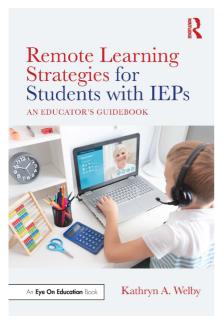
# Remote Learning for Students with IEPs

Tips and Tools to Share with Parents





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 Tips and Tools to Share with Parents



By Kathryn A Welby

from Remote Learning Strategies for Students with IEPs: An Educator's Guidebook

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# 10

## Tips and Tools to Share With Parents

As I round the bottom of the stairs to meet my five-year-old son Jack, I pause and take a few deep breaths. As I have learned over the recent months, Jack feeds off my energy when I work with him. If I am stressed or anxious, so is Jack. If I am impatient or tired, so is Jack. If I am calm and happy, so is Jack.

- Vanessa France, Jack's Mom

As a result of the 2020 global pandemic, caregivers who have children with learning challenges, diagnosed disabilities, and exceptionalities have been asked to do the nearly impossible – teach their children while maintaining their home, multiple children's schooling, and their employment responsibilities. Parents are concerned about the logistics of the task and the fear of their children falling behind academically and missing developmental milestones while losing the life skills necessary for independent living. This chapter will explore a parent's perspective, some available research and survey results, and tricks and tools educators can share with parents.

Throughout the chapters, there was such an emphasis on parental expectations and involvement that I decided to fully understand their obstacles and challenges. Vanessa's story will provide further perspective along with some tools discussed throughout the chapters that can work at home with students.

#### A Parent's Perspective – Vanessa's Story

Vanessa France, a New England Mom and working professional, is trying to continue her career from home while her four young children learn remotely. As you imagine, she is faced with an incredibly daunting feat. Not only is Vanessa overwhelmed with her four children collectively engaged in remote learning, Vanessa's youngest child, Jack (age 5), has autism and has an Individualized Education Program. Like many parents across the county, Vanessa struggles to do it all and has countless concerns about Jack's progress.

At times, as educators, we can get so preoccupied with data collection, schedules, and creating the perfect lesson that we may forget to pause and reflect on the hardship parents are experiencing day to day. To get a glimpse into Vanessa's day, she and I had multiple conversations. Her perspective and insight were so real and powerful that I had to ask for her permission to share her story and perspective.

Here is Vanessa's story.

#### **Jack**

I ran from bedroom to bedroom upstairs to ensure my three older children were logged in to their proper online classes with no issues. I glance at the clock before heading down to log on with my youngest – I have 5 minutes before his virtual Kindergarten class starts and 35 minutes before my first of many conference calls for my job.

As I round the bottom of the stairs to meet my 5-yearold son Jack, I pause and take a few deep breaths. As I have learned over the recent months, Jack feeds off my energy when I work with him. If I am stressed or anxious, so is Jack. If I am impatient or tired, so is Jack. If I am calm and happy, so is lack.

These unprecedented times have certainly put me to the test. Honestly, it has been a struggle to put on a happy face and remain positive for my children, especially for my youngest, lack.

You see, my son Jack has Autism. To say it has been difficult taking on the role of not only his mom during this pandemic but now one of his teachers while virtually learning at home would be a complete understatement.

Jack doesn't learn like your typical student. Jack is on an IEP. The plan is designed specifically for Jack - catered in every way to his specific strengths and weaknesses.

His team of teachers and many specialists, such as an occupational therapist and a speech and language therapist, have been nothing short of incredible the entire time. However, there are a few things I wish I had realized in the beginning when I began working remotely with our son, but I am so very glad I do now as they have made our life less stressful. Here are some essential insights I would love to share with educators from my experiences and perspective. I want educators and other parents to know that it is OK to cross barriers, flexibility is important, and take it one day at a time!

#### **Understandings From a Parent to Educators**

#### 1. Barriers May Be Crossed, and That Is OK

Times are stressful. We are in the middle of a pandemic, and it is exhausting for everyone - parents, teachers, students, and all of us. Sometimes, it is just too difficult to pretend everything is okay and going smoothly.

