



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

March 26, 2020

Hello, Acera parents and caregivers!

We know that many of you find yourselves taking on the role of helping your kids with their education, and that this may be an unfamiliar role for you to have. We've come up with a guide to help you be successful at home. In this guide we have some tips and advice that may be helpful. Use any, all, or none of this as is appropriate for your child. While these tips are recommended, we are also confident that our parent community is more than equipped to support their kids in their own ways. Do not hesitate to reach out to anyone on the Counseling Team with individual questions or concerns.

There are many different philosophies and strategies for setting expectations, facilitating and coaching students, and supporting kids. You may need to use different approaches in different circumstances. This guide has some of the most commonly recommended tactics from the field of learning and behavioral psychology.

As Acera's Counseling Team, we outlined these strategies for you to use, if they are helpful.

1) Expectation/Norm Setting
2) Behavior
3) Social
4) Academic
5) Emotions
6) Executive Functioning Skills/Supports



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

Expectation/Norm Setting

It's no secret that we are currently all dealing with an unusual situation, and that remote schooling is an "uncharted waters" kind of situation. It's really, really, really important that for the duration of this remote schooling period you outline to your child, what they should expect. Here are some recommended expectations norms:

- 1) **Above all, stay safe and clean!** Tell kids to wash their hands, cover their cough, and let someone know if they are not feeling well.
- 2) **Set boundaries for when your child should be working on assignments/learning material.** Reaffirm the fact that though they are not physically at school, learning is still happening. *If their core teacher has given them a specific schedule to follow, outline that schedule as the expectation* (for example, if the teacher is moving them through assignments as the normal day would look, hold them to that). If their schedule is more open ended, make sure they know when and for how long they are expected to work. ***The caveat here is, though, that sometimes kids are just "done" - especially in the afternoons. You will need to use judgement about when to hold the expectation clearly and when an alternative -- for example, an outdoor movement activity -- is needed/appropriate as an additional break or alternative.*
- 3) **Give yourself a break.** You may find yourself facilitating a lot of learning, but ideally you should not need to be side by side guiding them the entire 6 hours. Much like how you would normally be at home, outline time for yourself. Make it clear to your child that there will be times where they should be working more independently and that, though you will be available if they need you, that you will be working on your own stuff or doing your own work, etc.
- 4) **Keep an open mind for learning.** They are learning things in a different way, but remind them that learning is still a priority, even in this unusual/chaotic situation.

******Set any other norm or expectation that you find appropriate based on your personal priorities at this time and your values. Whatever the expectations/norms are for your child, it is **VERY** important that the expectation norm is communicated:



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

- 1) Clearly and with use of direct, simple language, so the core message is not misunderstood, and that
- 2) You are CONSISTENT with the expectation the entire time we are not at school (even if it doesn't seem like the norm/expectation is working perfectly, keep with it. It can be confusing to drastically change expectations part way, and it runs the risk of communicating to your child that the expectations/norms are not that important).

Behavior

There are some basic strategies one can use to motivate a child to engage in a task. Now ideally, they don't need you, as the adult, to "motivate" them because, fundamentally, they find the task itself interesting and motivating. That is a core part of Acera's learning design approach. This approach is hampered, perhaps mightily, in a remote education context. We are trying hard to break the frame and really reach kids in spite of this remote learning challenge! However, when students are struggling, here are some tips and strategies to mediate your child's behavior and increase the chances of your child following through with the learning expectations you give them.

- 1) **Remind your child that above all else, these expectations to engage in learning activities are solely for their benefit and to have them learn.** Don't expend a lot of energy getting into power struggles with your child about things unrelated to the ultimate goal of "this is important for you to do so you can learn." Set expectations in a voice that is clear and unemotional.
- 2) **Praise your child for their hard work and for their process and help them know their job is to make mistakes and keep trying, not to already know how to do everything.** If your child is engaging in negative self talk, i.e. "I can't do this. This is too hard", bring a growth mindset into your home; this is a recent [Parent coaching / growth mindset posting](#) from Courtney.
- 3) **My child isn't doing what I ask- what now?** The most likely reasons your child doesn't want to do what you ask is either because it is too much effort, because they'd prefer to do something else that they like doing, or both. Communicate with your child to see why they aren't agreeing, then, depending on why, a couple of things can be helpful here:
 - If Internal motivation is not working, consider using a preferred activity as an extrinsic reward. Ideally, a student engages in the activities of school because they want to; a core part of Acera's ideology is that learning and school experiences should be meaningful, well aligned to students' interests and



