

Expert discusses keeping kids engaged in learning at home

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With New York State schools shut down for the foreseeable future because of the coronavirus pandemic, parents with school-age children are now adding teaching to their list of parental duties.

For most [parents](#), this may be an unfamiliar role. Wendy Paterson, dean of the School of Education at Buffalo State College, shared her advice for parents faced with this new responsibility.

Paterson, a two-time graduate of Buffalo State who began her teaching career in 1976 as a reading specialist in the Kenmore-Tonawanda [public schools](#), began working in [higher education](#) in 1983. She's been the dean of the School of Education at Buffalo State since 2012. An expert on education, Paterson is well-suited to help parents through this strange time.

The School of Education has also built an [online resource](#) for parents.

What should parents be doing to keep their kids learning and engaged?

The first thing that parents really need to do is to prepare a daily agenda along with their kids. What they're going to do on the agenda should be fairly consistent from day to day. It's okay to revisit it, and see if you want to keep doing the same thing, but they really need to set out a schedule. Put it on a poster board or big piece of paper or a blackboard at home.

The learning segments for kids should really be no more than about 20 minutes at a time, unless the kids are doing something more complicated. Attention spans are about 20 minutes long. Put some time into play games. There are a lot of wonderful games for kids, like matching games, word games, and number games. There should also be time built in to read with their kids. Every single day, they should be reading to, or with, their kids. It's one of the best things they can do with their kids.

Parents should also look for opportunities like cooking as learning experiences for their kids. Have them help measure things out, read recipes, and talk about the differences in cups. Five- to 10-minute journal-writing sessions should be built into the schedule for both the parent and child. This keeps them writing. It can be creative, like what's going on in your dog's head today. And don't forget about art. They can draw pictures and talk about the pictures with their parents.

Second, parents should set up a space that's just for learning. It can be a basement space or a corner somewhere in the house that's just a schoolroom for them. Have the children help to design it, and decorate the area. Use chalk and crayons, and be creative. Older children are going to need their own office setup, so they can continue their studies. With the nicer weather coming, head outside when you can and use sidewalk chalk. That's a golden commodity right now.

The third thing I would say is that it's important to set boundaries, and stick with them. Kids won't stick to a schedule otherwise. Try not to get angry. This is going to be the hardest part, but don't show frustration or anger or fear. If you feel yourself getting frustrated, walk away, and model good anger management. Yelling at the kids is only going to make things worse.

Are resources available for parents in terms of things like books, games, and lessons?

There are online resources for kids' books, lessons, recipes, and really anything kids would need. The School of Education has a resource for parents online, as well. Parents should take advantage of online resources, and they don't have to go out and buy things. I used to make matching games for my kids out of 3-by-5 note cards. You can have kids color in the photos in newspapers. Play "store" with the items in the

pantry, using fake money. Use scrap paper for art projects.

How should parents talk to their kids about the coronavirus pandemic?

Parents should absolutely talk to their kids about what's happening, without using fear-mongering kinds of terms. Kids are going to make up stuff. And they'll have things in their heads that are much more horrible than the truth. You want to get it out of your kids' heads. You don't want it stored in their heads because they'll have nightmares about all this. Don't feel like you have to go all the way into it. A 5-year-old isn't going to understand things at the same level that a 15-year-old will, but they should talk about it. Let them ask the question. Don't assume that they know. Don't lecture them. Let them ask you questions and then talk about it as honestly as you can without creating fear.

Any final advice to parents?

Schedule downtime. You're going to need to rest, and so will your kids. You're going to go insane if you expect to teach your kids all day long. The best advice I would give is to establish routines. Don't be too rigid, but help your kids be responsible for their learning and participate in it. This is kind of a rare opportunity for parents and kids to really work together on teaching and learning. It may end up being a really, really good experience for people who otherwise wouldn't have half as much time with their kids. Parents should also engage with their children without the distraction of having a cellphone out, or a laptop. Spend five or 10 minutes talking with them completely engaged. Listening to kids is a luxury we've lost.

Provided by Buffalo State

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