I remember the first time I lost it on a video call with one of the kid's teachers and broke down in tears. I felt so awkward; I felt I had just crossed a barrier. However, as I tried to hide the tears, I looked up to only realize the teacher was wiping away her own tears. She was a working mom too, and completely related to the stress I was under and felt it herself. At that moment, we were two stressed, worn out moms who just needed a good cry and a shoulder to lean on. And that's exactly what we did in that session. It was okay to let our guards down and be real. I gained much more respect for her and realized we are all just doing our best to get through this, and we can be honest about that, together. After that session, we were able to open up more and communicate on a whole new level for the betterment of my son.

#### 2. Flexibility Is Important

IEPs are designed for in-school learning, and the same plan most likely will not work for virtual learning. When you have a specific plan designed for the "normal" in-person school days and suddenly try to implement that plan to virtual learning, it is just not going to work the same. There will be adjustments, and we all need to be okay with that.

Parents will try what they can at home, and if it doesn't work, that's okay - make the temporary changes as needed and keep communicating with the IEP team about what is working and what is not. Continue to adjust as needed. Flexibility is key.

#### 3. Take It Day by Day

What may work today may not tomorrow. And that's okay. I remember struggling with Jack during his Unified Arts/Special Classes, especially Physical Education.

Jack simply did not enjoy watching other classmates dancing on the computer and did not want to dance with classmates watching him. I tried everything I could think of to make it fun for him and get him involved. I was beating myself up when I kept failing class after class after class. The struggle was all-consuming and heart wrenching. I finally brought this up to his Special Education Teacher, who simply said, "Okay, so if he doesn't want to do the dances while on video, just join in the beginning to say hello and end the virtual class whenever you need to. Then, do the dances/activities with Jack yourself, off the screen. Just do what works for him". Those last six words have been ingrained in my mind ever since – Just do what works for HIM.

Jack is on an IEP for specific reasons – the norm, the typical, the standard just doesn't work for my son. He needs a program that works for HIM. When things are upside down, stressful, and unknown, as a team, we need to focus on what works for him.

#### Vanessa's Final Thought

I have always had the utmost respect for teachers. As a family, after what we have been through over the past year, that respect has grown tremendously. And I don't think I am alone here. I think you will find this to be the case among the majority of families out there.

Working with children that have an IEP is no easy feat. Add a pandemic and a schedule that is flipped upside down, and that daunting task can sometimes feel overwhelming and impossible.

Educators' patience, resilience, strength, adaptability, and passion for educating have all been put to the test. Every single one of them not only stepped up to the plate, ready to take on the unknown, but they have all gone above and beyond for our children.

For that, I am immensely grateful.

Vanessa France

Vanessa is not alone in the struggle. Every family I spoke to feels similarly. The struggle has been all-consuming, but the more the families educate themselves on what works for their child, the easier remote learning is becoming. As Vanessa stated, the norm, the typical, and the standard did not work for Jack. Understanding that the standard needs to be modified and individualized is essential in helping their children become successful remote learners. Ideas to share with parents will be shared in hopes to help parents navigate the remote learning landscape in their homes.



Across the country, various stakeholders have surveyed parents.

One highlighted study was through the Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN, 2020). RIPIN conducted an online survey of 427 parents with children who attend school in Rhode Island and receive special education services, and 82 percent of parents responded that their children need their help and support all or most of the time when the school districts switched to remote learning.

An additional investigation conducted through ParentsTogether Action in New York (2020) released results collected from a survey of 1,500 families around the US. The survey revealed that 80 percent of families who have children with IEPs report that their child is not receiving the appropriate supports outlined in the IEP, and almost 40 percent are not receiving any support. Additionally, the survey reported that parents with children working remotely with IEPs are twice as likely to say that distance learning is going poorly than for those without IEPs. Furthermore, media outlets report (Jacobson, 2020; Kamentz, 2020) that families file legal complaints that schools need to do a better job addressing their children's needs.

