



Tips to Support Students with Special Needs During Distance Learning

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If there's anything that teachers and parents have learned so far this school year, it's that distance learning simply isn't for everyone! With students online at home with plenty of distractions around them to hinder their focus, it's no wonder why some children are struggling with their virtual classes. Add on top of that the challenges faced by students in special populations, such as those with special needs, it can seem as if failure and falling behind is inevitable.

While remote learning certainly isn't ideal for every learner, especially those with an IEP or learning disability, the pandemic is nevertheless forcing some kids into online classes for the duration of the semester or school year. So, what can parents and teachers do to help ensure that these students don't fall behind?

Thankfully, there are a few tricks and tools that can make distance learning a little easier for our neediest children. They may not be perfect solutions to these challenging issues,

but the tips below can assist everyone involved in assisting special populations, such as those on an IEP for students with learning disabilities, 504 students, and even those who need language support in the online learning environment.

Strategies for Teachers

We're not going to sugarcoat it: teaching children who require special support services in the online setting is just plain hard! In the classroom, teachers are able to monitor student work as it happens, give specialized instructions, or make additional accommodations and modifications as they are needed during lessons and/or activities.

Obviously, the above supports are impossible when students are behind a screen with their cameras off! Sometimes it's necessary to turn to unique learning systems, as IEP goals often state that students must be supported in a specific way to show mastery throughout the year. So, what can a teacher do to help support kids who rely on their accommodations?

See the following list of strategies to implement in the virtual classroom:

- Utilize breakout room capabilities

Whether your district uses Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet, there are unique functions within each teleconferencing app that can be helpful to assist students with special needs. One of these tools is the breakout room function, that can allow a small group to gather in a virtual room outside of the main class call.

Breakout rooms can be especially useful if a teacher has a classroom aide or paraprofessional also on the call that assists students who receive inclusion support services. For instance, if some students require additional assistance from a special education aide, those students can be pulled out into a separate breakout session with that aide to deliver important accommodations such as oral administration of quizzes or tests.

Additionally, students can be pulled out into these breakout rooms so that either teacher can check with those students for understanding or reteach a particular concept. Breakout give teachers the same method of pulling aside a student for additional help so long as there is another adult or aide to help facilitate.

- If you have a teacher's aide, communicate often

In the past, it was easy to communicate with special educational aides because they were right there in the classroom! These days, it's a little tougher with everyone signing on to the same call. To fix this, be sure to exchange numbers with the paraprofessional or teacher to communicate during online lessons that involve the whole class.

Texting can be a useful way to manage this, and you may also plan to sign on a few minutes early or stay a little after class to talk with that aide individually. No matter which option you choose, be sure to communicate well and often to coordinate accommodations for students in need.

- Provide parents with a weekly checklist of assignments to submit

Even for kids who aren't on a unique learning plan, knowing what to submit and when can be a challenge when not all learning management systems are user friendly when it comes to listing assignments and due dates! For this reason, it might be helpful to go the extra mile and provide special needs students and their parents with a weekly newsletter or checklist of assignments that will be due each day and when.

Simply create a document that displays a table where assignments and due dates may be listed. Provide this at the beginning of each week to keep families organized.

- Don't be afraid to go beyond the IEP

At Kid's Academy, we already know that teachers are superheroes that already go above and beyond the call of duty to get the job done! As a teacher, chances are, during a typical class, you have made a choice in the past to grant a student another accommodation that is not currently a part of their IEP simply because you knew it would help.

This is exactly the recommendation during this strange time of distance learning. For example, if it would benefit a student to receive a modified test with fewer answer choices, it may be helpful to administer this assessment to a student, even if it's not required on their IEP. This may help bridge the gap considering that many students struggle with the online format in general.

- Teach students to use adaptive tools

As you may already be well aware, some accommodations are nearly impossible to provide in the online environment. For instance, 504 students or English language learners (ELLs) don't typically have a support aide available in a general education class, so an accommodation like oral administration of tests may not work. Fortunately, tools such as Microsoft's Immersive Reader can help supply those needed accommodations!

Immersive Reader is a tool available through the Microsoft Edge internet browser. It reads the text on the screen aloud to students, while enlarging the words as it reads to the child. This is helpful for children with dyslexia, as well as those with learning disabilities or language barriers.

Additionally, tools such as translation services available through Google Chrome may help ELL children to convert text into their home language. Overall, there are many

internet tools to use with students. Consider hosting a special tutorial for students and/or parents to model how to use these with kids at home.

[The Talented and Gifted app can also be used to support all learners, including those with special needs. Close learning gaps as kids work at their own pace. Subscribe today to get 50% off all plans!](#)

Tips for Parents

Conversely, as a parent, you may be looking for more information on how to provide support while kids are stuck at home struggling to learn through a screen. Try the following tips to make lessons easier to understand and run as smoothly as possible:

- Have plenty of patience on hand

Of course, this may just be the toughest recommendation! Parents always want what's best for their children, and it can be difficult to watch them struggle to understand or upset with potentially low grades. It's important to remember that school wasn't meant to be this way, and it will certainly not last forever!

In the meantime, try to practice patience with your child, and with their teacher who is trying their hardest to deliver top notch instruction and accommodations all through the internet. Communicate with teachers and with school staff if you have concerns about low grades and what it will mean regarding grade promotion later on in the school year.

- Try a weekly check in with the teacher via email

One helpful approach is to try setting aside a time and day each week for a quick email to the teacher or your child's case manager to see how things are going. Don't expect this to happen automatically. Ask to check if all assignments are submitted, but more importantly about whether he/she understands the concepts being taught.

- Participate in any IEP reviews, commonly known as an ARD

While families are required to be present at ARD meetings, it's best to take a more hands-on approach to the ARD process. Don't forget—you know your child best! Feel free to be vocal about your thoughts regarding specific accommodations you think would be helpful to support your child's needs. Prepare ahead of time and know what you would

like to ask the committee, as well as a list of potential accommodations that can be implemented to help.

- Learn how your child learns best. Think about any adaptive tools he/she might need, such as audio texts

Lastly, get to know your child's learning style, and think of a few tools that may be used at home. For instance, students who have dyslexia often need audiobooks to assist in reading stories or books. Ask the teacher or special education staff about using them during homework completion, or regarding the Immersive Reader tool listed above. Don't be shy about inquiring about whether these tools can be used during live lessons or in asynchronous assignments.

Obviously, distance learning is a challenge for many students, and isn't right for everyone. Unfortunately, many learners have no other options as many schools across the country have moved its classes online. Fortunately, there are a few tools to make virtual classes a little easier for both parents and teachers of special need students. Utilize the tips above to support your learners at home no matter their accommodations or unique needs.

