

How to help your kids—and yourself—handle being at home

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Now that Alberta's schools have closed to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19, thousands of parents are wondering how to keep their kids busy, adjust to everyone being at home and handle school lessons.

It's important to simply acknowledge the challenge, said Adam Galovan, a University of Alberta expert in [parent-child relationships](#).

"When everyone is sick of being cooped up, it's important to remind ourselves that we're all feeling that way, we're in this together. Accept that there are going to be arguments, so proactively say that. You're going to all be hanging out, so let's stay calm about it," he said.

Giving youngsters the chance to talk about their feelings is key to helping them cope, he added.

"Ask how they're feeling right now. When they feel heard and understood, they have more confidence that you're watching out for them, so they feel safe."

He added that easing anxiety is key to helping kids before they start their lessons.

"If they're anxious, they won't be learning effectively anyway, so it's important for [parents](#) to strengthen their relationships with their children a bit before starting lessons."

With younger kids, that means doing enjoyable things together like games, going for walks or even just chatting.

Give teens the lead on designing what family activities they want to do, while reminding them that there's a common cause, Galovan said.

"Take a team approach; you're working together to get the learning done."

When feelings of frustration do flare, take a break from each other, Galovan added.

"Everyone needs some quiet time to decompress a little bit."

Active minds

While parents may worry about their children missing classes, avoid the temptation to rush them into too much structured time at home.

"First of all, give everyone some breathing room at the start. Take a little time, and maybe consider spending your first week or two as their spring break while you come up with a plan," said Linda Laidlaw, a professor and digital literacy researcher in the U of A's Faculty of Education.

While you're waiting for [school districts](#) to roll out remote lesson plans, there are lots of ways to help kids exercise their brains at home, she said.

"Think about activities that are going to keep them learning in ways that are fun, like cooking. They're reading, following instructions, while older kids can be searching online for recipes."

Crafts, board games and even home improvement projects, like redesigning a bedroom, are also good ways to stay mentally active.

Journal writing is another good way for kids to practice their literacy skills. It gives them a historical record of what's happening for their own children and grandchildren, and gives parents a window into what they're thinking, Laidlaw noted.

"They could even be doing this as a video diary," she said.

Laidlaw added that it's important to make sure kids can still connect online with one another.

"In addition to learning, school is a huge social outlet. They process with

their friends and play with their friends."

Technology can also help them shape their time creatively, by making personal videos to share with faraway family or creating video book reviews. It can also be a handy source of learning tools when children do start their online studies, said Laidlaw, who advises parents to beef up their internet access if possible.

"There are tons of resources, so find the ones that are going to work for your own child, since it's not going to be one size fits all. Don't feel pressured to buy something quickly online."

She recommends teacher-approved sites like [commonsense.org](https://www.common Sense.org) or [code.org](https://www.code.org) and local resources like the Edmonton Public Library program.

Laidlaw also urges parents to try not to stress about class delivery.

"I have a lot of trust in teachers, and what the schools come out with for students will be carefully thought out. All of society is struggling with this right now, so parents should give themselves a bit of a reprieve; it's not all going to be on them. I anticipate that there will be many resources for parents coming out in the coming weeks.

"These are strange circumstances, but what's important is that kids and families are all together in the house, and that we use this time together in positive ways."

Active bodies

Being physically active together is also important to coping with being home full-time, says David Chorney, associate professor in the Department of Secondary Education.

With recreation centres, skating rinks and swimming pools closed and organized sports programs postponed or cancelled, it's important to keep kids physically active, he said.

Being active gives the body physical and mental stimulation, which helps children focus on the school assignments they will still be receiving electronically in the weeks ahead. "It keeps that blah feeling minimized."

Parents need to take the lead on the home front by establishing a daily exercise or movement routine with their children, he said.

"When students aren't going to school and don't have structured activities as they are used to having, most kids won't be as motivated to be active," he said.

Kids should be moderately to vigorously active for 60 to 90 minutes daily, preferably spread out over the day, and should also be getting up to 15,000 steps per day to have a health benefit.

One of the biggest concerns parents will face in our current crisis is their children spending too much time on screens, Chorney believes.

"Sitting in front of a TV or spending countless hours on a cellphone playing games and chatting is not an option for maintaining fitness, and it's too easy for youth to spend their downtime this way," he said.

But parents can turn that desired screen time in their favor by helping their kids find online dance videos, at-home workout programs or cardio and strength bursts that get everyone moving. It can be and should be a family goal during this extraordinary time.

"Or turn exercise time into a 10-minute challenge, by running up and down the stairs and increasing your step count every day," said Chorney,

who also advised keeping a family log book and creating daily or weekly challenges among all family members.

Children who are typically involved in organized sports or structured activities especially need to keep up a fitness routine, he added.

"It's imperative that routinely active children maintain their muscle tone, cardio training activities and general physical movements. Students can improvise at home by using skipping ropes, light dumbbells or rubber tubing for resistance training. They can work out in their garages, basements, back decks or driveways."

He said it's also vital for everyone to get outside. "Being in nature reduces blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension, and it makes you feel better emotionally. Dress appropriately and take advantage of the longer days of sunshine to give your body a mental and physical break from being indoors.

"It could be walking your dog more often, cleaning the sidewalks or going for a light run."

Provided by University of Alberta

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