In combination with the multiple surveys that have been disseminated throughout the country and the media reports, there is no denying the predicament - parents are struggling to help their children with IEPs. Bottom line: Educating children with disabilities and learning challenges at home without in-person support has been challenging. Here are a few of the strategies discussed throughout the guidebook that could help parents.

#### **Strategies and Tips to Share With Parents**

Throughout the different chapters, some of the following suggestions were discussed that include specific focal points to share with parents and caregivers as we all work together to focus on the child's success.

#### **Learning Space**

Educators note that parents appreciate their input and recommendations in creating an at-home learning space to study and attend virtual sessions during remote learning. Working with parents to create an uncluttered learning space with visible schedules and easy to access learning tools are essential ways to partner in the initial stage of remote learning. Educators may also want to suggest good lighting and a comfortable workspace and chair. Additionally, the child may want to add some individual touches to the space to create motivation and inspiration, such as artwork and pictures.

Educators may want to provide parents literature or a quick tutorial video on flexible seating benefits and explain flexible seating options at home. Sitting for prolonged periods without movement or flexibility is not sufficient and can lead to health problems (Levine, 2015). Depending on the students' individualized needs and accommodations listed on their IEPs, educators may want to discuss some flexible seating options available in the home. Options could include using standing desks, using an ironing board at the proper height for their child to work on a counter-height table, or sitting on a stability ball at a desk. Other flexible seating options could be a backless seat such as a stool, adding resistance bands between chair legs to allow fidgety feet to move, or sitting on the floor with a lap table while learning and working.

Flexible seating gives students options for controlling their physical environment in ways that work best for themselves and their learning. Often with choices, students gain greater flexibility and control, giving them the autonomy and comfort to stay engaged and focused for more extended periods, overall leading to improved behavior, focus, and willingness to complete desired tasks. Figure 10.1 shows two examples of flexible seating. Using an ironing board for a standing desk or sitting on a stability ball are appropriate flexible seating options depending on the child's needs.

Additionally, when working with parents creating the learning space, this is an excellent opportunity to discuss limiting distractions. Removing technology that has access to social media and storing phones away from the child during school hours is helpful for older children.



FIGURE 10.1 Two Examples of Flexible Seating

#### **Establish a Consistent Schedule**

One of the most critical pieces in creating a successful remote classroom is a consistent, predictable daily schedule. A consistent schedule is comforting, and it can increase focus and willingness to work, especially in inconsistent times and environments, while transitions and schedule changes can add stress and lead to frustration and anger. Include parents in the design of a daily schedule. When creating the schedule, use pictures, graphics, and icons to make a child's visual schedule to follow.

Educators and parents should collaborate in creating schedules to create a visual and predictable daily routine. The child should participate in creating a plan to encourage independence and

ownership of the daily routine. The schedule should be the same each day and posted in the designed learning space. Two specific strategies are suggested here:

Color-Coded Schedules – For students who may need extra support with the organization and executive functioning, color-coded posted schedules could help. Assign each subject area a color. For example, Science is blue on the daily schedule, and the science notebook and folder are all blue. Working with parents to organize subjects into colors will promote independence, ease transitions, and help independently organize the student's workspace. With practice and the daily routine, students will know to allow only one color in their workspace at a time. As each subject is completed, the color-coded material should be removed. As students work through the posted daily schedule, they can cover up the completed task or move a paper clip down the schedule to visualize completion and accomplishment.

First Then Chart – Depending on the student's need and ability levels, some students may not be ready to follow a posted schedule and may need tasks broken down with an immediate award. The suggested strategy is a "first then" chart.

A "first then" chart is a visual strategy to help students complete a specific, non-preferred task. The chart displays two pictures side by side. The "first" is a picture of the student doing schoolwork (the non-preferred activity), and the "then" is a picture of the student participating in a preferred activity (playing on the swings, etc.). The student must get through the "first" to earn the "then". When establishing remote learning routines, suggest parents take a picture of their child participating in each subject and use those pictures to build their schedule ("first"). As they complete each assignment on time, they earn a preferred activity ("then").

The following (Figure 10.2) shows a visual example of a first then chart. *First*, complete work (an 8-year-old girl is sitting at a desk with her computer in front of her), and *then*, play with the preferred toy (a princess horse castle toy with three princess figurines on horses).

