



**JOHNS HOPKINS**  
SCHOOL of EDUCATION

**Institute for Education Policy**



## **Parent Resource Update**

New Year and Still Schooling From Home?

Balancing Life and Learning From Home During COVID-19

**January 2021**

The Coronavirus continues to impact the norms of daily life for adults and children alike. In our [original survival guide](#) from the spring of 2020, we discussed planning for schooling from home, thinking that this would be necessary for a few weeks. However, now that we have been home for months and learning has been disrupted for almost a year, the new year provides us with a good opportunity to reassess and plan for the longer term. Two mothers, certified teachers and current education researchers, revisit this conversation with personal suggestions and curated resources to help families survive and even thrive this winter and spring.

Dr. Alanna Bjorklund-Young and Dr. Angela R. Watson are researchers at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy. Alanna is the mother of two early learners (ages three and six), and Angela has a ten- and thirteen-year-old. Their children are currently in school via in-person, hybrid, synchronous virtual, and totally asynchronous virtual. Below, Alanna and Angela share recommendations based on what they are doing in their own homes during the second wave of COVID-19 schooling.

## Equipping Parents

The first [Parent's Survival Guide](#) advocated for common sense approaches that included such strategies as establishing schedules and routines, setting up a learning area in the home with needed materials, and having trusted resources at the ready. These strategies are still important, but as we planned for the months ahead, and reflected on what has really worked, we realized that we have needed to rely on additional approaches.

It is important to first acknowledge that managing in these circumstances is difficult. If you are struggling, you are in good company! We are too! Our goal with this updated resource is to help parents support their child's learning while still getting work done and to achieve better balance. Luckily for us all, kids are hardwired to learn, and your support heightens this! Here is how.

## Planning

Planning is our first step. While we all came up with some sort of plan last spring, plans need updating to reflect the experiences of the summer and fall, and the possibility of schooling from home throughout this winter or perhaps longer.

First, set realistic and attainable goals. This means

The image shows a calendar for the year 2021, titled "PLANNING 2021". The calendar is organized by month (JANVIER, FÉVRIER, MARS, AVRIL, MAI, JUIN, JUILLET, AOÛT, SEPTEMBRE, OCTOBRE, NOVEMBRE, DÉCEMBRE) and by day of the month. Each day's cell contains a small icon or text, likely representing a specific planning task or event. The calendar is presented in a grid format with a blue header and a light blue background.

taking stock of current priorities and figuring out what is truly feasible. For some, this might mean heavily prioritizing either work or children; others may strive for a balance of the two. However, we must recognize that we simply cannot do everything; each of us will need to compromise on something and that will look different for each family and maybe even for each family member. It is impossible to give everything 100%, so tough choices must be made.

Revisiting what did and did not work during the spring and summer helped us update our goals and prioritize changes. For example, in Alanna's house, her older daughter generally thrived over the spring and summer: she learned to read, completed long puzzles, and explored new music on Alexa.

However, she was more reluctant to engage in math activities. Therefore, Alanna and her husband set the goal of supporting their older daughter in math games and activities, but rely on her online schooling to support her literacy growth.

In contrast, Alanna's younger daughter needed a lot more attention in the fall than she had received over the spring and summer. Therefore, she went back to full-time daycare in September. ([The CDC published this guide, if you are considering sending your child back to school or daycare.](#))

While this was an anxiety-filled decision, the three-year-old is once again happy and learning with her friends and loving teachers. This change has also allowed for far more work productivity during the day.

What works for one child may not work for another child, and that is okay! In fact, Angela's family is also schooling her two children differently; one is in hybrid, the other in totally asynchronous virtual. Make choices that best fit the needs of the learners and the family. Whatever the choice, there will be trade-offs and associated parent guilt. But it is important to think through what situation allows for the amount of needed work, while also providing enough support for kids to be safe and learning. This likely means readjusting expectations and revisiting goals periodically.



## ***Enlist Help***

Whatever the plan, try to enlist help wherever possible!

Start with those around you. For example, try to split up as much work as possible with a partner, team up with other parents, enlist help from your children, and see if close family or friends can help. If a partner takes half of household and parenting respon-

sibilities, your responsibility is cut down to half! Use that extra time to work or help kids with their learning!

