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Virtual Learning Anxiety: How to Help Your Kids

Practical parenting tips you can use to make virtual school a bit better

The challenges of virtual learning are enough to make even the calmest kids (and parents) lose their minds.

It's time for virtual class, but your kid can't find his login information. Or he spends an hour on an assignment only to have it disappear into cyberspace. (Seriously?) Tears and yelling may be the first reaction, but there are better ways to cope — and even succeed — with virtual learning.

Clinical psychologist Kate Eshleman, PsyD, who cares for children and adolescents, has some advice that can help when virtual learning launches your child's anxiety levels through the roof.

1. Find your calm zone

"Do everything you can to stay calm when a crisis happens," says Dr. Eshleman. "It's natural for parents to get upset when their child is upset. But you can't help your child when you're not calm, and it can make the situation worse."

Staying calm doesn't mean glossing over the issue and gritting your teeth in a fake smile. "Acknowledge and validate your child's feelings in a calm voice," Dr. Eshleman says. You can say:

- "I know how upsetting this is. We're going to figure it out."

- "It looks like you're feeling frustrated/angry/sad. Let's see what I can do to help you."

"It's easy to become frustrated with virtual learning," Dr. Eshleman says. "The situation is not your child's fault, so try not to take your frustration out on them. They didn't choose this situation and can't help if they're struggling with it."

This is hard to do in the moment, so think ahead. What are some ways you can react when virtual learning is not going well?

"Parents can model good coping skills when they become frustrated, and kids will learn from them," Dr. Eshleman says. "Instead of yelling, take a few deep breaths. Step out of the room for a minute. It's not easy, but it's a valuable skill that helps you and your kids."

2. Tackle the problem

After you've calmly validated their feelings, address whatever caused the outburst. "Talk about the problem and work through it together," says Dr. Eshleman.

Discuss steps you or your child can take. This may include talking to the teacher about the vanishing assignment or searching for their login information. Maybe they can ask friends, teachers or school contacts for help.

3. Plan ahead

Brainstorm ways to prevent future mishaps with virtual learning. Involve your child in the process. Planning can help them feel calmer and in control. Consider these prevention strategies:

- Save a backup file of big projects or take a picture before sending them.

- Create a daily schedule with login information for each class.

- Set alarms for class start times, breaks or other important times.

- Keep a list of each teacher's name and contact info handy.

Being proactive can help you avoid (some of) the annoyances that push all the anxiety buttons in your household.

4. Understand that webcams can cause anxiety

Does your kid avoid virtual meetings or get cranky when it's time for class? Some kids get anxious or self-conscious when they see themselves on a video call. This can interfere with their learning as well as their mental health.

"I hear about this problem a lot," says Dr. Eshleman. "First, try to find out what makes them anxious. Is it their room in the background? Set up the call in another room. Are they self-conscious about their appearance? Help them get up earlier, so they have plenty of time to get dressed, do their hair and get ready."

In some cases, you can ask the teacher if your child can attend class without the camera on. If this can't happen, talk with your kid about how to deal with webcam-phobia.

"We all think everyone is looking at us, but this isn't the case," says Dr. Eshleman. "Tell them you know it feels uncomfortable, but others aren't staring at them. Their classmates are focused on their own appearance, too."

5. Avoid toxic positivity

Managing anxiety does not mean having a fake, Susie Sunshine attitude.

"Toxic positivity is when we pretend everything is great even when it's not," Dr. Eshleman says. "It doesn't allow us space to express frustration, anger or sadness. We don't want to teach our kids that we don't have thoughts or feelings. We need to identify and label our feelings and express them in healthy ways."

In other words, you don't have to pretend that a pandemic is easy-peasy. That's a relief.

Anxiety and depression signs in kids

The coronavirus has been a nightmarish crash course in dealing with stress. But sometimes, stress is something more. These signs could mean your child needs medical care for depression, anxiety or another health concern:

- Sleeping more or less than usual.

- Not eating enough or eating too much.

- Getting upset when a parent leaves (separation anxiety).

- Loss of interest in activities or friends.

- Ongoing health problems like stomachaches, nausea or headaches.

- Episodes of dizziness, trouble breathing, shakiness or sweating.

If you think your child might need mental health care, don't wait. Mental health issues don't go away on their own. Talk with your child's pediatrician or contact your school. Some schools have resources like a school counselor or psychologist who can help.

Forget mistakes and keep trying

Staying calm during a virtual learning catastrophe is easier said than done. But like any skill, you need to practice. It will get easier over time. Yes, you'll still have bad days, but they'll happen less often. When they do, put them behind you and try again tomorrow.

And — here's the best part — you can use these stellar calming skills in other areas of your life, long after this pandemic is over.