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

abilities, and linked to things that matter to them. A move to remote schooling makes this more difficult for Acera teachers, who become less able to adapt and differentiate and give as many choices nor to coach as deeply for each child, and there are not as many rich hands-on tools and options for them to leverage. While our teachers are doing admirable work to try to make learning and projects still relevant and exciting, there may be times when a child is not internally motivated. Ideally, through use of inquiry learning and coaching strategies, you can engage kids to extend their work time and focus and interest. This was the focus on Courtney's parent tips article from our last newsletter about keeping kids motivated during remote learning. (click [here](#) for that article) However, when the internal motivation is not there and inquiry learning is not the right tool, you may need to turn to an extrinsic rewards approach. One nice thing about being at home is that they have access to all of the things they love most, and that you as a caregiver/parent have (to a great extent) control over their environment. When you outline an expectation, if you need to, you can use a preferred activity as a reward for completing the task; for example, "You can use your iPad after you do literacy." This will only be as successful as your ability to control their environment- if they have the ability to just ignore you and use their iPad anyway, this won't be effective. You may need to be firm and fair in these situations.

- Chunk the work into smaller pieces. If you ask a child to do something they can't do, either because it is too hard, their motivation is too low, etc, they won't be successful. If your child is looking to meet a basic need (food, water, sleep) it may make sense to meet that need first; "Ok, let's have a quick snack, then try again." Otherwise, decrease the effort of the expectation by making it smaller. For example, if they are to write a 5 paragraph essay, see if they'll do at least 1 paragraph. A good rule to follow is that it's better for your child to do SOME of an activity than NONE of an activity.
- Avoid maladaptive cycles. If these two things still don't work, **you will have to be persistent.** If a child successfully engages in non-compliance, it can create a repetitive and ultimately maladaptive cycle where they feel emboldened to engage in non-compliance. Make it clear that eventually they will be expected to do what you've asked. Repeat the expectation every 5 minutes. If they don't do it on day one, expect they do it again the next day. Even if, in the worst case scenario, they do avoid completing the task despite your persistence, it's important that you show the child that follow-through is an important norm/expectation in your relationship. If you find yourself in this situation, it may be a good idea to have a counselor call for debrief and defining some new strategies.



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

A highly recommended parenting book: Setting Limits with Your Strong Willed Child: Eliminating Conflict by Establishing Clear, Firm and Respectful Boundaries by Robert J. MacKenzie, EdD.

(You may ask -- how did they know my child is a strong willed child? Because gifted students almost always are!)

Social

This is a particularly difficult/tricky area for our kids because a lot of social learning is “incidental,” or in the moment. Being in a quarantine-type setting means your child is not getting those incidental social scenarios they’d get from school. What we are likely to see in isolation is a lot of practice socializing using family dynamics, which don’t always accurately reflect socialization in public. For example, if you yell at your friend, your friend stops being your friend. BUT if you yell at your brother, he’s still your brother. Here are some things that may help:

- 1) **Social Media Skills!** One cornerstone of remote learning is that we are communicating across technology. This may be an unfamiliar mode of communication for your child, so here are some things they should be aware of:
 - **Communicate the way you would if you were in a room with a group of people.** Be direct with who you are communicating with by saying their name. If multiple people are communicating in a group chat, they may not know who you are addressing since you cannot look at them.
 - **Communicate with brief, succinct sentences.** Don’t be overly wordy- get your point across and make it clear.
 - **Communicate appropriately.** Remind them that their communications should mirror school standards. It is easy to hit send on a message, but encourage them to stop and re-read it before they do. A good rule of thumb: don’t say anything you wouldn’t say to your grandma in person.
- 2) **Encourage remote video-calls with peers.** It may not be the usual way they spend time with peers, but having that face-to-face interaction is going to help your child have incidental social interactions and have them practice using social skills with peers similar to the skills they’ll use when they re-enter school.
- 3) **If appropriate, sit down and practice social skills.** For much younger kids or children who you know struggle with social skills, one approach can be to intentionally sit down and practice social skills. Some basic things to work on are the social simplicities that we all use but don’t think of (saying hello when you see someone,



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

waiting your turn to talk, not yelling at a person in a conversation, making eye contact, active listening skills like nodding, responding to what the person just said instead of saying what you want to say). For older children or children who already have a good level of social awareness, this approach will seem forced and be ultimately ineffective.