When Angela’s children were younger, she teamed up with two other moms to form a parenting co-op. While there is some risk of contagion with this option, it may be less than at a larger daycare if proper precautions are in place. Each mom took turns watching all of the kids once a week to give the other moms some kid-free time. She also shared meals with these moms, making three freezer meals instead of one and then trading. This strategy provided her family with an assortment of meals and often saved cost as well. Be creative and come up with no-cost or low-cost solutions.



Alanna’s family has enlisted a lot of help. Aside from dividing work with her husband, and sending their youngest child back to pre-school, they have also teamed up with another family so that both children are at each home for half the week, freeing up 2-3 days a week completely dedicated to work. In the spring and summer, when both kids were home, Alanna’s mother-in-law conducted “Grandma School” every weekday, which typically consisted of reading stories, playing games and talking via Zoom. While the kids were a bit reluctant at first, engaging books and Grandma’s full attention soon turned “Grandma School” into a favorite time of the day and was often extended to an hour or more at the kids’ insistence. Angela’s husband has left the house for work throughout COVID, but takes their sons to lunch at the park once a week. This outing provides a much-needed break from virtual learning and trades screens for outdoor time, plus Angela gets an hour of uninterrupted work time. For more ideas, check out this [CDC guide](#).



If you cannot find free help, consider hiring help if possible. This might look like forming a “learning pod” with a couple other parents and hiring a tutor for all your children. Consider older children in your neighborhood as a source of help, particularly for tutoring. Many libraries and schools also offer tutoring support. Alternatively, it might be easier to outsource jobs like cooking, cleaning, yard work, or laundry, and freeing up your time for things that only you can do.

Your children are another great source of help—if a child can walk, they can help! Set high expectations for all children. Small children can clean up belongings, help set the table, and feed pets, while older children can take responsibility



for larger chores. Angela’s sons are responsible for cooking one family dinner each week. They research recipes and do the majority of the work, with reasonable supervision. Use this time to teach older children important life skills, such as how to contribute to the family by helping with laundry, starting a small business shoveling snow, or doing yardwork. Important bonuses include time outdoors exercising, and away from screens.

Kids can also help teach each other! Older children can help younger children with their work. Alanna’s older daughter loves to read to her younger sister, as well as demonstrate the “right way” to sweep the floor. These types of activities not only help you; they also support your children’s learning and give them a sense of accomplishment and pride in having contributed to the family. They also build independence, which leads us to our next section.

## *Support Your Child’s Independence*

If children were physically in school, they would be responsible for monitoring their behavior and learning, with relatively little individualized support. Schools support this independence by explicitly setting expectations, routines, and norms for behavior. You can do this at home too!

First, think about the most troublesome daily problems. Address those first. Do your kids constantly disrupt each other or you each time they have a question or problem? Then setting rules about when they can and cannot ask questions or disrupt your work might be a good idea. Do you have to interrupt your work so your child returns to lessons after a break? Then setting up a timer (or, better yet, teaching your child how to set a timer!) might solve this problem. Angela’s sons had multiple Zoom classes at various times throughout the day. To help keep her kids on track, she programmed an Alexa with reminders before each class while she continued her work in the other room. Alan-

na's six-year-old sets a ten-minute timer at the beginning of each of her breaks.

Whatever the problem, think of ways to solve it, and then explicitly teach your children how to do it. You may have to show them the first few times, explaining exactly what you are doing and why; next, you may need to do it with your child; then, sit next to them as they do it themselves; and finally, gradually, allow them to do it themselves. In education, these strategies are called “scaffolding” and “gradual release of responsibility,” and can be a great way of teaching something new and complicated to your child. Have high expectations for your kids! Even young children can learn to manage themselves with minimal supervision.

Once the most disruptive times of the day have been resolved, think about what else you can do to support your child's independence. Even the youngest student can complete simple check lists, keep track of their school materials and supplies, and access their own snacks and drinks. While these strategies will help you survive today, they will also pay great dividends for your child as they grow up knowing that they can take care of themselves and possess the skills to manage in later life!



Parental concerns may be different with older children. They may be more independent with their learning, but they may need help staying socially engaged. The CDC has published guidance for parents regarding [in-person interactions](#) and the associated risk levels. While virtual interactions present the lowest risk, there are in-person options with medium risks. Engaging safely within the family will also help combat feelings of isolation for everyone. Both of our families have increased family meals and time for playing cards, puzzles, and other indoor games, as well as outdoor activities like hiking. Angela's neighbors painted a pickleball court in the street in front of her house and families throughout the neighborhood have taken to using it.

