

Tips for Living Life to Its Fullest



Tips for Creating a Virtual Learning Workspace

Back-to-school preparations look much different this year in the era of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). As many school systems across the nation are selecting virtual and hybrid options for classroom instruction, parents and guardians are wondering how to support students and help them stay on track during this unprecedented time. Creating a virtual learning workspace in the home is a great way to get started. The following are some tips for families:

Find a Workspace

- Select an area of the home that your student can call their own home base, which can be used for academic instruction.
- Try to select a desk or workspace that does not need to be used for other activities.
- If a common area is the only option, use a plastic bin or tote to collect school items so the space can be easily cleared for multi-purpose functions, and so school supplies can remain accessible and organized.
- Avoid high-traffic areas, so distractions are limited. If a high-traffic area is the only option, use a three-panel cardboard display board or poster paper to create a physical barrier between your student and other members of the household, and any distractions.
- Multiple dedicated spaces are okay. Use a desk for writing and creative tasks, but allow quiet reading or research to be done in an alternative area like a playroom, bedroom, or even outside.
- Use books, trays, binders, and pieces of cardboard as “lap tables” for students who don’t have access to a physical desk or tabletop.
- Nature is proven to aid in learning and improving mood ([Bratman et al., 2015](#)). Seek an area with natural light, and if available, add a plant or flower to the space. No matter how great the space is, encourage breaks outside when feasible.

Create a Work Station

- Select a flat table or desk that is located near an electrical outlet and adequate lighting that allows your student to view the computer keyboard and written materials.
 - If near a window, make sure the computer monitor is not facing the window, to reduce glare on the screen or shadows on a video conferencing platform.
 - Start with a chair that’s comfortable for your student. It’s okay if your student alternates between sitting on a bed or a couch, standing at a countertop, or lounging on a beanbag chair, but remind them to change positions and vary their posture often.
 - Whatever seating your student uses, make sure it’s in a comfortable environment. If using a couch, make sure your student’s back is against the back of the couch, and their feet are flat on the floor. If necessary, use a footstool to support their feet.
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Establish Boundaries

- Consider creating signage for your student to indicate whether they can be interrupted. A color-coded clip chart can indicate availability. For example, if a clothespin is on a green card, that means it's okay to talk; yellow means come in, but quietly; and red means your student needs complete quiet and cannot be distracted. Using Post-it notes or taping a sign to the door or workspace can also work well.
- As with all technology, online access controls can be used to prevent students from viewing unnecessary sites or materials that could be distracting.
- Other boundaries might be related to when and how to take breaks and what to do during breaks and downtime, where video can be turned on in the home (e.g., only in study area?), when to do e-learning homework, what other types of devices/toys can be in the learning area, and how and when to ask a working parent for help if needed.

Create a Routine and Minimize Distractions

- Create a routine that includes breaks and opportunities to get up and stretch.
- Post a copy of the school schedule for your student and other family members to reference.
- Create a schedule for the week that has routines, such as reading time each day after lunch, or math each morning, so your student knows what to expect.
- Schedules—even if created the night before—can help limit distractions, especially for older students whose parents and caregivers are working outside the home.
- Noise-canceling headphones are a great way for students to stay focused on the lesson.

Safety Issues

- Notebook computers can produce heat and can get especially hot when placed on a student's lap. Be sure to use a lap desk or barrier when possible.
- Prevent eye strain by encouraging breaks from the screen every 20 minutes. Advise your student to look at least 20 feet away every 20 minutes to adjust their gaze. Younger children can play "I spy" out the window.
- Eye strain and poor posture can occur when using a small screen. If available, a larger monitor or a cable to connect the small device to a TV screen for easier viewing can be used.
- Using a notebook computer or tablet all day can be hard on the hands and wrists. If available, consider connecting to an external keyboard and mouse to minimize any discomfort. Many devices accommodate dictation to eliminate or reduce the need to type.

Re-evaluate your student's workspace periodically. Changes should be made as needed to support student learning. Occupational therapy practitioners work with people across the lifespan to increase and enhance participation in daily living. For students, this includes the occupation of learning. Reach out to the occupational therapy practitioner at your student's school for more information.

For more tips from AOTA about [Distance Learning](#), to download the [Decision Guide and Tips for Returning to School During COVID-19](#), and more, visit www.aota.org/backtoschool.

Reference

Bratman, G. N., Daily, G. C., Levy, B. J., & Gross, J. J. (2015). The benefits of nature experience: Improved affect and cognition. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 138, 41–50. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2015.02.005>