

Routines & Schedules during the Coronavirus School Closings

By Melkorka Licea; Adapted by Betsy Fawcett

There's nothing normal about the coronavirus epidemic, but experts say keeping a regular learning schedule for kids and teens is essential.

That's why when Massachusetts mom Jessica McHale started keeping her kids home from school last Friday, she made a colorful "COVID-19 Daily Schedule" that includes blocks of time for "morning walk," "creative time" and "academic time."

"I knew in order to keep them mentally engaged and happy for however many weeks we're home, they'll have to have something to be excited about," McHale tells The Post. "It reduces anxiety in kids that are anxious because they have that structure to look to."

Thinking it may help out a friend or two, McHale, posted the schedule on Facebook, where it quickly went viral.

"I had no idea so many other people would like it," she says of the timetable, which has been shared 52,000 times. "I think it's because routines provide comfort, and right now, there is so much chaos that everyone is just looking for comfort and safety wherever they can find it."

Here, McHale and other education experts share all the best tips and tricks for keeping kids on schedule and out of trouble while they study from home.

Outside time is crucial

Just like morning and afternoon recess at school, parents should have two periods of outdoor time so kids of all ages can let out their energy and keep their spirits up. Consider a walk around the block, bike ride or evening sitting outside and talking— keeping in mind social-distancing parameters — first thing in the morning.

"My kids are very energetic, and if they start the day lazing around and watching TV, we'd never get the momentum back," says McHale, who has three kids ages 7, 9 and 13. "Getting outside, moving, fresh air — it just puts everyone in a good mood."

Schedule the second outdoor time after 3 p.m. Teens and kids should recharge outside midafternoon. Getting fresh air is great for teens, too, says Amber Robbins, a grad student in teen counseling, who made her own teen-focused coronavirus schedule. "It gives them the chance to mentally prepare for the day and practice mindfulness."

Chores are essential

Both experts agree that helping around the house earlier in the day helps remind teens and kids that they're an important part of their family units. "For young children, doing chores gives them a sense of control over their own safety," says McHale. Plus, adding in chore time to when parents might be cleaning themselves — like after lunch on McHale's schedule — helps encourage the kids to join in. Teens also need that positive reinforcement.

Save screens for later

McHale recommends putting any allotted screen time at the end of the day as a reward.

"I know that if my kids start off the day with a walk and they get into their creative projects, what they come up with is amazing," says McHale. "But once they hook into the screens, they tend to not have the same level of energy."

For teens, constantly reading the coronavirus updates can lead to more stress rather than help them hone new skills, says Robbins, of Salt Lake City, Utah. Instead, allow them to only use screens for educational apps and documentaries during the daytime, and save social screen time for after dinner.

Stick to the schedule

While it may be easy to make a schedule, the hard part is actually sticking to it. That's why McHale and Robbins always recommend writing it down and keeping it posted around the house, so kids and teens can see it every day and make check marks next to their completed tasks.

Using colors makes it fun and easy to understand. For younger kids, McHale recommends using pictures to describe each time block.

The best way to keep everyone on track? A reward system. "Positive reinforcement of good things like more screen time, or time to stay up later, is a great motivator throughout the day," says McHale.

Answer the questions below by clicking the blue box next to the correct answer. When you are finished, click the finished box at the bottom of the page to check your answers.

1. What is this article about?
 - a. Coronavirus
 - b. How making schedules is difficult
 - c. How to use routines to help your children
 - d. Looking forward to events
2. Why are routines beneficial?
 - a. They provide comfort for kids
 - b. They increase anxiety in kids
 - c. They keep parents busy.
 - d. They aren't beneficial
3. According to the article, how do routines affect anxiety?
 - a. They don't affect it.
 - b. They increase it.
 - c. They decrease it.
 - d. They keep it the same.
4. According to the article, why is outside time important?
 - a. It prepares kids and teens to be more focused
 - b. It makes everyone happier
 - c. It gives kids a chance to release their energy
 - d. All of the above