



# Heart Heart

A Newsletter for Parents of Children with Disabilities

"...that their hearts may be encouraged..." Colossians 2:2

**"But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Matthew 19:26**



Fall 2020

## Supporting Special Needs Students Online as a Parent

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Everyone's life has been spun around the last few weeks with mass quarantines and school closures. When this all started, we thought it would last a couple of weeks. We were so wrong! It seems now there's no end in sight and many states are beginning to announce schools will not reopen this year. Finding a meaningful way of supporting special needs students online can be a real challenge for both parents and teachers. So, if you're trapped in the house trying to figure out how distance learning is going to work for your child with special needs, here are some suggestions.

### Parents Supporting Their Special Needs Child

If you are the parent of a child with a disability who has suddenly been thrust into the role of full-time teacher on top of everything else, these last few weeks have felt like a year! People with neurotypical children have struggled to find a way to keep them engaged in learning and also balance their online work responsibilities. They don't know how much easier they have it! Supporting a special needs child online is no easy feat. You're working with shorter attention spans, the need for tactile learning tools, and trying to meet the needs of a child who typically gets intensive supports. First off, there's one thing you have to know. Every parent is struggling with some part of distance learning right now. This is hard. So give yourself some slack. You're not expected to master this overnight. With that in mind, there are a few things that you can do to support your child through the school closures and hopefully prevent a significant loss in skills.

#### 1. Emphasize Structure

Schools will reopen again, I promise! When that time comes one of the most difficult things for most kids is getting back on a normal schedule. As hard as

that seems right now, it's important that you retain some routine in your day. For a lot of our students with special needs, especially Autism, routine is King. You want to put in place a broad schedule so that your child knows what's in store on a daily basis. Sometimes an undefined daily schedule can lead to anxiety and increased behaviors partially because a child doesn't know what's coming next. That is actually true for most people. We crave routine and predictability, so build that into your home school. Use a visual schedule, which can be as simple as a piece of paper with some general times and ideas. And also bust out a timer. The one on your phone or even the oven is perfect. It's reminiscent of the bells ringing at school and it's a good tool to mark the passage of time through each day. Read this post for free printable visuals you can easily implement. And know one thing. I'm not suggesting that you plan every microsecond of every day the entire week, but students with disabilities are acutely aware of their daily schedule. If you've seen a spike in behaviors or increased anxiety in the last few weeks, it could be the lack of routine or the destruction of the normal school routine that has set your child off. Getting back to some semblance of predictability will help alleviate those issues. Make it a point to establish a schedule and a routine. If anxiety seems to be a continued problem, introduce a social story to address some school closure and the idea that it will reopen soon. It's important your child knows this will not last forever. *[\*\*Check out the one here about school closure and the free one about COVID-19.]*

#### 2. Focus on Communication

Right now we are all looking for meaningful ways to connect and communicate with others. With your child

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out of school, and access to peers limited, it can be difficult to practice communication while at home. On top of that, outside service providers are not seeing students with the same frequency or intensity as they would at school. That could mean your speech minutes are not as meaningful as normal. Communication is one of those skills that erodes quickly, so you want to find a way for your students to practice communication as much as possible while school is closed. What that looks like will depend entirely on your child. For some kids, you can supplement your communication by reaching out to friends and family for online chat time. Video will let your child still target interpreting facial expressions, work on maintaining eye contact, and also allow them to see someone other than you. Make yourself available so that you can coach your child as they speak and guide them to appropriate questions to ask or cue them taking turns while chatting... just control the urge to take over the conversation or answer for your child. For kids who typically have access to a Voice output device (VOD) or AAC system at school, you may find that you're doing without during the school closures. It's wildly important to maintain consistent use of a communication system if that's what your student uses to interact with others. Like I tell teachers, the only way your child will master their communication device is if you use it, model good usage, and make it a non-negotiable. You may be without a digital communication device during the closure. At the very least use yes and no pieces of paper or a paper core board. I just made a digital one available using your device's default PDF reader that has some interactivity. No matter what you use, the point is to keep your child communicating to the maximum extent possible.

### **3. Target Tech Skills**

We are all quickly finding out where our technology deficits lie. Supporting special needs students online is like a crash course in Ed-Tech! Truth be told, however, is that these tech skills are huge barriers to kids with special needs who are often shorted when it comes to tech ed. Now is a great time for your child to learn the ins and outs of video chat, how to use speech to text, and how to access a phone's functional apps like the calculator. Tech skills like these are essential for independent living in the future. On top of that, they are skills that are difficult to practice in the classroom

because of a lack of student provided devices and firewall barriers. Take advantage of this. Have your kid command Alexa, send messages by text to speech or email their teacher with voice output. If you want some free technology lessons for your child (or yourself), check out *\*\*GCF Learn Free*. Start with the Online Safety, Internet or Email and then branch out from there.

