Successful Remote Learning On A Budget - What Parents Need To Think About When Kids Are At Home

December 13, 2020 - If your child's school is closed due to COVID19, there is a pretty good chance that their entire learning experience is based on a classroom experience centered around Zoom or some other video platform. And if you aren't happy with the results of this, you're not alone. Many parents and students are complaining that they aren't learning like they do when they're in class. But there are ways to improve the experience for both you and your child. Here are some things to keep in mind.

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How is your child setup at home?

If you're child is sitting on his bed with a laptop computer, or sitting at the kitchen table while you bake and talk on the phone, it really isn't any wonder that he isn't getting the same level of education that he does when in school.

In a school environment he'd be sitting at a desk, likely taking notes and without too many outside distractions. That's the same environment you should be trying to create at home.

We realize that not every child has his or her own room, but that doesn't alter the fact that you need to create a place that is setup specifically for each child's school experience. That means having a desk or some other sort of close approximation. If you're worried about what that might cost, keep reading because we're going to give you some ideas about ways to create the right experience without breaking the budget.

Many kids are also complaining that even with a computer at a desk, they still have to toggle back and forth between their teacher and example material being shared with the class. The issue here is that if they toggle at the wrong time, they can miss things. It also requires them to take their minds off of what they are learning and focus on computer operation. A simple fix to this is using a second computer monitor; one focused on the teacher and the other focused on the material. Again, there are some inexpensive ways to get your hands on what you need here.

What you are trying to do is create an environment for your child to learn that approximates the in-school experience as closely as you can. That might require some parental sacrifices such as turning off televisions and silencing phones and

other devices. It also means that there shouldn't be people wandering into their "learning space" while they are in school. The only exception to that is if you think your child is goofing off. After all, you wouldn't be able to do that if they were actually in school. Leave the classroom discipline to the teachers.

Creating a learning environment on a budget.

Right about now, there is a very real possibility that while your child is at home stuck in a distance learning environment, you're also stuck at home filling out job applications. Even if that isn't the case, we know that money is likely an issue. If you're trying to setup a good environment for learning, there are some things that you'll need which aren't necessarily inexpensive. But there are ways to get those things without breaking the bank. This includes computer equipment and furnishings. We'll discuss each of these things below.
Getting the computer.

Some schools are using software that runs on Windows platforms, while others use Chrome. Either way, you should be trying to get your child a computer of their own.

The least expensive way to do this is to find a free option. Some school districts are offering parents the equipment they need, or forms of financial assistance. Before you purchase anything, you need to look into that.

If that isn't an option, then consider any older equipment you have laying around. An old computer in a closet may no longer be suitable for business, but it may work just fine for your child. This is true even for slow systems just as long as it works smoothly once it is booted up. The last thing that students need is a system that constantly freezes or needs frequent rebooting.

If you have to purchase equipment, you should be able to purchase a new Chromebook for around $150. If you really want to economize, consider a cheap Android tablet and then pair it with a Bluetooth keyboard. Doing that will pretty well make you a new Chromebook. You can probably do that for $120 or less. Just make sure that if you get a tablet, you also get a protective case for it so that it doesn't get broken if it is dropped.

If you have an old Windows system that works but your child needs a Chromebook, you may not have to purchase new equipment. That's because there are ways to make the Chrome operating system (os) to work on a Windows or Linux PC. HowToGeek has a good article on this that you can find here: https://www.howtogeek.com/217659/how-to-get-a-chrome-os-like-operating-system-on-any-pc/

If you need a Windows system however, there currently isn't an easy way to get it operating on a Chromebook.
Time to economize!

If buying new isn't an option, it may be time to check out stores that sell used equipment (Goodwill, the American Cancer Society Discovery Shop and the Salvation Army come to mind) or jump onto the internet. Sites like Craigslist, Facebook's marketplace, eBay and Nextdoor all offer used equipment. In many cases, the equipment is well taken care of and works just fine. If you are trying to get a second computer monitor (mentioned above) this may be the best way to do it. If you go this route, there are some things that you'll need to do to protect yourself.

First, if you use any of the sites mentioned here - with the exception of eBay - look at the sellers that are local to you. If they are selling their items from home, don't go to their house if you can avoid it (this may not be an option if you are purchasing something like a desk though). Make arrangements to meet them at a neutral location and tell them that you'll want them to demonstrate that the equipment they are selling actually works.

For battery operated devices, that shouldn't be too difficult. But for items that need to be plugged in, it may be a little tougher. Just make sure you find a place to meet that has an accessible plug. I library may be a good option.

If you are purchasing a used printer, make sure that you can also still get ink cartridges or toner for it. The printer may work just fine but it won't do you or your child any good if you can resupply it with ink the next time you need it.

As far as the desk goes, if you can't find one that fits your budget there is a simple alternative. Keeping in mind that "necessity is the mother of all invention," two saw horses and a piece of 3/4 inch plywood will accomplish the same thing. Or instead of the plywood, you may be able to use an old door. You can cut the door or the plywood to fit the space you have.

Once you've created the space, use it!

None of what we've suggested here will do you or your child any good if your child doesn't use the new space you've created. Try to get some buy-in before you create the space. But if you can't get that buy-in, make sure that once you've setup the space, your child knows that they are expected to use it. The goal is to create a more-successful learning environment within your budget. One that is free from or, at the very least, has a reduced number of distractions.
by Jim Malmberg
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