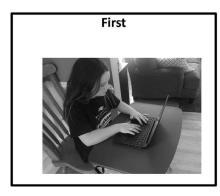
#### **Weekly Goal Setting**

Picking an IEP objective or two each week to focus on with your students and communicating that goal to parents and caregivers during the weekly meeting are extremely important. Having too many goals, assignments, and expectations has led to failure and reduced student motivation. Ensure the learning goal is aligned with the annual IEP goals, and, most importantly, the learning goal is reinforced throughout the week by both parents and educators. By verbalizing and displaying this learning goal, educators will help the students recognize the why behind the lesson, understand the expectations, work toward a specific accomplishment, and take ownership of achieving the goal. Keep the goal and expectation clear and concise.

#### IEP Walk-Through — Focus on PLEP A

Review or walk through the IEP with the parents and caregivers and commit to spending a reasonable amount of time explaining the Present Level of Educational Performance (PLEP A) section. PLEP A outlines the curriculum areas such as English Language Arts, History and Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Math, and Other Curriculum areas affected by the student's disability. There is also a section embedded in the PLEP A that explains and describes how the disability affects progress. Explaining the curriculum areas

#### First Then Chart



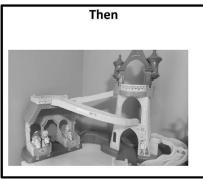


FIGURE 10.2 Example of a First Then Chart

affected by the disability and explaining how the specific disability affects progress are a critical section to share with parents. Doing so will help them understand common learning roadblocks at home and the subjects that their child may struggle in.

Another valuable part of PLEP A to educate parents on is the accommodations section. For anyone who is not a formally trained educator, the accommodation list might seem like a bulleted list of random actions and words, with some educational jargon thrown in for good measure. Whereas educators can look at those bullets and know precisely what to do to help the child be successful in school, most parents and caregivers will need guidance. Spend time with parents reviewing all the suggested accommodations and provide recommendations to help parents implement and replicate at home in the remote learning environment. Break down the accommodation for the parents by setting, presentation, timing/scheduling, and response. Explain each section by defining and providing appropriate examples using specific examples in terms parents and caregivers will understand and offer remote-friendly suggestions for each student's accommodations. (See Chapter 6 for common accommodations and the remote equivalent.)

The next section is an expansion of the PLEP A with some do it yourself (DIY) accommodations.

#### **Sensory Tools**

Sensory tools, which are objects, fidgets, putty, and other tools to stimulate the senses or focus on a single sensory input, are another popular way to provide sensory options. Studies have found that allowing sensory input during worktime improved students' participation and on-task behaviors (Noddings, 2017). Students with diagnoses, such as ADHD, anxiety, and autism, have shown improvements in concentration if they could fidget or use a tool that redirects the fidget. Integrating these tools in the classroom appropriately and explaining the expectations of their use to students can create a great learning environment for students. The same concepts can be used in a remote setting.

If resources are available, educators can create a personal sensory toolkit for each student with a few small tools delivered

to the home or picked up at the school. If tools and resources to share are unavailable, educators can send home a letter to make DIY tools.

During school, many teachers have a specific area of their classroom dedicated to sensory tools. Educators often call these areas different names such as "Sensory Corners" or "Calm-Down Corners". Educators can include sensory tools for access when students need them or for breaks. With guidance from the educator, parents can replicate this idea at home and perhaps have an athome sensory shelf or a sensory drawer to allow children access to during the day. Some items to include that can be found at home to fit in a sensory box or shelf could be:

#### **Simple Hand and Feet Fidget Tools:**

- Various textured cloth material.
- Squeeze balls and squishy toys of varying textures and firmness level.
- Bins of Putty, Play-Doh, Slime.
- Tupperware container of rice or kinetic sand.
- Tupperware container of nuts and bolts.
- Velcro strips to stick under the desk to feel during independent activities.
- Stretch/resistance bands to use at the bottom of chairs for fidgety feet.
- Tupperware container of beads.

