



Cultivating Cognitive Skills During the Coronavirus Quarantine: Working with Preschoolers

By Andrei Semenov

Many of our daily routines have been disrupted by the **novel coronavirus** pandemic. As we adjust to social distancing and working remotely, we also need to adjust to our kids being home from school. For older children, staying home might mean connecting to classes digitally whereas for younger children, staying home might leave parents scrambling for activities to keep them busy. However, staying home doesn't have to mean that children stop developing their **cognitive skills**. Below we discuss some activities and practices parents can employ to keep their children's **executive function** skills sharp while society adjusts to the ongoing pandemic. Executive function skills help children pay attention, hold information in mind, resist distractions, and think flexibly.

Preschool Children

School disruptions can be particularly difficult for young children as their daily routine is disrupted and they are separated from teachers. The structured environment of school creates predictable situations that children can plan for and this helps them develop key executive function skills. Disruptions in this predictability can make kids frustrated, more impulsive and harder to handle. Parents should try to replicate the structure and stability of school at home.

Daily Schedules/Plans: A preschooler's day is typically guided by the teacher and activities are outlined on a daily schedule, which the class reviews at the start of the day. Schedules include what types of activities are going to happen (e.g. Circle Time, Crafts, Free Play, Lunch, Nap, etc.). Knowing what to expect next helps kids **proactively** regulate their emotions.

Play plans can be created by parents and children to help structure a child's play. Rather than relying exclusively on self-directed free play and saying, "Go play," parents can encourage children to sit down and plan out what they want to do during the next play period. For example: "First I want to play with the blocks and then I want to color in my book and then I want to play with my sister." Encouraging children to stick to this plan will help them develop their goal-directedness and planning skills. After play time is over be sure to revisit these plans and ask children if they followed their plan, what they liked about their plan and what they might want to do differently next time.

Create a School-like Environment: Context cues are very important for early learning. Being in a certain space signals to a child to act a certain way (at home we do this, but at school we do that). Consider creating a (temporary) school environment in your home, decorate this environment with visual aids for your child and an outline of their daily schedule and plan. Once the school day is "done" you can take down the cues and revert rules back to how we do things at home.



Physical Activity: Maintaining regular exercise can be especially hard when there's no school recess time for kids to run around. Make sure to schedule regular physical activities throughout the day, whether in the backyard, the park or at home. Incorporating mindfulness and cognitive reflection with physical activities has been proven to be especially effective at promoting executive function skills. Consider activities such as zoo animal yoga and animal freeze dances. Games that require slow and coordinated movement can help children with being mindful and deliberate in their actions. For example: have a child outstretch their hand palm-side down and put a coin on the back of their

hand. Now, ask the child to walk to a specific place without dropping the coin. These types of games will slow kids down, but also encourage deliberate movement and attention to the task at-hand.

Reflection: With the pandemic situation changing daily, it can be difficult for adults and children to decompress at the end of the day. Moments of reflection allow us to notice our thoughts and emotions without getting caught up in them, which helps build executive function skills. Consider the use of **reflection journals** and **family reflection conversations** to help children make sense of what is going on. Have children talk about what they did during the day, what feelings they felt, what questions came up, what questions were answered and what they want to do tomorrow. Closing the day with this type of reflection can help reduce levels of uncertainty experienced by the family. Consider other mediums for reflection. For example, drawings, songs and crafts projects can all be used to help document and chronicle the experience while also identifying important thoughts and emotions. For more information about mindfulness and activities you can try at home, see our blog post [here](#).

Hygiene: Proper handwashing habits have always been difficult for kids (and even adults) to maintain. One useful technique to promote handwashing for the suggested amount of time (20 seconds) is to sing “Happy Birthday,” twice. Make sure children and adults in the family wash hands after coming home from being outside, before and after mealtimes, and after the bathroom. Consider encouraging this behavior through competitions (e.g., who can wash their hands the slowest) and through achievement charts. When out in public, be mindful of surfaces that children touch and when they touch their face. To help with face touching behavior, consider playing games at home that discourage face touching. The key executive function skill involved here is **inhibitory control**. Books like Bill Cotter’s [Don’t Push the Button!](#) can help children practice resisting the urge to touch something (like their face).



Media: Although it might be tempting to limit screen time, remember there are apps that can help promote executive function skills such as our partners, [Kiko's Thinking Time Games](#) and [Mind Yeti](#). This can be a good time to focus on your child's relationship to screen time as you have more time to monitor their usage. Be deliberate and mindful in how you structure screen time and what programming you choose for your child(ren). For a list of approved educational media selections check out [Common Sense Media](#).

Working with anxiety:

Put on your own oxygen mask first. Make sure to process your own anxiety first – panicking around young children might make them confused and distressed. Mindfulness meditation and other contemplative practices can help us process our emotions and center us on the present moment.

Identify and talk about emotions. As you notice fear and worry in your child, do not dismiss it. Rather, identify their feelings, e.g., “I think you might be feeling scared right now, that’s ok, what’s making you scared?” Talk through your own feelings and how to manage them. Focus on present moment strategies for how to get through this passing emotion and then how to come up with strategies to address that fear later.

Manage difficult situations with pretend play. Pretend play is a very powerful tool that can help children get through difficult situations. When children pretend to be someone else, they create **psychological distance** between themselves and the problem at hand. In the case of a frustrating task, pretending to be Batman can help alleviate the frustration. Try having children pretend to be superheroes and favorite movie characters to help them get through scary and anxious situations, e.g., “What do you think Elsa does when she’s scared?” Consider adding props and costumes to make it easier for children to pretend to be someone else.

Stay tuned for tips for school-age children!

About the Author:



Andrei Semenov is currently earning his Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology at the University of Minnesota, Institute of Child Development. His primary research interests are in how reflection and mindfulness training can help improve executive function skills. Currently, Andrei is working on a parenting program that promotes reflection and collaborative problem solving between parents and their children. Andrei has worked with the [Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing](#) where he helped develop and evaluate programs that promote mindfulness for teachers and educators. Andrei earned his B.A. in Psychology and Philosophy from the University of Colorado, Boulder where he studied how overscheduling children into extra-curricular activities may be associated with changes in their executive function skills. He has written and presented his work at academic conferences as well as in peer-reviewed academic journals.