

How Children's Experiences During Current Times Inform School Priorities

Children are always developing and growing based on their experiences, especially when their realities change. Teachers can build on this recognition by providing opportunities for children to share, extend, and reflect on how the learning they did at home—and the experiences they have had while not in school—have made them stronger and more capable of succeeding at what's next. Some of the things that benefited children that can now be thought about in the physical classroom include:

Self-pacing: School schedules have suddenly become more fluid, allowing students more choice over when and how they do their schoolwork. This flexibility to make their own hours is also giving students a chance to exercise, take breaks, be creative, or even be bored, all of which research shows is beneficial.

There are some aspects of self-pacing that we can bring back to our physical classrooms. Giving children a menu of activities and allowing them to choose items from the menu—in a logical sequence that they need to complete over a set time—is possible even in our youngest classrooms. We can be clear that they can self-manage their time and take their own breaks to stroll around the classroom, look at books, or talk quietly to friends.

Re-think overextending children: Children benefited from a lot of unstructured downtime during school closures. Before and after school care, after school clubs and sports, and most organized academic and recreational activities outside of school were cancelled. Research tells us that jam-packed schedules, particularly when children are over-committed out of a sense of obligation and not desire, can lead to higher anxiety levels.

During our in-school time, we can rethink the importance of unstructured downtime and the impact it has on learning, or even concentrate on just having children have less of a to do list during the school day.

Outside of school, we can help families recognize that children gained some strengths during this unstructured downtime and encourage them to think twice before enrolling their children in every activity possible.

Lowering the pressure: Most schools have dramatically reduced children's workload in order to make learning accessible rather than overwhelming. According to a Pew Research Center study, teens cite academic pressure as the top pressure they face, with 61 percent of teens reporting they feel the heat to achieve at a certain level academically.

We know that teachers have also been under increasing scrutiny in the last decade to prepare students to hit benchmarks on standardized testing, pressure that trickles down to students. Both teachers and families are communicating that once the pressure of testing is off, many are feeling like they can really learn. As leaders, we need to consider the pressures that are on children because of these high stakes. How can we consider reducing the stakes for children—and perhaps by doing so, we see that they actually learn better and more.

Considering quiet time: Though we know for sure that most children miss the socialization of school, for some children—who experience social anxiety, are bullied, or feel lonely—the pressures of making social connections or thriving in social

environments is reduced. We can think about how some children need and want quiet time, and how children should not be made to contribute to every discussion or constantly pushed into social connections that might not be a fit for them. This does not mean that talk and relationships is not valuable to all children, but considering when we might be pushing or forcing children to talk or socialize just to fit the norm is something worth considering.

Active citizenship and advocacy: In this pivotal time, children may have participated in or at least observed protests, or been in conversations about anti-racist movements. They may feel compelled to be involved and to act. Nurturing and encouraging children's sense of advocacy and determination to make changes in the world is something teachers should prioritize, helping children make the connections between feelings, thinking, acting, and real change. This motivation and determination can translate into rich conversations in the classroom, research projects, and persuasive writing.

Increasing opportunities for blended learning: Many children have had experience with a combination of online and offline assignments. They may have gained some experience and strategies for moving in and out of technology and have some feelings about how technology is useful for their learning style and contributes to their feelings about learning and school. Drawing on this experience will help them as they likely encounter many more blended learning experiences back in the classroom after this distance-learning period. Teachers can increase opportunities for children to utilize technology in ways that really worked for children during this distance-learning time.

Cooper, Sarah. "Distance Learning Strategies to Bring Back to the Classroom." *Edutopia*, 22 May 2020, www.edutopia.org/article/distance-learning-strategies-bring-back-classroom.