#### **Relaxation Tools:**

- Headphones (noise-canceling, silent, or with soothing music).
- Lap weights/weighted blanket/weighted stuffed animals.
- Colored glasses/blue light glasses (help with visual input or block flickering of fluorescent lights).
- Bubbles to blow to regulate breathing and relaxation.
- Massage balls or a foam roller.

Many occupational therapists and special education teachers have noted the benefits of working with parents to create sensory boxes for remote instruction. Figure 10.3 is a sample sensory box, labeled



FIGURE 10.3 A Sample Sensory Box

as "Ava's Learning Tools". It is a white box with kinetic sand, pipe cleaners, noise-canceling headphones, beads, Play-Doh, a resistance band, and gum displayed on a white piece of cardboard.

#### **Timers and Frequent Breaks**

Timers and frequent breaks are useful strategies to educate parents and caregivers to improve the remote learning experience for everyone involved.

Timers keep children on task for a given amount of time. They can learn to independently start and reset the timers while progressing through their daily schedule. Once they move through and complete a certain timed amount of work, they earn a break. The break should be a preferred activity of the child's choice or an enjoyable brain break. Timers can also dictate when the break is over and it is time to get back to work. By utilizing timers at home during the day, ownership moves from the parent to the child. The parent is not just arbitrarily mandating that the child needs to get back to work. The timer does. The timer dictates when it is time to stop the break and get to work, leading to fewer child and parent arguments, frustrations, and defiant behaviors.

Breaks improve the cognitive ability and focus of students. Frequent physical movement breaks also allow students to regulate their behavior and emotions and provide the students with an opportunity to stimulate their sensory needs. When children have to sit and remain in one place, it is likely to result in fatigue and disruptive behavior (Levine, 2015; Brekke-Sisk, 2006). Incorporating movement breaks throughout the day can benefit from controlling sensory integration and improving readiness to learn. Incorporating movement breaks routinely rather than using them on a needbasis prevents behavior incidents before they start. Frequent breaks throughout the day are necessary, especially if children are sitting in front of a computer all day.

Make a list of suggested movement breaks that can be done at home and share that list with parents and caregivers. Some suggestions could be:

GoNoodle Videos, Koo Koo Kanga Roo, KIDZ BOP: YouTube has many kid-friendly movement videos ranging from quick videos that last only a minute or two to longer videos around 20 minutes. GoNoodle, Koo Koo Kango Roo, and KIDZ BOP offer movement breaks include songs with movement, dance videos, and exercise routines.

Outdoor Activity: Make a list of outdoor movement break ideas for students to refer to when a break is earned. Such activities could include jump rope, hopscotch, dancing, running, riding a bike, or spending a few minutes shooting basketballs, kicking soccer balls, or stickhandling a hockey puck.

Create a list for Outdoor Scavenger Hunts: Present parents with pre-made outdoor scavenger hunt activities that you, the educator, can participate in. For example, one day during a movement break, have students try to find a rock that looks like a heart or maybe a stick with three distinctive colors. During a synchronous meeting, the educator can ask the student if anyone did an outdoor scavenger hunt and share what they found. Knowing the outdoor environment, parents and caregivers could also create an outdoor scavenger hunt to use during breaks.

At-Home Sensory/Motor Paths: Many schools have sensory/motor paths that parents can replicate at home. Figure 10.4 is



FIGURE 10.4 An At-School Motor Path

a picture of an at-school motor path. It is a school floor with A through Z paws, numbered circles 1 through 5, five other circles not numbered, and four lines with the word "jump". Five pairs of handprints are displayed on the far wall.

Parents can recreate motor paths by using painter's tape, duct tape, and construction paper. Figure 10.5 shows a simple at-home path created in a hallway of a house. The floor has a start sign with three small lines, two large lines, staggered circles, and a zigzag. Two pairs of handprints, labeled wall jump, and wall press are visible on the sidewall.

