

5 THINGS TO REMEMBER AS DISTANCE LEARNING BEGINS

“Unprecedented” seems to be the word used most to describe this time we are currently living in. The word means never done or known before, which is also an accurate way to describe the type of teaching and learning many of us are about to start (or have already begun). There are a lot of unknowns in the world right now, and many new things we are trying to do in order to create some semblance of our world as we knew it just a few weeks ago. Living through times of uncertainty is challenging, and there seem to be layers of uncertainty and change attached to the Coronavirus pandemic. Interfaith chaplain and trauma counselor Terri Daniel says in NPR’s article, “Coronavirus Has Upended Our World. It’s OK To Grieve,” that in order to cope with these times, “it’s important to acknowledge and grieve lost routines, social connections, family structures and our sense of security—and then create new ways to move forward.”¹ As teachers and leaders of our classrooms, we are tasked with creating these new ways to move forward. So, as you forge a path for you and your students, consider these tips for providing productive learning opportunities while also making room for processing difficult emotions.

1. Establish (or Modify Current) Routines

We know that children (and most adults) appreciate structure or routine in their day. This helps kids regulate themselves, and it gives them clear expectations of their behavior, and predictability for what is to come.² We set these routines in the classroom every year, and they are just as important with distance learning. They may even be particularly imperative now, as the American Psychological Association (APA) says one way to cope with times of uncertainty is to establish routines, which provide comfort and structure.³ The world is unpredictable, but you can give your students some solace with the predictability of your routines.

For example, have students start each day with the same question or with the same type of communication or assignment. Did you have morning meeting in your classroom? Use a digital tool to allow students to share and continue to build relationships with each other. Set a weekly virtual office hours schedule and stick to it. If possible, have students continue to use tools they were using in school, and use specific tools for the same subjects.

2. Teach Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

More explicit teaching of SEL has been gaining momentum in schools in recent years, which according to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL’s, website is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”⁴ This is a challenging time for us all, and we know that challenges can also provide us with learning opportunities. Use this time to teach SEL to help your students get through it. Giving students time to process some of their emotions through writing can assist in teaching SEL. Using literature to teach SEL also works well, and more information and a [list of books can be found here](#).



¹ O’Neill, Stephanie. “Coronavirus Has Upended Our World. It’s OK To Grieve.” *NPR.Org*, 26 Mar. 2020, [npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/26/820304899/coronavirus-has-upended-our-world-its-ok-to-grieve](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/26/820304899/coronavirus-has-upended-our-world-its-ok-to-grieve).

² Melbourne Child Psychology & School Psychology Services. *The Importance of Routine in Childhood*. melbournechildpsychology.com.au/blog/the-importance-of-routine-in-childhood/.

³ “The Great Unknown: 10 Tips for Dealing With the Stress of Uncertainty.” <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-uncertainty>, Oct. 2019, [apa.org/helpcenter/stress-uncertainty](https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-uncertainty).

⁴ “15 Activities for Teaching CASEL Core Competencies | Waterford.Org.” *Waterford.Org*, 18 Dec. 2018, [waterford.org/education/15-activities-for-teaching-casel-core-competencies](https://www.waterford.org/education/15-activities-for-teaching-casel-core-competencies).

3. Focus on Relationships

Your students need relationships with peers and their teachers right now. This is one thing they are no doubt missing already. Those little social interactions they had throughout the day are no longer possible, so give your students ways to connect with you and with their peers. We know that this helps our students be more connected as “socially interactive learners are engaged learners.”⁵ In addition, in order to prepare our students for the twenty-first-century workforce, they need to develop collaboration and critical thinking skills, which are nurtured through relationships and interaction.⁶ There are many ways teachers can connect students including Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, or even email. Flipgrid is another good way for students to be able to connect with each other. Whatever method you choose, work to intentionally weave in social interactions throughout their learning.

4. Less is More

Parents are working and parenting (often simultaneously) from home. Some children are providing childcare for their siblings. Siblings may be sharing devices, desks, and other materials. We are all getting used to this new way of living. So, give students and yourself time to adjust. Think of this time like the beginning of the school year, because it truly is the beginning of a new type of school year. Focus on fewer tasks, more simplified processes, and high-quality content. Your students and parents will appreciate it. When you do start distance teaching and learning, begin with some review of concepts and some community building exercises.⁷ Your students need things that feel familiar to them right now and this content will help.



5. Address Concerns and Have Patience (For Yourself and Your Students)

Families are worried, and kids can feel that. Students likely have a lot of questions and some concerns right now. Address these by asking them what they know. Work to make sure they feel heard and that their feelings are validated. Be sure to clarify any misinformation they may have heard. Communicate clearly and at their level. Give them the time to ask you questions.⁸ Remind them of all the things in their control that they can help with, like washing their hands and maintaining social distancing.⁹ This will help students to feel a bit safer and hopefully, more ready to learn.

⁵ Hurst, B., Wallace, R., & Nixon, S. B. (2013). The Impact of Social Interaction on Student Learning. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 52 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol52/iss4/5.

⁶ Stauffer, Bri. *What Are 21st Century Skills?* 19 Mar. 2020, aeseeducation.com/blog/what-are-21st-century-skills.

⁷ Thomas, John. “How to Support Home Learning in Elementary Grades.” *Edutopia*, 17 Mar. 2020, edutopia.org/article/how-support-home-learning-early-elementary.

⁸ “Talking With Children About Coronavirus.” *Fred Rogers Center*, fredrogerscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FRC-COVID19-Response.pdf. Accessed 26 Mar. 2020.

⁹ “Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).” *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 1 Mar. 2020, https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf.