How to Help Your Child with Screen Anxiety in Distance Learning

I'm writing this morning on a topic that many of us are facing as we work to transition our children and teens into virtual learning environments during the pandemic. Screen anxiety shows up in children and teens when they resist, avoid, or shut down in the face of demands to participate in asynchronous and especially synchronous instruction during distance learning.

As a family therapist in Washington, D.C. and nearby Bethesda, MD, I have been treating many families with children who crashed and burned when virtual learning was introduced last spring. As a mom, I experienced it first hand at home. We all might have experienced the introduction of distance learning in different ways–some of us had no exposure in the first month of COVID and then were expected to get our kids online for video classes and live calls; others may have had live classes from the start after a week or two of spring break; and others of us might have been offered a hybrid of live classes, video instruction, packet learning, online learning tools, and interactive group projects to complete through the computer or independently. Yet, all of our children were quickly isolated at home, removed from their regular learning environments, distanced from their friends, deprived of social motivation and in-person connected learning from teachers and classmates, and traveling on a somewhat chaotic, uncertain path of learning.

Many children did fairly well with less than ideal learning circumstances. Most children/teens struggled a bit, and some suffered mightily especially school-aged kids. Despite the hard work of dedicated teachers and loving, committed parents, the problems that occurred were vast. I've heard countless stories.

My child refused after day #1! ~My son wouldn't do anything other than online learning games.~ My child cried and screamed whenever asked to be on camera.~My child would always stay on mute.~My daughter learned nothing. ~My kid needed 100% one-on-one support throughout the entire school day, and therefore I couldn't work at all.

And now, here we are in September and we are being asked to continue virtual schooling indefinitely. Kids are discouraged, parents are tired and teachers are trying. Yet, I think we have all learned some things from last spring. I know that

I've spent the summer working on the systems that I will use to help my family with distance learning and coping in the midst of COVID. My colleague and friend, Ann Dolin, who is the Executive Director and Founder of Educational Connections, worked tirelessly over the summer to develop specialized tutoring and support programs to help families manage during this crisis (https://ectutoring.com).

And, as a family therapy practice treating hundreds of families weekly, our team has gathered some tips and suggestions from our lessons learned from COVID distance learning last year.

1. **This is not a one size fits all method.** Please realize that distance learning in this manner and for lengthy periods of time especially for school-aged children is not developmentally appropriate. Under normal circumstances, teaching professionals would not support this model. Teachers are working hard to offer the best version of learning through online experiences, yet it will have some problems.
2. **Be kind and flexible with your child and yourself.** Every child and family is different. There are no absolutes in what will or what won't work. Commit to a schedule and plan, and be willing to flex it regularly.
3. **Communicate with your teacher about what your specific goals and plans are for your child.** Send your child's teacher an email with the following information–how distance learning went for your child last year, and what your goals are for your child with distance learning this year (i.e stay on camera, participate in live classes more and more, raise their hand on the camera, listen off-screen and on the mic until more comfortable, etc.)
4. **Create a good learning space.** Have a separate desk for your child. Ideally, set up their own laptop, headphones with a good mic, and a wireless mouse. Work on a cleared desk. Use a whiteboard for the daily schedule. Have a separate folder with printouts. Have a box or drawer of good fidgets.
5. **Prepare for siblings learning together.** Consider having break-out learning spaces for other siblings so they can work together and apart when needed. Use headsets for kids to minimize distractions. Separate desks at least arm lengths apart if you can. Designate a parent/person for certain blocks of the school day, or hire a childcare provider to help facilitate distance learning while you work.
6. **Buy back to school supplies to get prepared/excited.** Help your kids get excited by buying some school supplies and setting up their work space. Everyone loves new notebooks and pens! Get something fun like

erasable highlighters or a new wireless mouse, fun gel pens, and composition notebooks with cool designs.

