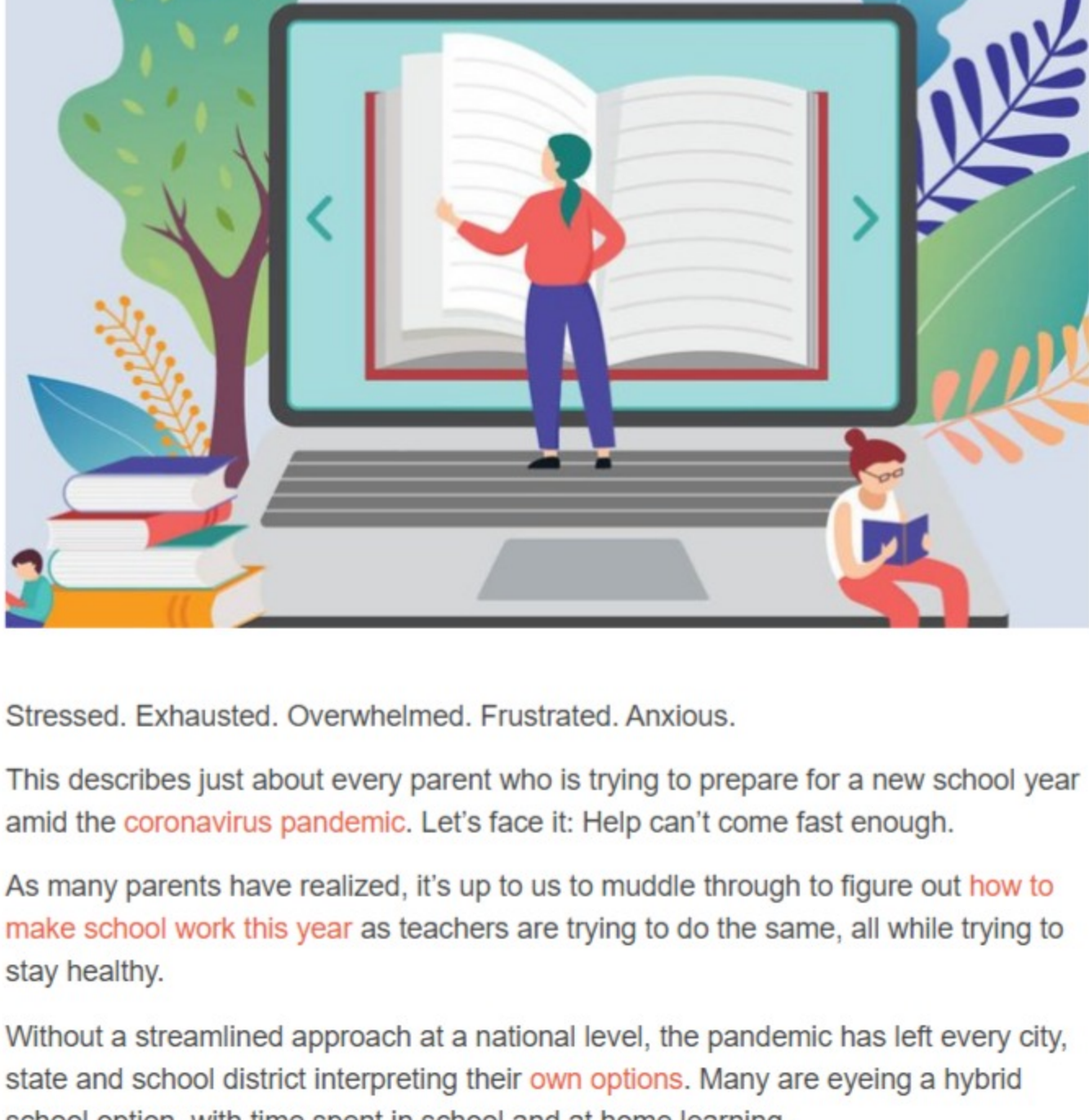


# A Parent's Guide to School Online

by Dawn Reiss



Stressed. Exhausted. Overwhelmed. Frustrated. Anxious.

This describes just about every parent who is trying to prepare for a new school year amid the **coronavirus pandemic**. Let's face it: Help can't come fast enough.

As many parents have realized, it's up to us to muddle through to figure out **how to make school work this year** as teachers are trying to do the same, all while trying to stay healthy.

Without a streamlined approach at a national level, the pandemic has left every city, state and school district interpreting their **own options**. Many are eyeing a hybrid school option, with time spent in school and at home learning.

That's not something any parent wants to face, particularly working parents, but it's our new reality.

**RELATED:** [How to Find an Online Learning Style That Fits Your Child's Personality](#)

Blagica Stefanovski Bottigliero, a Chicago-turned-Michigan mom of two and a first-generation immigrant with Macedonian heritage, has seen the impact with her children, Liljana "Lily," 10, and Nikola "Niko," 7.

"I think all parents were kind of set back with how many applications, logins and passwords were thrown at us," she says.

It took the pandemic for Bottigliero, who is in the process moving to the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe to be closer to her parents, to realize the **learning styles** of her children in a digital environment.

