Older children may benefit from an open and honest discussion of the current situation, as many will take reassurance from such discussions.

Actively encourage and provide support for children to follow government guidance, including hand washing and social distancing. Reassure them that adults are doing everything possible to minimise the risk to them and their families.

Children will benefit from maintaining as much of their day to day routines as possible.

There are ways to enjoy meaningful social contact without being at risk. Children can be encouraged to use video calling platforms such as 'Zoom', 'Skype', or 'Facetime' to contact friends. Some may enjoy playing age - appropriate online games together. Communications for younger children can be supervised by parents to ensure that they are safe online. Parents should encourage regular communication with relatives.

The home setting

Physical environment does influence learning. There is an interaction between the environment and the learner, as well as a correlation between the environment and the learning task. The elements that are found to be most helpful for learning overall are:

- The complexity of visual details of the learning material.
- A natural environment or natural elements in the environment.
- The use of natural materials.
- Limited use of cool colours.

Children's satisfaction with learning guidance, materials and their social environment plays an important role in stimulating their effort and ability to learn. Satisfaction with physical working conditions, whilst normally less important, has greater importance in this present climate, particularly with younger children.

Some practical implications of this sudden and likely extended situation, is that the home environment, now as the primary setting where children will learn, should take into consideration factors such as the temperature of the room, lighting, periods of quiet, reducing distractions and being an uncluttered 'space' to learn and study. Once again, parents should be guided by the age of their child.

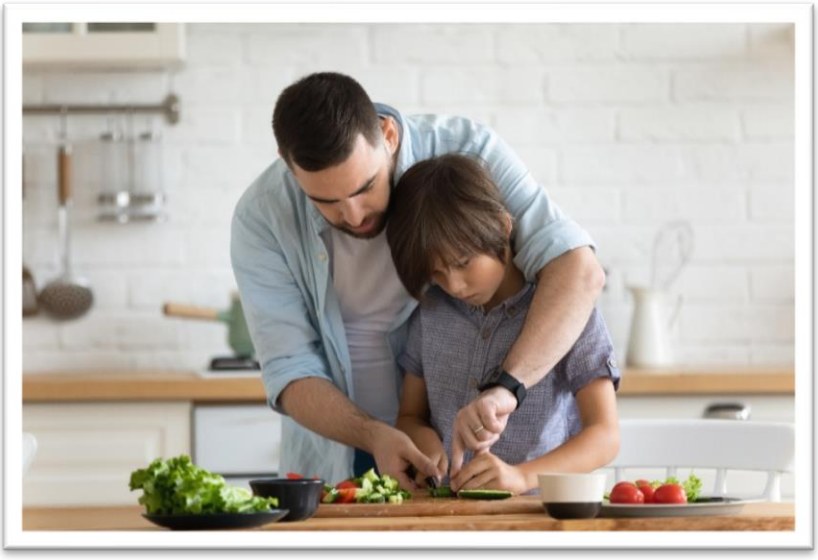
A central message is that children's homes are very different environments to schools. Parents should not therefore try to replicate the classroom environment.

A comfortable home environment can still be an excellent learning place for your child.

Well being

Physical health is important, and parents should take steps to ensure that their children are in the best health they can be to learn:

***Nutrition*:** Children need to eat healthily in order to get the best out of their learning. Parents will be aware that children are less able to concentrate when hungry or overfed. Breakfast before starting the school day is a good foundation for children to be alert and able to study well. Currently, children will not be getting as much exercise as usual, simply because they are significantly less active; diets should be adjusted to reflect that.



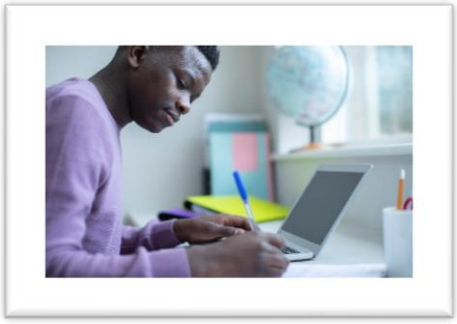
In this present climate, it is important that children gain a better appreciation of why learning is important.

***Exercise*:** Exercise helps children to be more emotionally resilient and more equipped to learn. Exercise is a key component in fighting depression, anxiety, and in improving mental dexterity. Parents should follow government guidance and try to incorporate some exercise each day. This could be a walk, playing in the garden, or exercises indoors.

***Sleep*:** A good night's sleep can enhance the immune system, increase energy levels, decrease injury risk, improve mood and help children to think clearly about their learning. Children therefore need a good night's sleep and parents should try to ensure that bedtimes are kept consistent.

***Mindfulness*:** We see mindfulness techniques such as meditation and deep breathing increasingly being used in sports and in general healthcare to help relieve stress and anxiety. Children should be encouraged to incorporate periods of thought about the moment and what is happening internally and externally.