Academic

A lot of learning is dynamic and happens with intention when you think about many different variables (behavior, social, emotional, etc). However, the basis of academic support should always focus on how can the child best learn. Here are some key points to consider when your child is engaged in a learning opportunity:

- 1) **Learn Independently.** Ideally the best way for a student to learn everything intended by their teacher is to engage in the learning opportunity as much as they can on their own.
- 2) **Use Supports Responsibly and Effectively.** Some students need extra supports to learn. For example, executive functioning supports are a good way for younger children who haven't built organizational skills to access learning regardless of organization ability. A good support is a way for a student to access learning, not for you to do the work/learning for them. For example, if your child has trouble writing, you could write math problems for them as they dictate what to write. They are still engaged with the content, you are only helping remove a barrier to them learning.
- 3) **Let the children explore.** If a student is really excited about something related to what you're learning, let them explore that before bringing them back to the core of what they're learning. Curiosity is a good, healthy thing to have, and we want to support where our gifted learner's interests are while we teach them core concepts.



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

Emotions

Everybody has feelings, but gifted children can feel things very deeply and can be overly expressive with their feelings. Here are some feelings you may see, and general ways with how to approach strong feelings.

- 1) **My child is feeling an undesired emotion. What do I say?** Validate that they are feeling the emotion, or label the emotion. "You seem very worried right now," or "I can see that you're upset." Validating the emotion is the first step to dealing with undesired emotions in a healthy way. Tell them that you want them to be there, and be emotionally supportive by affirming yourself as someone they can rely on. "I'm sorry you're feeling upset, and I know work can be hard. Things feel hard for me sometimes too. You can do this, and I'm here for you." While you are listening and coaching your child on emotions or behavior, make sure to act unemotional and calm.
- 2) **No. I'm. NOT.** If your child denies that they are feeling an undesired emotion, drop it. Don't make the conversation into them having to articulate their emotional state. Your child, by denying feeling an emotion, is expressing that they're not ready to process it and may be getting more upset, or they may be communicating that they are ready to move on. Change the focus back to something else, either schoolwork or something neutral.
- 3) **Oh no. My child is upset or angry. HELP!** It is important that you always try to de-escalate a situation. Take a breath, communicate that you need a minute, and give yourself and your child some space. If a child is angry (clenched teeth, scowls, yelling, hitting, red in the face, etc.) it is a sign that they've lost control and cannot properly make decisions. Wait for them to cool down, or even for them to be sad. Being sad (crying, hiding, etc.) is a sign that they can process what has happened.
- 4) **My child is very, very worried- and so am I. What do I say?** We have all experienced big changes in our routines and everyday lives. If your child is feeling worried, this is normal. If you are feeling worried, this is normal. You as the adult need to communicate to your child that though things are changing, you are going to keep them safe. If you become overly worried, your child will see that as a sign that something is wrong, and it will increase their worry. It is ok to be honest with your children and tell them that you don't know what is going to happen while also communicating that you are going to be a source of stability. "Hey, I know things are changing a lot right now. It's a bit overwhelming, and I don't like it either. It's ok to feel uncertain. But, no matter what happens, I will do what I can to keep you safe. If you feel worried, know that I am always making decisions to keep you safe. I love you, and



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

things are going to be ok." It is also good practice to limit the amount of worried talk and news information your child is hearing during this time.

- 5) **Move On.** Everybody feels different emotions every day. This is normal. It's easy to let feeling an unwanted emotion affect your hour, afternoon, or entire day. Our children can express emotions in a big way, and it can be easy to let that dominate a lot of time. Remember: just because your child felt sad or angry for an hour in the morning does not mean this should affect the entire day. It is normal and healthy to feel emotions, and it is normal and healthy to move on after those emotions have been processed. It is often exhausting as a parent/ caregiver - to feel like you are a shock absorber for the child's emotion and you are not allowed to have your own response and reaction. It takes tremendous control. However, showing emotional control and calm models a path your child can learn to replicate. Giving yourself a timeout if you are upset shows them how to do this also. Following up after you have lost your patience, but cycling back, owning it, apologizing and then moving on from it shows them how to do this also.

