Strategies for managing distance learning

Over the past few weeks, we have heard from many of you how stressful managing school with your child has been. We wanted to take this opportunity to let you know you are not alone! Let this letter serve as a guided recommendation to navigating the school transitions during this time of COVID 19. And more specifically this letter is intended to bring some practical guidance for families and educators who are trying to complete distance education with children who have difficulties with self-regulation and deficits in executive functioning (organization, planning, maintaining focus and concentration).

We hope that it might be helpful for you if we articulate some of the reasons that distance learning for children who have experienced trauma can be extra difficult. In this we hope you will be encouraged in knowing that these struggles with school are not your fault and they are not your child’s fault. We are ALL traveling through uncharted territory right now, schools and families alike. We would like to leave you with a few hopefully helpful tips in how to navigate distance learning with children who have experienced trauma/abandonment or attachment concerns.

There are four main reasons why distance learning is extra hard for our kids.

1. Before COVID-19 our children’s “engines” were already running higher than the average teen. They typically suffered from higher levels of anxiety and dysregulation than a teen that has not experienced trauma/abandonment or attachment concerns. Add to that a global pandemic and isolation, then to top things off, ask them to learn how to do school in an entirely different format. This is A LOT for our children to adjust to in a very short period of time.

2. For many children that have experienced trauma and attachment issues, their brains have developed differently. Often times the “downstairs brain” or more reactive functions of the brain have over developed, while the “upstairs brain” including the frontal lobe does not develop as quickly. This area of the brain controls Executive Functioning capabilities. Distance learning and online school requires a lot of executive functioning, leaving our children struggling to know how to follow all of the instructions, and left feeling very frustrated.

3. Children that have experienced trauma and/or abandonment struggle with attachment. As parents it is our responsibility to be working towards building a safe and trusting relationship with our children. To play the role of teacher can add a lot of stress to that relationship. For a child that struggles with attachment, their relationship with their caregiver is more fragile than their relationship with a teacher. Where a child may not lash out at their teacher when they are struggling or frustrated, they likely will lash out at you when they are having a hard time with school. You are now having to keep them on track and correct them if they make a mistake on their assignments. Where these corrections for kids with healthy attachment may be fine, for those who struggle with attachment, it can stir feelings of shame and rejection.

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4. For many of our families, electronic devices were a struggle before online school even began. For attachment disrupted youth there is a pattern of linking and bonding with a device that can be a significant challenge.

We list these challenges not to discourage you, but to encourage you that the added stress you are feeling around school is not a reflection of your parenting or patience, or of your child’s academic abilities or intelligence. We are working with many youth who have expressed feeling stupid when they try to do online school, and in turn are avoiding it all together. We hope this information will also be an encouragement to them to press on, to be in communication with their teachers and schools as to why they are struggling.

We would like to leave you with some practical tips to use at home and to communicate to your schools to help our children succeed during this time.

1. **Because their “engines” are running higher, make sure that you are providing tools to help your child regulate throughout the day.** Examples could include:
   
   a. Provide structure to the day so that their time is as predictable as possible.
   
   b. Make sure they are staying hydrated and eating regular healthy snacks, especially protein rich snacks. *Many school districts are providing free meals to students during this time. Please reach out to your clinic if you need help accessing these resources*
   
   c. Attend to sensory needs. Offer fidget spinners, stress balls, have them do their school work on a stress ball. Chewing gum and suckers can also be great regulators.
   
   d. Take movement breaks.
   
   e. Encourage use of deep breathing and mindfulness exercises before, during and after school.

2. **When a child struggles with Executive Functioning, it can affect the way they process directions.**
   
   a. Work with their teachers on trying to provide as clear and concise directions as possible. Too many directions with too many details can be overwhelming.
   
   b. If possible print out their assignments, and highlight key instructions.
   
   c. Communicate with their teachers where they are struggling, ask for more 1 on 1 support.
   
   d. If the work load is overwhelming, ask teachers to pair it down. Suggest grouping work into “Must do” “Should do” and “Can do” assignments.

It is ok for your child to complete the minimum amount of school work right now. The priority is for your child to feel confident about their school work, not the volume of school work they are completing.
3. How to continue to work towards positive attachment during distance learning...
   a. If it comes down to should I “connect” with my child or “correct,” choose connect. If you have to correct, make sure it is sandwiched with connecting statements or actions.
   b. Make sure the message you are communicating to your child is, “My relationship with you means more to me than your achievement in school.”
   c. Talk to your school. If your school is struggling to understand attachment concerns, please reach out to our office and we would love to help communicate with them.
   d. Utilize any family or friends that may have extra time to go over school work with your child via video conferencing or phone. Having someone help with challenging subjects that is not a primary attachment figure can make a huge difference.

4. Devices. If your child is using a device provided by their school, make sure that you are communicating with their school any concerns you may have. Your school should take responsibility to make sure your children are protected from dangerous material on those devices and put safe guards in place. However, continue to be diligent in monitoring them. If the devices are causing too much conflict, work with your school to see if you can use a device at home you feel comfortable with.

   Please know that we are here for you during this difficult time. Let us know how we can advocate for you and your children if they are struggling with school.