***Posture*:** The benefits of proper posture (leaning forward with interest, slumping shoulders, etc.) to health, wellness and stress management relates to proper breathing and so reducing the amount of actual physical stress on the body. Holding a tense posture for long periods of time typically leads to increased stress which is not helpful to learning.



Learning Strategy

Pulling together the proper learning strategy is a core component for academic success. This begins with having the proper motivation and understanding of how your child learns best. Studies have shown that students that have a weak concept of why they are studying tend to underperform when compared to those who had strong motivations.

Another dimension to learning is that of choosing the right method for each subject; for most children, English and mathematics should be practised daily. Children should be encouraged to employ multiple study techniques, as this provides variation and supports engagement.

Overall, wellness and learning are linked. Healthier children simply learn better, more readily handle stress and find it easier to engage with their learning. Using child -appropriate learning strategies will help to reduce stress and help children to make more efficient use of time. That combined with a clear understanding of learning styles and motivations goes a long way.

The Parent

Parents should remember to look after their own health, as not only will this help them to cope with the current crisis, but children can and do learn from the good examples that parents set.

Parents should give their children encouragement and honest praise. Parents can point out mistakes in spelling, maths, or facts in a supportive way, without criticism; destructive feedback (criticism) does not encourage positive learning. Typically, if a child is struggling to understand something, an approach could be to stop and get back to it at another time, using a different explanation. The focus is to find an approach that enables the child to understand. An example of this is if a child cannot understand how to calculate angles in a shape, parents can reproduce the shape out of string, paper, models, or whatever materials they have to hand, in order to demonstrate visually what is meant. Simply put, learning should be enjoyable, not stressful.

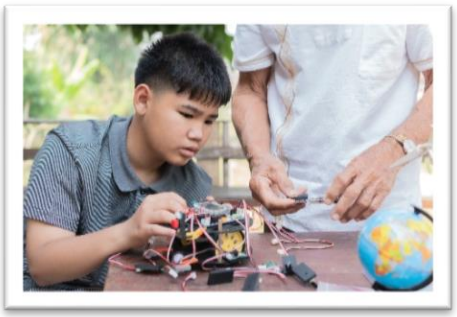
If parents vary the style of education for the child, children will also benefit from a new perspective on how to approach learning and understanding.

For a child being educated at home, everything is a learning opportunity.

4. EDUCATION

Parents will understandably be concerned about how to support their children learning at home, particularly those families working from home, or with several children. It may feel daunting, or even overwhelming, but there are ways for parents to make the situation a positive one.

Schools will, in most cases, have supplied, or be in the process of supplying work for the child to do. Parents should remember that schools had little notice to do this and that many were not prepared for the enormous change in provision that the crisis has created. Some schools will have provided reasonable amounts of work or set up remote learning for children through the internet. Parents should actively support their child in their efforts to meet the demands being set by the school. If large amounts of work have been set at once, parents should remember that children do not need to rush through it all at once. Instead put together a routine and in cases where schools are less well - prepared, parents should take a measured approach based on their child's school supplied work and the child's individual needs.



For example, a child may pick up some Lego and parents can ask questions tailored to their child's age, ability and aptitude. This is demonstrated in the following chart, which is one example, but the same learning approach can be applied to a wide range of topics**:**

Arrows indicate that the Child researches answer with support where appropriate.

The possibilities are endless and can include many subjects such as mathematics, English, geography, history, geology, music, social studies, art and science.

Resources

The way that children learn is changing and the Internet provides a wealth of resources. This new kind of learning platform is ideally suited for the task of learning at home.

There are literally hundreds of resources available to help a child learn, including 'YouTube' and Ted talks' and many of these are free. Many providers are adding resources in response to the current crisis and hundreds of resources can be found through the EO website (https://www.educationotherwise.org/index.php/links).

The child

Regular Breaks

Children need breaks in their learning to relax and recoup. Parents can encourage their children to have short bursts of learning, with gaps for relaxation in between. Some children are happy to learn for up to an hour without a break, whereas others may learn better in short bursts of 15 minutes. Parents should be alert to their child becoming less engaged with their learning and suggest a break at that time. Once the parent is more familiar with the child's individual learning needs, breaks (rest periods) can be planned ahead more readily.

Attention levels vary between children and fluctuates with factors such as the quality of the learning material, the subject, motivation, emotions, time of the day. The following graph from a study by Bligh (1998) shows the impact of rest on performance - the initial blue performance curve declines with time but after a period of rest performance increases (the red curve), this in turn decreases with time but again increases after a further period of rest (yellow curve).