Executive Functioning Skills/Supports

Executive functioning is a set of structures in the brain, specifically related to the prefrontal cortex, that control a myriad of skills, such as: organization, emotional control, sensory regulation, a concept of time, judgement, decision making, and planning. One's brain builds skills and structures related to all of these as they age, and one's ability to perform these skills typically positively correlates with their age. Many other factors, such as giftedness, learning disorders, and psychiatric disorders can also play a role in the development of executive functioning skills. Here are some skills/supports you can use to help with your child's executive functioning skills:

- 1) **Consistency is Key!** The more consistent you are and the more you give your child repetition that is predictable and easy to understand, the more you will support their organizational skills, concepts of time, and planning skills. Some things you'll want to keep consistent: a daily academic schedule, bedtime and bedtime routines, wake up and morning routines, at least consistent meal time once a day, independent work time, regular break times, and other daily activities (washing hands, easy chores, etc.)
- 2) **STOP acronym** (space, time, objects, and people)
 - **Space:** give your child a consistent "work space" at home. If they are young, make it a public area, like a dining room table. If they are 8-11, it can be somewhere designated in the house, like a desk in their room. With middle



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

school kids it can be more flexible- they've (likely) learned more nuanced strategies to help them create a workspace that may be the couch, their bed, out on a balcony or porch, etc.

- **Time:** create an academic schedule that is more rigid as they are younger and more relaxed as they are older. Allow times for breaks and free time.
- **Objects:** provide them with objects they can pair to "work time" to help cue their brain into a work mode, such as: headphones, pencil/paper, calculator, desk, certain blanket or pillow, blank uncluttered table without visual distractions, etc.
- **People:** this refers to their role, so remind them that when learning, they are "being a student." This should go with certain schema building expectations for "student," such as "students learn" or "students do good, quality work," "students are good listeners," "students work hard even when it is difficult," You can also give them an "er" label for their role, "You are a writer now" or problem solver/ engineer / creator / analyzer / etc. This gives them a category to help them visualize their role and step into it.

- 3) **Get Ready, Do, Done.** This is a common tool for helping students independently complete a task. The idea is for a student to plan out their task, then use that plan to complete the task. Use "Get Ready, Do, done" but plan it with them by working backwards. (write/draw it out so they can see!)

- **Done:** start with what the task looks like when it's done. For example, if it's an essay, remind them that what you're completing is 5 paragraphs of work, 3-5 sentences each, and that they're turning it in. You can draw a picture of what that looks like.
- **Do:** how are you actually going to do the task? Using the paper analogy, the do here would be physically writing or typing the paper.
- **Get Ready:** look to the "do" part and ask "how will I do that?" So for the paper analogy again you'd ask "how will I write a paper?" and help them to generate awareness that, well, you need a pencil and paper, or your computer, to do it.

***side note: you can always break these parts down as much as possible to help your student when appropriate. For example, breaking down what a paragraph looks like to include: transition sentence, claim, supporting topic, supporting detail, fact, concluding sentence.



The Massachusetts School of
Science, Creativity and Leadership

These are some basic strategies. Guiding students requires our whole minds, hearts, and tremendous emotional fortitude. Who you are being sets the stage for who they can be. If you model a clear schedule and set of norms, this will give calm in the home. If you use a calm voice to describe your emotions and reactions, you pave the way for them to do so also. If you talk about the strategies you take to give yourself a break and then re-focus on the work to achieve something you are proud of, they will enact that as well.

In the end of the day, though, the most important thing right now is that kids feel loved, safe, and connected to other people. This is also a time when their work for school, even more than ever, should not be a source of “stress.” This is a time to prioritize outdoor time, hands-on real projects at home, and video chats with friends! Additionally, as always, if kids are getting stressed, communicate that to teachers and counselors. If your child needs a break, give it to them. Homeschoolers often only do 2 or 3 hours of “academic” learning in a day, so our outline for a 6 hour remote schooling schedule is ambitious, and may not work for all kids. Ultimately, you as the parent are the arbiter of the right frame for *your* child.

Please reach out to the Counseling Team via Slack or email if you’d like to talk about these or any other strategies and how to apply them in your home with your child. We are here for you. We do not have all the answers, but we will brainstorm together to come up with new things to try!

Wishing you well,
The Counseling Team
(Eileen, Malcolm, Kara, Edye, Sam, Tyler, and Sigourney)