## *Learning Happens*

While dedicated “learning time” is helpful, do not cram all learning into school hours. Kids are hardwired to learn and this happens all the time, everywhere. Leverage this ability to learn by sneaking in “lessons” throughout the day! Think of learning as an “immersion” experience. Angela calls this “stealth education.” For example, be intentional about using big words around your kids and in conversation to expand their

vocabulary. Or show your kids how you continue to expand your vocabulary by highlighting, defining, and using new words you have heard or read. One evening, while watching TV as a family, Angela's ten-year-old son said that he wanted to "reiterate" something. She never taught him the word "reiterate," he just heard her use it, probably on her work Zoom calls. Kids soak up learning like sponges.

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Other stealth education strategies could include incorporating things such as educational placemats, books, puzzles, and games. Angela keeps educational picture books and art cards on book stands throughout the house and changes the pages every few days. Consider labeling items in your house in a foreign language. Practice counting, a few math facts, or spelling words at stoplights or while cooking. Play different kinds of music. Practice [close looking](#) and "[wonder why](#)" on walks around the neighborhood. Estimate distance or weight in things that you see. Discuss topics that interest your child and use those interests as springboards for new learning. No need to be explicit and turn learning into a chore. These strategies are what [Annette Lareau](#) might refer to as "concerted cultivation," and many parents practice them throughout the day without even noticing. Since the Coleman Report more than 50 years ago, we have known that [family plays a major role in academic outcomes for children](#). This impact is likely heightened as we all interact more with our children and their education.

Most importantly, we suggest starting with something fun, that your children enjoy. In addition, we recommend thinking about your goals for your kids and being intentional about the content of your covert educational opportunities. Finally, set reasonable expectations: five to ten minutes of math practice every day is better than an overwhelming 60-minute goal that never gets started.

## ***Research on Mindset, Grit, and Agency***

Parents are worried about learning loss. A better understanding of learning might help abate some of these fears. Research tells us that learning is encouraged when both the learner and those teaching them understand that everyone can learn, and that learning new things is difficult for everyone at first. Carol Dweck's *Mindset* is a wonderful resource for parents that teaches the importance of a "growth mindset." Similarly, Angela Duckworth's *Grit* stresses the importance of persevering. She says that in her own family, they encourage each other to set small stretch goals each day - that she refers to as the "[hard thing](#)" rule - to push themselves just a little.

In education this idea is referred to as the “zone of proximal development,” i.e., the place just beyond your current ability where growth and learning occur. The key is pushing just enough that the task is difficult, but not so difficult that the learner becomes discouraged and shuts down. No time to read these books? No worries. There are some wonderful Ted Talks and YouTube videos that sum up these ideas quickly (see [here](#), and [here](#)).

## *Be Kind*

Finally, remember to be kind. Be kind to yourself. What we are all doing is hard. Find support and support others. Make time for some self-care. Similarly, be kind to your children and loved ones. These changing circumstances and disruption of the status quo are difficult for everyone. Know that learning does not have to be fancy or well-planned all the time. Just be intentional, focus on reasonable goals, enlist help, and look for opportunities to support your child’s learning.



BE KIND TO  
*Yourself*



## Authors



Alanna Bjorklund-Young is a Senior Research and Policy Analyst at the Institute. She previously served as a Research Fellow and recently completed her Ph.D. in economics at Johns Hopkins with a dissertation examining the teaching skills and practices associated with more effective teachers. Dr. Bjorklund specializes in the economics of education and has prior experience as a classroom instructor with membership in NY-CDOE's Office of Teacher Effectiveness. She holds an M.A. in economics from Johns Hopkins University, an M.S. from City College of New York, and a B.A. in international studies from the University of Washington/Seattle.



Angela R. Watson is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute. She earned her doctorate in education policy from the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform in May 2019. Her dissertation examined the value of arts field trips on student social-emotional skill acquisition as well as the relationship between policy and access. She is a co-researcher at the National Endowment for the Arts Research Lab, also at the University of Arkansas. Angela also holds an MAT from Harding University and a B.A. in elementary education and a graduate certificate in STEM education from the University of Arkansas. Angela's other research interests include gender gaps and school choice with a focus on homeschooling.

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