Keeping Kids Sharp During the Coronavirus Quarantine: Working with School-age Children

By Andrei Semenov

Kids of all ages are being affected by school closures brought on by the **novel coronavirus** pandemic. For school-age children, the transition to home-schooling and remote learning can be jarring and challenge their developing **executive function skills.** This period of social isolation and school disruption can be a good opportunity for parents to engage with their children and maintain their cognitive and academic progress. 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.

School-age Children

Despite the best efforts of teachers and administrators, the at-home learning experience will not fully replicate traditional school environments. There are many important aspects of a school environment including student-teacher relationships, structured schedules, social interaction and structured use of technology that are harder to replicate at the dining room table. But the goal is not to fully replicate school. During the ongoing school closures, focus on providing the best learning environment possible without trying to fully replicate what school used to be. Do this by working around schedules, respecting your child's autonomy and being flexible during this transition.

Schedules and Routines

By the time children are in 1st or 2nd grade, their school schedule becomes something they can anticipate and plan around. Unsurprisingly, a disruption in this predictable schedule can be a difficult adjustment for children. You have likely already spent the first few days of your quarantine easing into the new way of life. Eventually, however,

thinking of this as an extended holiday or snow day will transition into a desire for more structure, for both you and your kids.

Work with your school to chart out what academic content will be delivered by teachers digitally and what the expectations are for students while they are at home. Work with your child to chart out what the short-term plan is and ask them to help you create an at-home school schedule. During this process you want to work *with* your child and respect their autonomy – that is, their idea of themselves as individuals who have competence, responsibilities, and choices. This will make the at-home learning experience feel more collaborative and might help ease children's anxiety in the face of a dramatic schedule change.

Daily Schedule: A sense of stability and predictability is important for the development of **executive function skills**. Being able to prepare for what happens next allows children to proactively regulate their attention and their emotions. Work on maintaining a structured daily school schedule by preserving ongoing rituals like wake-up routines and breakfast times. Encourage children to dress up as if they were going to school (it is harder to concentrate when you sit around in your PJs!).

Some key tips to remember when making your schedule:

➢ Start with a meeting and an overview of the plan. Highlight what major activities will take place as well as other important updates from around the household.
➢ Break up content blocks with breaks and time for unstructured play/relaxation
    o Allow for social media breaks and snacks
➢ Don't forget lunch and recess!
➢ Try to stick to scheduled times – you don't have to cover all the content all at once.
➢ Try different schedules on different days (e.g. have a Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedule and a Tuesday/Thursday schedule).
➢ Don't let perfect be the enemy of good enough! This is a stressful and challenging time for many. Be flexible and responsive to your child's needs and respect your own time as well.

Because a school-age child's **cognitive flexibility** is still developing, the transition from one activity to another is particularly difficult. Having visual aids, auditory cues and proactive reminders can help children prepare for switching their attention to a different topic/activity. Consider apps like First Then Visual Schedule and Visual Schedule Planner to help scaffold schedules.

Environment

Work on creating study spaces and learning environments in your home. School-age children still struggle with **inhibiting** their attention toward distractions, so limiting the distractions that are available will help them focus. Try to create learning spaces that are distinct and separate from play spaces, consider removing distractors like toys and

games until after "school" is over. Similarly, limit background noise from TVs, radios and podcasts that might disrupt a child's attention.

Make sure other family members at home are aware of the school environment you have created. When people come in and out of rooms it can be difficult for children to **flexibly switch** their attention back to the work they were doing. Try using props and signs indicating that school is in session or that there is quiet reading time to limit the potential distractions caused by other members of the household.

Technology

Remote learning almost always entails the use of technology. Technology like tablets, laptops and phones are an aid in learning, teacher-student communication and access to resources. However, there are plenty of apps, videos and games that are competing for children's attention and make it harder to focus on the work at hand. This can be a good time to work with your child to develop healthy technology habits that help them practice **inhibitory control**.

Rather than flat-out banning certain websites and applications, it helps to work with your child to promote the habits they will need to develop in order to have a healthy relationship with technology. As mentioned previously, having set times throughout the day when children can use their phones, contact friends and check social media will allow for predictable technology use throughout the day.

Work *with* your child to discuss time management and technology management apps. Programs, like SelfControl (For MacOS), can restrict access to certain websites and applications for a certain duration of time and are "impossible" to circumvent. While these apps can be useful, they can also create an oppositional relationship between you and your child. Rather than engaging in these apps unilaterally, come up with

agreements through discussions with your child on whether they want to use these types of apps, and when they think is the most appropriate time to use them. Starting with screen-time monitoring apps, like Moment, can help start the conversation about appropriate and inappropriate screen time. Be sure to talk about your own relationship to technology and the challenges you face. For example, "Sometimes I also find it hard to focus and like to look at my phone while in meetings, but whenever I do this, I miss important information and sometimes forget what was being talked about."

During remote learning, distance between students and their teachers can be difficult for children's emerging **social cognition skills.** The development of social cognition, or how we reason about others in social situations, relies on verbal as well as nonverbal messages from others. When interacting over video and voice chats, a lot of this messaging is lost, making it harder for children (and adults!) to process all the social information necessary. Be mindful of these limitations and help scaffold your child's digital interactions. Ask your child: "What was different when we talked on video and when we talked in person? Was there anything that was harder to understand?"

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 think about how to come up with strategies to address that fear later.

Answer questions and correct misinformation. There are likely many questions that you and your children have about the COVID-19 virus. It is important to talk about questions and concerns your child may have in an age appropriate way. Your primary resource for the COVID-19 virus should be the Center for Disease Control. For local information, including state efforts to combat the pandemic, refer to your local department of health (e.g., Minnesota Department of Health). With this information in hand, have daily conversations with your child about what their questions are regarding the disease. First and foremost, reassure your child that they are safe and that you, as a family, are doing all you can to make sure that you stay safe. Answer questions and address misinformation that children might have, reassure them that doctors around the world are doing their best to make sure that everyone is healthy.

Work with your child to develop an action plan. Children are often more distressed if there is a passive and unsure response to a crisis than if there are concrete actions that they can take along with you to help. Consider developing expansive hygiene routines and giving your child a role in the task. For example, "Your job is to use the cleaning wipes on every door handle in the house," "Can you walk us through the checklist to see if we've cleaned everything that we need to?" or, "What song should we sing today to make sure we clean our hands for 20 seconds?"

See: Working with Preschoolers at Home here!

Stay tuned for tips for adolescents!

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