Work together with parents to discuss ideas to create a sensory/motor path using chalk outside or tape and construction paper. Using visuals, parents can add to the path and have children hop on one foot, do wall push-ups, skips, wall jumps, and frog jumps. The ideas are endless. Use the sensory path during the day as a sensory outlet or as a movement break. These act as an excellent brain break with high-intensity activities that enable students to return to work, improving focus for more extended periods.

#### **Understanding Assistive Technology**

Educating parents on the importance of assistive technology for remote instruction has been a useful share for parents. Educators do not have to spend too much time on this task because reputable teaching options are available for a parent to reference. For example, the Center on Technology and Disability offers an Introduction to Assistive Technology video that outlines essential topics, concepts, and ideas for using assistive technology with students with disabilities. The video is a great resource that can be viewed and shared at no cost.

Here is the link: www.ctdinstitute.org/library/2017-10-05/introassistive-technology-video



FIGURE 10.5 A Simple At-Home Path

## Success Story

Andrew, a father from New Hampshire, presets his home Alexa device to alarm for his son's brain and motor breaks. He sets the Alexa device so the day is consistent, and every day (five times a day) at the exact same time, Alexa alarms, and his son knows he has a ten-minute break. He works with his son's special education teacher to be consistent and aware of the plan. This works for the family because Andrew works from home and would forget to remind his son of breaks. With breaks preset through Alexa, his son has been more independent and does not rely on him to dictate breaks.

# Quick Tips From Educators

Jackie, an occupational therapist from Colorado, recommends sharing DIY sensory tool ideas with parents. Parents have told Jackie that they appreciate her sensory tool DIY suggestions. One of the easiest, do it yourself fidget tools are "pipe cleaner fingers". Use a pipe cleaner to wrap around a finger or two. The child can feel the texture while independently working and increase focus on the task at hand. This is a budget-friendly alternative to some of the expensive fidget tools out there. Parents have told Jackie that pipe cleaner fingers have been working well.

Natalie, a grades 3-4 special education teacher from New York, recommends that parents start each day and end each day with structure. Before everyone signs in for work and school, it has been beneficial to sit down with their children to go over the daily schedule and answer any questions their children may have. She also recommends reconvening at the end of the remote school day to note successes and challenges and document them. Documenting success and challenges is essential and helpful for the teacher and the parent. Natalie meets weekly with parents and relies on

those successes and challenges when planning the next weeks' lesson and activities focusing on the child's success.



### **Highlighted Resources**

**External Parent Training and Support Groups:** 

Here are some supports retrieved from the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (2020) that can be shared with families:

- ♦ The Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (CEDD) provides educational resources on developmental disabilities to the community. CEDD has sponsored educational videos and online training modules, such as ADEPT (Autism Distance Education Parent Training) Interactive Learning. ADEPT has a ten-lesson interactive, self-paced, online learning module for parents. The training includes tools to more effectively teach their child with autism and disabilities functional skills using applied behavior analysis (ABA) techniques. It can be found here: https://health.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/centers/cedd/adept.html
- ♦ A support group offered through the Home for Little Wanderers offers parent support and group discussion for families caring for children with behavioral and mental health needs. www.thehome.org/site/PageNavigator/Parent SupportProgram.html
- ♦ The American Academy of Pediatrics has put out an advisory to help parents facing stress during remote learning. The advisory stressed that parents and caregivers must practice self-care and reach out to others for support. https://services.aap.org/en/news-room/news-releases/aap/2020/the-american-academy-of-pediatrics-advises-parents-experiencing-stress-over-covid-19/
- ♦ Additionally, the Child Mind Institute offers phone consultations, video talks, and other resources for families

dealing with the stress related to COVID-19 and related remote instruction. https://childmind.org/coping-duringcovid-19-resources-for-parents/



#### Remember

- Educators and parents should work together and figure out solutions to help the child succeed.
- ✓ Remember, empathy Parents fear their children are falling behind academically and missing developmental milestones while losing the life skills necessary for independent living.
- ✓ Help parents create a learning space, agendas, and routines.
- ✓ Walk through and highlight important areas of the IEPs and together establish a home school weekly goal.
- Sensory input during worktime improved the participation and ontask behaviors of students. Share DIY sensory tools and brain break ideas with parents.

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