### **4. Improve Functional Skills**

There are so many independent living and functional skills that are essential for your child's success after they graduate K-12. Feel empowered teaching Laundry 101, Cleaning the Bathroom 102, or auditing I'm Hungry, Now What? because these are skills every young person needs to succeed in life. Even if your child isn't slated for a fully independent life after graduation, it's still very engaging to be in the kitchen while food is being prepared, getting up and moving to support normal chores, and having extra time to spend with you while doing things in the house. Sometimes those functional skills connect deeply with academics, like a child planning what they will order online with a menu. Menu math (\*\*like this free one here) is engaging, functional, and academic. For a more capable mathematician, calculate tax, discounts and tip. (\*\*Grab our subscriber freebie for a printable to help you with this). For basic skills, target whole number addition, paying using the 'dollar up' method, or 1:1 correspondence with money.

### **5. Move... Please Move**

Right now, your child is missing out on PE, recess, walking the halls, and moving frequently. If your child has been busy studying Netflix for the last few weeks, they're probably not moving as much as they should. That can have a profound impact on work stamina, physical fitness, and mental clarity. All of these things will work against your child when they return to the classroom. Be sure to schedule time for physical fitness every day. also, take time to have your child explore the Arts. You can access online keyboards to practice music, DJ with Incredibox, or watch YouTube videos to get busy with some art (like ArtHub). Really, the point is staying engaged and lessening the amount of mindless screen time. My youngest son has loved using the yoga posing cards that come in my calm down corner kit. Any yoga will do though. It targets mind and body!

## 6. Academics Too

Yes, I can see that six ton elephant in the room. It's looking right at me. I wish I could give you some very concrete answers to how to manage academics for your special needs child during online learning, but the truth of the matter is they have an IEP or 504 because they need adaptations and supports specific to them and their needs. To shoot out blanket academics to you would undermine the IEP you've fought for. With that in mind, I suggest you do these three things. One, be sure you have a current copy of your child's IEP. Take a minute to read through it, especially focusing on the goals. Then choose the ones you will target. It doesn't have to be all of them, unless you have the mental space and confidence to attack them all. Instead, pick the most critical skills or the ones you know your child has worked hardest to acquire. Two, get materials to address those critical skills or for each IEP goal. Reach out to your teacher, put a post out on Facebook for others to help out with activities they've used, check out the resources your district is making available, or hop on Teachers Pay Teachers and snag a couple of activities. If all of this seems like too much, I suggest you head over to either Khan Academy or BrainPopJr. Khan Academy is what I am using with my kids to supplement what is being provided by the district. It is a non-profit and they have a schedule template available for parents here. It is a great place to start if you are already overwhelmed supporting special needs students online. Download the app for basic skills and get started. Three, think about how to make your home more educational. Start by setting up a space for 'school' in your house. Hopefully that is away from the TV and feels like a work space. Your child may only be able to 'work' for a few minutes before they need a break, but it's a start. Be sure you're going through the morning routine every school day including getting dressed (or at least changing into your 'daytime' pajamas). Read and do math with things around the house. Use cereal boxes to read, do math, for number/letter identification or calculation. Search for things in the house by function or ask what are items we find in the kitchen... it is just a way to engage the mind in academic activities while we're held up in the house. There are lots of ways to engage in academics with everyday items. Try this **\*\*Free Choice Board download** I just put together. The point is to NOT let your child stay plugged in all day on mindless activities.

Well, there you have it. The six tips for supporting special needs student's online learning as a parent. I also have tips for supporting special needs students online for teachers here. It may give you some more ideas as we all hunker down for the long haul.

