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Setting up for Success at Home: Using Ci3T Structures to Facilitate Positive, Productive Continuous Learning Opportunities during the COVID-19 Crisis

To protect the health and safety of all communities, many schools across the country have closed in response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). With these closures, educators and families alike are preparing to support a “new normal” that includes providing learning for children in new ways, such as online-learning for families who have access to the internet and other technological resources. For families without these resources, there will need to be opportunities for continuous learning that do not rely on internet access and electronic devices (e.g., printed books, work packets, activities). In this practice guide, we offer five suggestions for families as they set up structures to support their children for more time at home.

1. Plan for Safety First: Set Routines

Taking care of yourself, your families, and friends can help everyone cope better in response to the stresses and uncertainty of COVID-19. We know children are sensitive to what is happening in their environment and respond in ways that reflect the responses of those around them. When families respond calmly, confidently, and proactively, they can provide the best support for their children. This begins with planning for safety first, then developing and practicing new procedures until they become established routines.

For everyone, this begins with creating a safe and clean environment following recommended guidelines from the Departments of Health and Center for Disease and Control ([CDC, 2019](#)). This may include cleaning and disinfecting your home, [following guidelines for hand washing](#), and disinfecting frequently touched spaces. Once procedures are established, it is important everyone knows what their role is and what is expected. Adults can teach, model, and practice with all children appropriate preventative measures (i.e., most up to date) until they are predictable and routine. This includes washing hands, keeping hands away from our face, and regularly sanitizing surface areas (including toys and electronics). Other ways of staying healthy include getting enough nutrition, rest, exercise, and limiting (younger children) or balancing (older youth) screen time.

Consider ways to share age appropriate information and use resources for helping children understand the situation. Have regular, yet short, fact-sharing discussions in ways your child can understand. Prolonged discussions, over explaining, and misinformation (e.g., fibbing, prettying-up the truth) can increase anxieties and worries. When a child brings up a worry or emotion it is important to validate by acknowledging their feelings, showing empathy, and then moving forward calmly with the day’s plans. For example, when a child says they are worried about missing activities at school, you might say “It’s ok to feel what you are feeling, it makes sense to me that you’d be feeling scared and it’s ok to feel anxious. Your teachers and I get worries about this too. When I feel that way, I talk to someone I trust, do what I can do, and focus on something I enjoy.”

2. Schedule for Success: Create A “New Normal”

After creating routines for keeping your family members safe, another priority is to establish a “new normal” at home. One step is to make a schedule including the major happenings of the day. For example: wake up time, breakfast, morning instructional or learning block, time to socialize using remote technology, lunch time, afternoon instructional or learning block, exercise, dinner time, recreational and leisure time, and finally time for bed.

By creating a regular schedule, we create a predictable structure for our children and adolescents. Predictability creates a feeling of safety, and helps children know what to expect each day. This is particularly relevant at times when we are hearing new federal, state, and community directives daily. Schedules facilitate a sense of safety for our children and safeguard against too much screen time, limit the risk of missing important opportunities for continuing learning, and support engagement in positive, productive activities instead of focusing solely on their concerns about the pandemic.

Regular, predictable routines for ensuring adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise will help all family members manage anxieties about the current situation. Important also is setting limits on access to social media and other news outlets. While it is important for families and children to discuss information about how to keep safe during the pandemic – such as the importance of social distancing (a precaution to avoid becoming sick or spreading the disease), quarantine (separation of people believed to have been exposed to the disease), and isolation (separation of those who are sick) – too much access to information on the pandemic can be overwhelming for children, youth, and even adults.

3. Set and Teach Expectations

After you have created your family’s schedule for the weekdays (and perhaps even the weekend!), the next step is to think about what your child needs to know to successfully engage in the activities throughout the day. We suggest you create an expectation matrix for your elementary-, middle-, or high school-age children to use as a visual reminder. You might have seen similar expectation matrices in your child’s school that defined expectations for all key settings in the school building: classroom, hallway, cafeteria, and so on. These expectations include specific behaviors for how to be respectful, be responsible, and give best effort in each of those settings (or organized by the social expectations for your child’s school). When providing these types of positive behavior supports in the home, start by determining 3-5 overall expectations which might be the same as those in your child’s school. Keeping the same expectations as your child’s school (e.g., be respectful, be responsible, give best effort) will actually help your child to make connections between school and home (e.g., what is learned at school can also be useful at home). Then, you can either identify settings in your home or key activities such as those in your schedule (e.g., morning routines, academic blocks, bedtime routines). For each, work with your child and other family members to think about a few important, positively phrased expectations that are critical for success. For example, during study time you might set as an expectation for your middle or high school students to remove distractors (e.g., cell phones). Instead of listing the “don’ts” list the “dos.” Instead of saying “don’t get close to others” when going for a walk outside, instead say, “stay at least 6 feet from others.”

Once the expectations are figured out, the next step is to teach these expectations to your child and explain why they are important. For example, you might explain, “We are putting these expectations in place to keep everyone in our family and community safe. They will help our family enjoy the time we have together until we can enjoy other people’s company and go back to socializing in-person.” Explain to your child that you want this to be a productive time for them academically so they are on track when returning to school. Also, explain you want to concentrate on the positive by focusing on and acknowledging what is expected more often than pointing out when things are going wrong.

We encourage you to post the expectation matrix as a reminder for the whole family on what is expected. Then, be certain to acknowledge your child when they meet expectations, telling them exactly what they did well (e.g., “Thank you so much for putting your dishes in the dishwasher after breakfast, I appreciate you helping to keep the kitchen cleaned up!”; “Thank you for waiting on the sidewalk when your ball went into the street.”). Highlighting the positive will also help you to notice the great things your child is doing and it will feel far better for you to have many positive interactions with your child as opposed to pointing out the things they overlooked (e.g., “You forgot to put your dishes in the dishwasher.”).

