

Home-Schooling Tweens and Teens During Coronavirus Closings

Advice from experts and home-schoolers on what do with your children if their schools are closed.



Tracey Pucci's son Foxtton Harding and stepson, Adison Pucci, both 12, eat breakfast Wednesday at their home in Bothell, Wash., before starting their online schooling through Northshore Middle School, closed for two weeks because of coronavirus concerns. Credit...Lindsey Wasson/Reuters

By Nir Eyal

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As the spread of the coronavirus [leads to more school closings](#), many parents are finding themselves faced with the prospect of what amounts to home-schooling their children. Ideally, teachers will provide lessons, whether online or on paper, to help meet children's academic needs, but school also fills physical and social needs.

Answering the following questions can help parents ease the transition and help children (temporarily) join the [1.7 million American students](#) who are home-schooled.

[\[For younger children whose schools are closed, advice from NYT Parenting.\]](#)

Will an Adult Be Around?

Many companies are [offering employees the option of working from home](#) or explicitly telling them to do so, so some parents may find themselves at home with their kids, trying to figure out new ways to navigate their own workdays as well as their children's.

For those who must work outside the home, unless you can arrange for a nanny there are few options but to ask friends or relatives for help. There are no consistent standards as to what is the right age to leave a child home alone. In [the few states that have laws](#), the range is wide: Illinois, 14 years old; Maryland, 8 years old; and Oregon, 10 years old.

It's important to know how much responsibility your child can handle: Children who can safely make themselves a meal and care for pets can most likely look after themselves for the span of a school day. Parents should provide emergency contacts and check in regularly; if an older child has to be responsible for a younger sibling, try to ensure that they are keeping the peace and are able to get their work done.

Do You Have a Schedule?

No matter the child's age, educators recommend providing structure.

"It's important kids don't see this as an indefinite snow day," said Dr. Michael Rich, director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Harvard Medical School.

School-age children can learn to school themselves, as long as a caregiver has set the groundwork to help them succeed.

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At home, there are no bells ringing to tell students when it's time for their next class. But apportioning time and sticking to plans are valuable life skills kids can learn while school is canceled. Dr. Rich believes families can take advantage of the change in the schooling environment. "I see this as an opportunity to help kids become more self-regulated," he said.

These school closings may last longer than weather-related ones, necessitating a new mindset that learning doesn't stop because kids are not at a traditional school.

[Explaining the current crisis](#) and the challenges it presents while enlisting children's help in making the best of a bad situation is important. The first step is to make a daily schedule.

For the past five years, my home-schooled daughter, now 11, has kept a three-ring binder with a [daily schedule](#) per page. Every week, she holds time for her online classes, study time, reading, leisure time and household chores, like cleaning her fish tank.

She insists that planning is key. "I have a color-coded planner so I know exactly what to do at what time. If I didn't have a plan I'd think, 'Well, should I work on this or should I work on that?'"

Can Tech Help?

Home-schooling does not necessarily mean that the parent is the teacher. Enrico Bertini, an associate professor of computer science and engineering at New York University, relies on technology to help home-school his 12-year-old son.

Dr. Bertini uses a mix of free and paid sites like [Outschool.com](https://www.outschool.com), [ProdigyGame.com](https://www.prodigygame.com) and [KhanAcademy.org](https://www.khanacademy.org) to give his son a full roster of classes. While many traditional schools provide students with access to online education during a shutdown, supplementing with other tools can help kids explore interests they don't have time for during the school year.

Home-schooling allowed my daughter to go deep into topics like forensic anthropology by learning from an expert online. Platforms like [Outschool.com](https://www.outschool.com) let families select highly rated teachers more likely to keep kids engaged as they learn. One more plus: Unlike in-person school where one rambunctious child can disrupt an entire class, teachers online can mute the unruly child and turn off their camera with one click.

As for concerns about screen time, [research suggests](#) that the quality of the interaction makes a difference. Using tech to create, rather than to passively consume, can encourage creativity and problem solving, but a balanced mix of tech and non-tech activities is best.

Are You Keeping Kids Active Indoors?

If being outdoors is a safe option, fit in time for running, hikes or bike rides. But if it isn't, it's possible for kids to stay active even when indoors. When my daughter can't go outside, she gets her exercise playing games like Just Dance Now on her laptop. Using an old Android phone, she holds the phone in one hand as she mimics the dance moves on her screen. The phone registers how well she moves to the beat as she works up a sweat.

Anya Kamenetz, an education blogger at NPR, author of "The Art of Screen Time," and mother of two living in Brooklyn, is making tentative plans [in case the New York City public schools shut down](#). She says her two girls, 3 and 8, will stay active at home by using sites like [GoNoodle.com](https://www.gonoodle.com) which provides at-home exercise programs. For no-cost options, she recommends child-friendly aerobic workouts or yoga poses with the [YouTube kids app](#). And you can always play freeze dance or try a situp challenge.

Are They Being Social the Right Way?

Kids need to interact with their peers, but how can children play without potentially spreading disease? Social media sites provide a place to engage online, but many parents are concerned about children overusing social media and worry about potential bullying online.

Companies like Snapchat, TikTok and Facebook (which owns WhatsApp and Instagram), set a minimum age of 13 to use their services. Ms. Kamenetz recommends that if parents allow their children to use these services, they use them together. "It's totally appropriate for you to be looking over their shoulders and helping them if they don't like the way their interaction is going." Getting off social media and using video calling through Skype or FaceTime can keep kids connected to their friends and family one-on-one.

She also recommends other online experiences which may not look like social sites but provide for the same need for camaraderie. "I think a shared Minecraft server, for example," where a private option allows kids to play only with people they know, "could be an awesome solution for kids." As long as games are played in planned durations, online games with friends can be a healthy place for children to play in the virtual world when they can't play together in the real world.

Nir Eyal is the author of "*Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life.*"