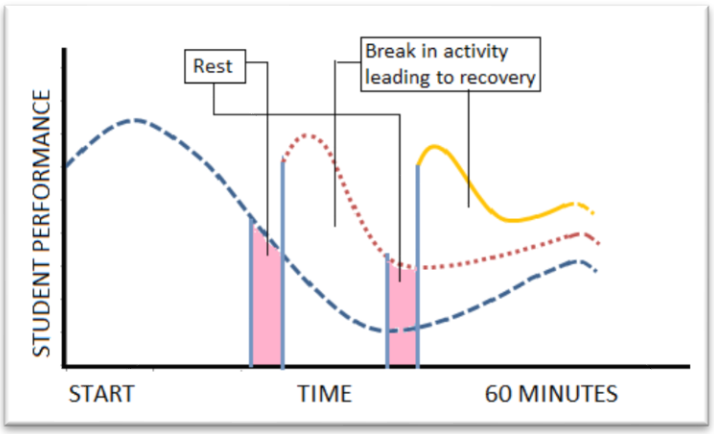


Figure 1: Three Declines and Recoveries Graph[3]

[3] Sourced from Learning Curve in lecture (Bligh, 1998)

Relaxation techniques could include listening to calming music, or 'mindfulness' such as sitting in a comfortable position and concentrating on body relaxation.

Relaxation can also simply involve having fun, or entertaining discussions.

Supporting Learning

Rather than instructing the child, when possible a parent should learn with their child, particularly with younger children. Parents can read to their children, discuss problems with them, but most of all, listen to them and ask questions of each other. Parents may not realise that discussion and conversation are valuable means of learning for their child. It may take a little time to relax enough to take this less formal approach, but children will benefit from the experience. Demonstrating how to research is of itself a good learning experience for children.

Developing a Routine

Despite developing a learning routine within the home, children may well become bored and that is not always a bad thing, as a bored child will want something engaging to do. If educational materials are readily available, many children will naturally choose to use them. Home educating families sometimes refer to 'strewing', which simply means having a lot of resources for learning around the home, so that a child can readily pick something up and use it. This works well with books, art materials, musical instruments, building materials and even workbooks made to be in a puzzle format.

Play and Life Skills

Playing is learning, particularly for younger children, and older ones can benefit too. Board games can encourage analysis, maths practice and spelling practice; puzzles encourage hand and eye co-ordination, resilience and support fine motor skills and modelling supports creativity, imagination and fine motor skills. All of these are tried and tested learning techniques.

Life skills practice is valuable learning for children. Baking and weighing provide practice in addition, fractions, portioning, food hygiene and healthy eating; playing shop can support younger children in learning maths; and taking something apart to see how it works will provide a child with physics skills whilst practice manual dexterity.

Subjects

Children should be encouraged to read every day. With a non-reader, parents can read to them. It does not matter so much what they are reading, but rather that they are still reading. For older children with their sights on English GCSE or A-Level there will be set texts that they can read. Some children may prefer to read at length, whereas others may need to limit reading to short bursts of 10 -15 minutes.

For children old enough to write, parents should encourage some daily writing. The child could keep a diary, create their own news reports, or write to older relatives restricted from visiting. Again, it is not what they write, but the fact that they are writing.

Children should be encouraged to do some maths every day. Practical maths works well for most children, but parents do not always recognise that everyday tasks can involve practising suitable maths skills. This can include weighing ingredients, portioning, handling money, playing games which require maths input, or doing maths puzzles. For older children, discussion of topics of interest can lead to data analysis practice, such as asking a child who enjoys computer games to calculate the average time a game takes to play, to calculate numbers of games sold worldwide, or to calculate the profit margins on sales of games.

Science need not be about textbooks, or using a laboratory, as there is plenty of science that children can safely do at home. Hands on learning through practical work is a very effective method of retaining knowledge. Many households will have basic materials which can be used for experiments – sources such as 'YouTube' have simple instructions for home based and safe experiments.

Children enjoy growing and planting and those parents who have a garden could consider involving their children in outdoor learning in their garden. This could be measuring and calculating space; planning out how it may be better used, both now and for the long term; preparing the garden for planting.

Families can get through this unprecedented situation together and thrive.

Children will benefit from practising fine motor skills, particularly younger children. This can be through things which parents may not associate with learning, such as building with Lego, doing puzzles, using construction kits such as 'K'Nex', or modelling with cardboard, paper and other clean waste materials.

Children typically studying foreign languages, French, German should endeavour to routinely practice. There is an abundance of learning materials (flash cards, books, games and applications such as Quizlet etc.) online.

History, geography, business studies, religious studies, art and design and other subjects can be weaved into general discussions, reflecting what is being watched on television, radio plays, local newspapers.

Every family of a school child is currently sharing the situation and every family will have their own worries about their children's learning. It can be useful to remember that learning starts at birth and it is very difficult to not learn if the environment is stress - free and stimulating.

Education Otherwise wishes every family well for now and for their futures.

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