In brief, by making expectations clear and visible, teaching and revisiting expectations in a positive tone, and noticing when your child meets these expectations, you will help to create a positive, productive, safe—and even enjoyable experiences at home!

4. Use Simple Strategies to Support Your Child at Home

Now that you have worked with your family to build a schedule and expectations, the next step is to put tools in your tool kit to support children as they move through the day. Fortunately, there are several simple, practical, and effective strategies you can easily learn and use throughout the day (see ci3t.org/pl). We would like to briefly introduce these four strategies:

- a. **Behavior Specific Praise.** Behavior specific praise (BSP) is simply using words to acknowledge when your child is meeting expectations (e.g., doing the specific behaviors listed in your expectation matrix or other typically expected behaviors). For example, instead of saying “good job!” a parent might say, “thank you so much for putting your cellphone away during lunch time this afternoon” or “I appreciate you joining me for a walk after lunch.” This helps your child to understand exactly what was valued. Ideally BSP is delivered sincerely, right away (very soon after the behavior occurs), and often. Rather than praising things your child cannot control (e.g., being smart or pretty), focus on praising behaviors your child **can** control (e.g., effort). This very simple strategy works to increase on-task and other desirable behavior, and decreases undesirable behaviors (e.g., being disruptive or arguing).
- b. **Choice.** Offering your child choices is another simple and effective way to not only support completing their academic tasks, chores, and other commitments (e.g., practicing a musical instrument), but also help your child to build autonomy and other self-determined behaviors. As the parent, you could offer choices for younger children, such as: “Would you like to brush your teeth first or take a bath first?” “Would you like to facetime Grandma before or after lunch?” “Would you like to listen to the story on the computer or would you like me to read it to you?” For older children, choices could include: “Would you make dinner tonight or tomorrow night?” “Would you like to work on your science or social studies activities first?” “Would you like to play Sequence or Monopoly for family game night?” Create 2 or more options. Then, ask your child to decide which one they prefer and be certain to honor their request. Choice is a proactive strategy that can be used before challenges arise. Incorporating choices has been effective in preventing problems from occurring.

- c. **Precorrection:** Precorrection is another proactive strategy that is simple and takes very little time. Basically, once your expectations are decided and posted in your expectation matrix, you simply remind your child what you are looking for from them. For younger children, you might precorrect by saying, “Just a reminder, when we are done eating, we are going to wipe off the kitchen counters to keep them clean and germ-free.” For older children, it would be the same: “Hey bud, just a reminder you can enjoy some screen time until 1 p.m., which is when your teacher will connect with your AP biology group on Zoom to review your assignment.” To support children with social distancing guidelines, you might use precorrection prior to going on a walk or other outdoor activity. For example, “Remember if you see a friend you can say hello but keep a safe distance away from each other.” When returning home from a public space you might use precorrection to remind children of the handwashing procedure when entering your home, “When we get inside the house the first stop is the bathroom to wash your hands.”

- d. **Active Supervision:** Active supervision can be used in many different times of the day, when children are working on academic work, during leisure activities, and even during mealtimes. After expectations are taught and well-understood, parents or other adults move about, observe what is happening, and interact with their child. When the child is meeting expectations, the parent can provide acknowledgments using behavior specific praise to let their child know what was going well and provide private, respectful feedback or redirection when challenges arise. Active supervision works particularly well when used with precorrection. Remind them what you are looking for throughout the day, and then be on the lookout to notice and acknowledge!

5. Emotional Well-being

During these uncertain times, it is more important than ever to think about the emotional well-being of everyone. If your school is currently implementing Ci3T, they probably already have adopted resources to teach skills that promote emotional well-being. This might include targeting self-awareness (e.g., identifying and naming emotions), self-management (e.g., impulse control), responsible decisions-making (e.g., identifying problems), relationship skills (e.g., social engagement), and social awareness (e.g., perspective taking; [CASEL](#), 2019).

Just like connecting behavior expectations between school and home, families can build on social-emotional skills learned at school by teaching, modeling, and reinforcing these necessary soft skills by using the language already familiar to your child. During this time, it may be especially important to target self-regulation, mindfulness, and relationship skills. When thinking about what skills to target and support, think about what everyone needs to know to be successful, and what skills would support more challenging times of the day.

When providing these types of supports, one approach to promoting emotional-well-being is to embed instruction in everyday routines, activities, and transitions to promote child engagement, learning, and independence. By using embedded instruction, families can take advantage of regularly occurring events to teach important skills by turning them into teachable moments. For example, you may begin your day

with a daily morning meeting activity to review expectations and the daily schedule. Take advantage of these regularly occurring activities to practice skills and facilitate more opportunities to practice. You may even connect social behaviors to academic skills. For example, at the start of the day, each family member can set goals for their work and social times. This may also be an opportunity to create new ways for keeping your child connected to family and friends through remote technologies. For example, “Today I am going to FaceTime grandpa and read him a story.” “I am going to draw a picture of the flowers blooming in the yard to mail to Aunt Victoria.” Families can then discuss progress and successes and continue teachable moments during their mid-day lunch, and throughout the day.

In the days ahead, we will be working with our Ci3T Partners to develop additional resources to support families as they foster positive, productive, and safe environments during the school day as part of our temporary “new normal.” We hope these five practical suggestions prove useful as you establish new routines. We will be posting additional resources such as sample schedules, expectation matrices, and items for you to use at home. Please visit ci3t.org for these and other resources.