"I started to see myself in my daughter," Bottigliero says. "My daughter and I are very similar learners, in how we take in content and how we get distracted. I quickly realized no parent-teacher conference could have prepared me for seeing how she really learned until the pandemic."

Then Bottigliero watched her son get anxious, frustrated and angry after trying to compete against a timed "beat-the-teacher" digital math program. It was an epiphany moment.

"I'm not saying it's the fault of the teachers, but we realized we needed to take more control to supplement how they're learning," she says. "The pandemic and at-home e-learning really opened my husband's and my eyes to what else we wanted to add to our children's lives."

## Reconfigure your living space

Both of Bottigliero's children began the pandemic by doing their work on the dining room table.

"We kicked ourselves for doing that," Bottigliero says. "Psychologically that didn't work."

Both children have desks in their bedrooms, but Bottigliero and her husband felt they needed to be near their children to help supervise their work.

"The way these apps were working, if our children were left unattended, there was so much frustration that ensued," says Bottigliero, who advises other parents to reconfigure their home to put the children's desks in a corner of a common area.

Have students participate in picking a learning space, says Davora Sides, co-owner of **Childrens Lighthouse**, a learning center. "You want it to be somewhere they feel comfortable and somewhere it feels like their own so they can decorate it."

## Minimize distractions

Set up the at-home learning space to minimize visual distractions, says Avivit Ben-Aharon, the founder and clinical director of **Great Speech**, a national online speech therapy company. And be mindful of background noise that may require students to wear noise-canceling headphones.

"A lot of parents like to have their kids in the kitchen, while they're cooking and keeping an eye on them, but you're hearing pots and pans, and drawers opening and closing and that sets a tone, that this is not a quiet, serious time," she says.

If studying in the kitchen is a necessity, Ben-Aharon suggests putting kids in a corner not facing the kitchen to minimize distractions.

"Regardless of the age, don't send a child into their room with their device connected to the internet," says JD Pirtle, founder of Depth and Light, an education consultancy that helps schools build curriculum for technology tools. "That's asking a lot of a kid not to get distracted."

## Get organized

Before school starts, create a cheat sheet with all of the login information. Organize it by listing the name of the website, the web address with the user and login information, says Carl Hooker, an educational consultant and public speaker.

Parents should prompt the teachers for that information by asking, "Is there's anything my child needs access to? If so, do you mind sending that forward?"

"It will save hours of headaches on the backend," says Hooker, the father of three girls.

James Conley, a high school AP history teacher, suggests parents learn their school's Learning Management System such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom or Schoology. Then teach your child how to log in.

When school starts, keep cell phones away from students while they are learning.

"Phones are the death of learning," Conley says. "Phones are not allowed in most classrooms and that needs to take place at home as well. It needs to be non-negotiable even if that means taking phones away."

Pirtle recommends students get a paper planner and calendar to write down tasks that can be easily transported in hybrid learning situations between school and home.

The physical act of writing information can help with learning, he says. Both of his sons, Caspian, 13, and Hawkeye, 15, have their own whiteboards to brainstorm ideas with pieces of paper and Post-It notes by their desks.

For digital notes, Pirtle's oldest son uses **Google Keep** and his younger son uses **Microsoft OneNote**.

Pirtle also recommends **Trello**, a free program that creates visual boards with informational cards that can easily be dragged and dropped to track projects.

"Parents can collaborate with their children using a Trello board and work together," Pirtle says.

Conley is a fan of **Padlet**, a free program that allows virtual collaboration to create visual charts, maps and other interactive projects.

## Be vocal about needing digital access

If there's an issue with getting access to digital tools, Conley recommends contacting the teacher directly.

"The biggest challenge for about 10 percent of our kids was they didn't have internet," Conley says.

To help these students, Conley's school worked with AT&T to offer Internet access for \$10 a month or free hot spots for students who couldn't afford it, he says.

## Amp up your Wi-Fi

To avoid hitting dead zones, consider adding in a Wi-Fi repeater, an inexpensive plug-into-the-wall device that will repeat the Wi-Fi signal. A more expensive newer option is to get a mesh system, a network of radio nodes that broadcast Wi-Fi for a stronger connection.

Running multiple programs like Zoom, Google Classroom with Google Docs or YouTube is heavy on resources. Check your download and upload speeds for free on SpeedTest.net, Pirtle says.

If possible, have one person use a hardwired coaxial cable to unburden some of the Wi-Fi signal use.

"Think of using Wi-Fi like a pizza," Pirtle says. "You can divide it into as many pieces as you want, but each person gets a smaller piece."

## Review your devices

The type of device is less important than mirroring the technology the teacher is using, Pirtle says.

Still, it's important to think about the age of your children. "The keyboard is tough for children third grade and below," Pirtle says. A tablet might be more ideal for younger learners.

He also encourages students fifth grade and older to use a mouse and also likes Chromebooks as an affordable laptop option.

Regardless of age, Ben-Aharon thinks a laptop or desktop is more beneficial for most students, because iPads have small screens that are harder to share.