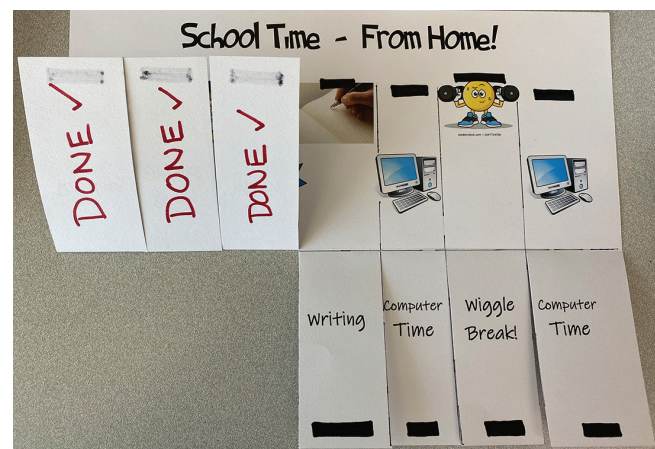
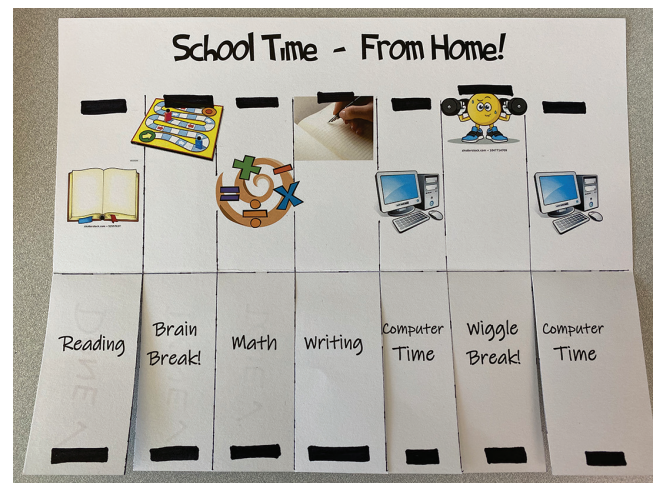
Remember, you can do this.

**\*\*See the webpage article directly from Noodle Nook for any links that are mentioned and suggested in the article.**

## Heart to Heart DIY

What's Next?! The article above talked about how helpful visual schedules can be. Whether your child is in school right now (online, hybrid, or still in person) or not—visual schedules can be so helpful for both structure and independence. Allowing your child to see what can be expected or the day as well as mark the task completed is such a great tool. There are TONS of visual schedule ideas out there—Pinterest is full of hundreds!! Here's one way that I find that's really easy and re-usable daily. And I find magnets to be easy to use physically and super satisfying

As always, let us know if you have a DIY that works well for you so we can pass it along to others!



## Support Groups



Contact us at **717.859.4777**  
or visit [hvmi.org](http://hvmi.org) for details.

Join other parents of “children” (of any age) with disabilities for fellowship, sharing, prayer and encouragement from God’s Word at our **PIP** (Parents in Progress) Support Group meetings:

### **\*South Jersey** –Collingswood, NJ

1st Monday, 7:30 PM (October-May)  
(Bible Club program available during meeting time for children, teens and adults with a disability.)

### **Lancaster County** –Akron, PA

2nd Monday, 7:30 PM (October-May)

*\*Group indicated is temporarily on hold due to COVID restrictions.*

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* Matthew 11:28 (NIV)

There are days I REALLY wish the Lord would just give me the LEMONADE! I don’t want the lemons of life. I don’t want to have to gather them, wash them, cut them, squeeze them, and finally sweeten them—that’s quite a long and painful process!! So much of 2020 has felt like a bushel of LEMONS. Full of sour events and lots of situations that are out of my control. How quickly I forget that the Lord is always in control, and that His presence in my life is not determined by circumstances. So if you’re like me, and staring at the mountain of lemons that have been thrust into your lap—take heart!! The Lord knows so intimately our burdens and how weary we are. He promises to give us rest! What sweet, sweet lemonade the true rest that can only from the Lord is. We have to also remember that the lemonade can’t exist without the tart lemons to start with. May the Lord bless you as you cast your lemons at His feet, and let Him give you the blessings and rest He has in store!



## H\*VMI Upcoming Events

**October 9**

Annual H\*VMI Yard Sale, 28 Heritage Road, Akron PA

**November 20**

ExtraOrdinary Give event

*Heart to Heart* is produced by **Parents In Progress**, a ministry under the leadership of



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Enhancing Trust

## Parents In Progress

is a group designed just for parents of children with disabilities, offering resources to help them as they raise and nurture their children; and providing a “safe” environment of support and encouragement where they can freely discuss the issues unique to their families.

*“PIP is the one place I can truly express my frustrations because I know everyone there understands and cares.”*

Please feel free to contact *Heart to Heart* regarding articles, resources, or information contained in this publication. We also welcome your thoughts, personal testimonies, articles, and resources that would be helpful or encouraging to other parents!