



Learning During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic required purposeful changes to learning strategies and engagement in healthy living habits. Improved communication between students, families, and teachers is essential to successful learning outcomes for students.

Keywords: COVID-19, Education, Family, Health, Learning, Pandemic, Technology

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our days were busy and over-scheduled. We ran from thing to thing and we tried to manage the demands of our day-to-day existence. Our family of five was navigating the spring semester with a pretty good flow, until the pandemic hit. Within one weekend, we went from a predictable structure to immediate uncertainty with little understanding or direction on how to navigate this change.

Each child in our family attended a different school. Each school and teacher chose a different approach to student success. The varied approaches meant that our family received communication regarding student expectations that often differed significantly. Initially, the different strategies made it almost impossible to craft a strategy for our family to successfully adjust to remote learning. These different strategies also created angst in each child because they wanted to do well, the conflicting messages we received were confusing and frustrating. The different strategies, angst, and pandemic immediately upended the harmony of the household. Suddenly siblings with different interests, preferences, and schedules became “co-workers” that had to find strategies to collaborate to create a productive and positive living and learning space. In spite of the co-worker relationships, space, access to technology to complete academic requirements, and personal schedules were often in conflict. For example, our household has three computers; however, one

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laptop is unreliable, and the second laptop has a faulty screen, leaving the final working desktop computer in the bedroom of one sibling as a viable option. Pre-COVID, we were able to manage technology needs because everyone had access to technology at school. However, ensuring each child had adequate access became a challenge once all instruction moved online and we lost the opportunity to use classroom technology. To overcome this, the kids worked together to craft a daily schedule that allowed each person sufficient access to the desktop computer in one siblings room. The plan included personal and creative time as well as exercise to ensure that each person maintained some control over their day-to-day experiences while accomplishing schoolwork and time for fun.

Interestingly, the younger kids were quickly able to follow a consistent daily schedule; however, the oldest child found the plan to be too constricting and this created additional anxiety because she needed more flexibility throughout her day to keep her on track. Further complicating matters by increasing the family tension, both parents were now home all day, every day. While the school day had offered daily opportunities to be with peers and these interactions provided a sense of freedom, with everyone together all the time there were more opportunities for friction that further challenged the transition. The kids moved from “public school kids” to “home school kids” overnight and they felt isolated from their peers and the crucial social-emotional element of learning in a face-to-face classroom disappeared. While technology allowed for interaction, the physical component associated with a sense of belonging, community, and excitement was missing; In short, they were sad. The kids expressed that for the first month or so of quarantine, they and their friends experienced a collective sense of depression. Furthermore, our kids felt this for longer because of the decision to limit physical interaction with others, while their friends were able to hang out still like they did pre-COVID. We decided that our kids would not be given the same pre-COVID freedom out of concern for their health and safety and the health and safety of others. This tension was further exacerbated by peer pressure not to follow the quarantine recommendations and these feelings had a dramatic impact on their motivation.

Motivation continued to be impacted by conflicting and inconsistent messages from the schools because it seemed like each teacher was left to fend for himself or herself and not all had the same level of training or comfortability with using technology for pedagogy. These differences meant there was considerable variation in assignment type, difficulty, and how much instruction occurred. The kids quickly grew frustrated with how inconsistent their day-to-day schooling became at this time.

The Fall provides more uncertainty because we still do not know if schools will re-open, if face-to-face classes will resume, or if our educational existence will remain virtual. Not knowing what the future holds is unsettling and, with that said, we have learned some things from our experience. The unexpected, extended break from our pre-COVID understanding of normal provided a much-needed reality check. We were busy being busy and we were not taking good care of our health. We all needed more sleep, more exercise, and healthier eating habits. Our “new” schedule forced us to re-examine our choices and live a slower-paced life. Also, we began to manage our essential needs better, built exercise into our day, and shifted from eating lots of takeout to cooking at home together.

As we navigate the remainder of the summer, we are mindful of the challenges the Fall will bring and the undeniable pressure teachers feel. The children have not had much of a summer break and like teachers they have been planning and preparing for multiple instructional delivery methods while trying to identify strategies to keep students, themselves, and their families safe. To maintain the positive aspects of our “new normal,” and for the kids to have a safe and productive return to school, communication must improve. For us all to have success, our communication must be consistent, constant, and transparent and it will be essential that we check in with each other to ensure that what we are doing is working for all involved. If communication reveals that things are not working, then we have to commit to making changes in the future to ensure we achieve the most favorable outcomes for our health, safety, and education. Our kids depend on it.

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Lily Van Mullem is a Junior in High School. She is actively involved in student leadership, Mock Trial, and serves on her school’s yearbook staff. She is the oldest of the three children in the Van Mullem family.

Heather Van Mullem is a mom, a professor of Kinesiology and Health, and a part-time law student. She is most proud of her bright, caring, and inquisitive kids.