## Create a consistent schedule, build in breaks

When the pandemic started, Bottigliero, a marketing consultant, and her husband Michael, founder and chief sommelier of Bottles Nation, an online wine tasting company, began split-shifting their days to help monitor the children's school work.

At first, they each would pick a subject for their children to learn, take a break and then pick a new subject. "But we realized that didn't work," she says.

Instead, they gave their children more ownership, a list of schoolwork tasks they needed accomplish and allowed them to choose the order.

Most school days began at 9 a.m. with an incentivized directive: Finish as much as you can by lunch and then you can enjoy a fun activity in the afternoon such as doing an art project or going outside.

"That was important," she says. "Our children were able to accomplish their tasks in a short amount of time if we kept them focused. If anything was leftover unfinished, we'd do it the next day. A whole day of academics didn't work for us."

## Get sleep, set goals

During the pandemic, many parents drifted away from consistent bedtimes and schedules for their children. Conley says many of his students logged in to do work at 1 a.m.

"That's really disruptive," Conley says. "As much as possible get your kids on a consistent sleep schedule and make them stick to it."

To help students get focused Conley suggests parents start school with a goal-setting "I can do" statement for a preferred task. Then check in with them throughout the day to review the goals.

## Set up consequences and rewards

"I often hear parents say, if my kid doesn't behave, I'll just take away their laptop or iPad," says Ben-Aharon. "I have to remind parents that in today's digital learning world, that's not such a great option because you're taking away learning opportunities."

Instead, set expectations prior to learning and lay out the consequences if children don't follow through.

"Come up with consequences, but involved the kids," Ben-Aharon says.

That could mean taking away TV time, which is different than computer time, free play or anything else a child would find motivating, she says.

She suggests parents always offer at least four or five things that will be rewarding to the child before mentioning the consequence if a negative behavior occurs.

"If you do this, these are all the great things that are going to happen," she says. "And by the way, if you don't do these things, this is what is ultimately going to happen. Kids respond really well to more reinforcement than punitive."

For older kids, the conversation can include reminders about what doing a task means for their ability to participate in after-school activities and long-term goals.

"You have to be creative, know your kid and be flexible," Ben-Aharon says. "Remind them what is relevant to them and know every few weeks you're going to need to reshuffle. You can't just say 'This is how we are going to do it from now until December' without revisiting it at least a couple of times."

## Supplement learning

Not all online learning tools work for all students. Think about how your child learns.

For his high school students, Conley tries to "gamify" learning as much as possible with online quiz programs like **Kahoot!** and **Gimkit**. He's also a fan of **Heimler's History** channel on YouTube for anyone who is in an AP History class and the **Crash Course**, which offers a variety of free AP-centric educational videos ranging from business and entrepreneurship to astronomy, history and biology. Or view science videos by Bill Nye the Science Guy.

**Khan Academy** offers free online learning and parents can download daily schedules for students ages 2-18 that offers suggestions on activities to help plan out a day.

Bottigliero's children spend 20 minutes a day on **Duolingo**, a free online program to learn French, sometimes supplemented with Italian or Spanish lessons. Her daughter also took virtual learn-to-code classes on **Codeverse** geared towards kids ages 6-13.

Parents can also go on **Teachers Pay Teachers**, a website that sells learning tools that can be sorted by grade and subject level from Pre-K up to 12th grade.

## Create your own learning bubble

Parents have been creating "playdate bubbles" with households they feel comfortable having their kids visit. Consider creating a remote school club bubble to help with digital learning, Bottigliero says.

Review local Facebook parenting groups to help compare about what other parents, neighborhoods and districts are doing, Bottigliero says.

"The Facebook group world is still very powerful and how the decisions are made about the 'word of mouth' recommendations from mom-to-mom," she says. "More than ever, this pandemic has taught me I need to rely on my community and my family."

## Communicate to your children's teachers

Before school starts, first grade teacher Michelle Gunderson, suggests parents should set up an interview with their child's teacher.

Take the Head Start approach, she says. Discuss: What is your child's preferred learning style? What does discipline look like in your house?

Learn the teacher's email, Conley suggests. Send questions frequently, he says, but recognize that teachers are being bombarded with emails so unlike a business setting where a quick response is expected, expect a lag time unless it's a very urgent situation.

If everything is going OK, consider doing a quick email check-in to say: "How is my student doing?" no more than once a week, Conley says.

## Teach children online etiquette

Especially for younger learners, it can be hard to learn online etiquette.

Practice muting and unmuting the microphone so children are more prepared for **digital learning**. Same goes for learning to raise hands and not interrupting others when talking.

It's also important for children to learn how to video chat in frame. Gunderson did this by having her students hold up a drawing. She then coached each student how to move into view of the camera with verbiage such as "Look at your thumbnail, look where it is, you have to move it over."

"They got pretty good at it, but they did need to be taught how to do it," she says.

Gunderson also likes her children to use the chat box function so they can respond to questions without interrupting her teaching.

Parents also need to be aware of walking in and out of camera view.

"I did see a dad in his underwear," Gunderson says with a laugh. "He was wearing boxers, thank goodness. But be mindful of what people see."

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