How can I help my child learn independently and stay motivated?

For many children, moving to online learning may have been challenging in many ways. Below are some suggestions that may help you work with your child on topics such as time management, independent learning and motivation. Many of these strategies come from Macquarie University’s Centre for Emotional Health Study Without Stress (SWOS) Program.

If your child is experiencing difficulties, it’s important to start off by identifying the problem. Begin by helping your child clarify exactly what the difficulty is. Perhaps your child is unclear on what the task involves, they just don’t feel like starting or they don’t know where to start. Solutions will be different in each case.
For some parents/carers who are working from home, the list below may feel overwhelming. We suggest selecting one or two strategies that might work for you and your child.

TIME MANAGEMENT

- **Structure**: Plan a day that is similar in structure to a school day. Older students and those who are more self-directed may be more flexible. Many students are used to, and work better with, some structure that is similar to a typical school day. For instance, it’s important that your child maintains a regular wake-up time.

Help your child to develop a timetable that works for them. Consider whether they benefit from getting stuck into and finishing a task, and then taking a break before moving on to the next topic (the ‘get it over and done with type’). Or are they more willing to start if they know they can soon have a break?

The first session could include a warm up or a fun task. Break tasks into small manageable chunks, as this can help with their motivation. This is key to helping those who have trouble getting started. For example, encourage your child not to think about the 40 questions they need to do for history – just the first two. Then set the next goal. You know your child’s character and can help them create a timetable that’s realistic for them.

- **Regular breaks**: Encourage your child to take more regular breaks than normal to introduce a change of pace throughout the day. Older children should be encouraged to set an alarm to manage their time independently.

- **Physical activity**: Include some physical activity at several points throughout the day, as being in front of a computer for long periods can be more physically difficult on the body than being in a normal classroom.

- **Connect**: Try to find time for children to connect with family and friends. Use apps such as FaceTime to talk and play (virtually) with their friends.

- **Ask for help**: Remind your child that if they feel unsure, it is okay to ask for help. This is a new way of learning for all of us.

**Motivation**

Motivation is something we look for before starting a task. This is a fallacy. It is better to simply make a start in a small way, and then motivation kicks in. Time management can help, too. Here are a few additional tips to help build motivation:

- **Break work into small chunks**: Some children may need help with this.

- **Plan and encourage rewards**: Provide a reward when your child completes a task. A reward could be a favourite meal, a fun game, doing something with you (after work), going for bike ride, shooting hoops.

- **Encourage teamwork**: Some children will be missing the energy of classroom interactions. Encourage them to work together, if possible. For example, form small study groups and/or have virtual play dates after school.

- **Tailor learning activities**: Consider if it is possible for children to work on things that particularly interest them.

- **Overcome hurdles**: If getting started is difficult for your child, encourage 10–15 minutes focus on a task, and then allow a short break, if needed. Motivation often builds as we begin an activity, not before it. The first few minutes can be the hardest. By getting through the first few minutes, we reduce the perceived difficulty of the task and increase the motivation to keep going.

- **Study space**: It may help to have a regular place to study. Some schools are even suggesting students wear their uniform. This might sound silly, but it may set up the association that this is worktime, not playtime.

- **Listening**: If your child seems to be more worried than usual, try to set aside time to listen to their concerns. Sometimes, kids don’t want us to solve their problems; they just need to know we really hear them.

- **Normalise**: We’re all in this together. If your child is worried that they are falling behind because of the changes in schooling, remind them that everyone has been affected by COVID-19. There will be opportunities in coming months to recover any learning missed.

**Links to Key Support Services**

**CENTRE FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH CLINIC**
Macquarie University  
**T:** (02) 9850 8668  
**E:** ehc.admin@mq.edu.au  
**mq.edu.au/CEH-clinic**

**IN CASE OF A CRISIS, CONTACT**

- **ACT**: 1800 629 354 – Mental Health Triage Service  
- **NSW**: 1800 011 511 – Mental Health Line  
- **NT**: 1800 682 288 – Northern Territory Mental Health Line  
- **QLD**: 1300 MH CALL or 1300 642 255 – 24-hour specialist mental healthcare  
- **SA**: 13 14 65 – Mental Health Triage Service  
- **TAS**: 1800 332 368 – Mental Health Service Helpline  
- **VIC**: Victoria’s Mental Health Services – See website for services in your area  
- **WA**: 1800 676 822 – Mental Health Emergency Response Line  

**LIFELINE**  
**T:** 13 11 14

**KIDS HELPLINE**  
**T:** 1800 55 1800  
**kidshelpline.com.au**

**HEAD TO HEALTH (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT)**  
headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support

**BEYOND BLUE**
Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service  
**T:** 1800 512 348

A dedicated COVID-19 [online forum](https://au.reachout.com) is available for people to share their concerns and connect online to support one another.

**coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au**

**REACH OUT**

Online youth forums and [online parents forums](https://au.reachout.com) for COVID-19 offer peer support in safe and established online communities.

**au.reachout.com**

**MINDSPOT CLINIC**
**T:** 1800 61 44 34  
**E:** contact@mindsport.org.au  
**mindsport.org.au**

**HEADSPACE**  
**headspace.org.au**

**AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY**  
psychology.org.au/FindAPsychologist

In an emergency, dial **000**.