7. **Try to start the same way daily.** For the first couple of weeks, try to develop a routine. Have the same point-person start the day if you can. Try to have a routine and a fun outing daily to do during lunch break/recess (i.e. walk the dog, run a fun errand, etc).

8. **Follow the learning schedule flexibly.** Write out the schedule daily on a dry erase board. Cross off each class and task when your child completes it. If your child is overwhelmed by how long the day looks, break down the schedule into morning and afternoon and only write out half the day at first. Let your child take body breaks when needed.

9. **Start with realistic and customized goals for your child.** If s/he is scared of being on-screen with his or her mic on, s/he can participate off-screen and off-mic at first. Just be sure to tell his/her teacher that is your plan and that you are working with your child to increase their comfort. Then gradually add a feature–turn on the mic, or turn on the screen during fun activities, help your child respond in chat, or raise their hand virtually, etc.

10. **Ask your teacher not to call out or on your child at first** if you are worried that they will become too anxious or meltdown. Advocate for your child's feelings while still expecting them to grow in becoming more comfortable on screen. Expose them to other less threatening virtual interactions (i.e. zoom calls grandparents regularly, interactive apps or facetime with friends, etc).

11. **Create a ladder.** Write out with your child their fears or resistance about being in a virtual class. 10 is the scariest and 0 is all ok. Help them think about instances that might make them anxious and write them down and rate them *(i.e. Being called on in class. Having my teacher ask me to respond on mic. Getting the answer wrong in the chat. Having everyone see my face on the screen. Having to look at everyone's faces all at once on-screen.)* Try to build a list of coping strategies for each level of concern.

12. **Be willing to accommodate and adjust your child's learning experience.** If your child is fearful or averse to looking at everyone fully in the face on-screen, you can have him/her sit to the side and just listen to class at first, doodle, or play with a fidget rather than focus on the screen images. You also can have them minimize the zoom window so they don't see everyone, or they can hide their image.

13. **Expose them gradually, kindly, and steadily to new screen skills.** Start at the bottom of their ladder and pick a strategy that they can use that day that helps them get more and more comfortable with working on-screen. Pair that new skill with a relaxing activity or coping skill. For instance, they might take a screen break or "shake it off" after showing up on-screen for 5-10timed minutes. Or they could play with thinking putty

while they are off-screen but on-mic and answering questions. We are working towards progress, not perfection!

14.   **Recognize that they are learning a multitude of skills at once which could cause information and emotional overload.** Most school-aged kids don't have typing skills. Some may not have any computer skills. So trying to learn math, while using OneNote, and typing their answers while also talking and listening and watching on-screen may just be too much, right!?! Have paper and pencils ready to replace OneNote if needed and type their answers for them. Consider practicing a typing program as it makes sense.

15.   **Emphasize, empathize, empathize–And Still Return Certain Standards.** When your child complains, share in those feelings…"This IS awful!" Match their emotion and intensity and then return to a calm voice if you can. Don't forget to return to certain goals and standards (even if just silently to yourself in that moment) and consistently ask them to participate. If we give up, we teach our kids that they can't do hard things and that we can't help them overcome difficult tasks. Don't pressure, yet do be kind and firm.

Look: what we are doing as parents is really really challenging—working, teaching, coping with chronic stress, and uncertainty. It actually can feel impossible and insurmountable in the moment. Yet, we can do hard things for the sake of our kids. We just have to keep them in mind as we flex and work. Don't forget to start by acknowledging and appreciating yourself each morning. You make your home run, and get to bring joy or angst into the day. Try to acknowledge the worry that you wake up with, honor it, and then calm yourself for a minute. Then, if you can, try to consciously choose how you want to feel with your child that day. Try to imagine the relationship that you want to create (even when it isn't playing out that way at that exact moment) when faced with too much adversity in your school day. If your child is resisting or avoiding, take a minute to reconnect with them through a 5-minute break that is light and easy and then start again. And, if you find you need additional help, give yourself that help.