

How Effective is Online Learning for the Youngest Learners? Tips to Improve Success

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Teachers already know that the youngest students learn best through hands-on play. Walk into any Pre-K or kindergarten classroom, and it's easy to find centers filled with toys and manipulatives that allow children to explore and learn about the world. From play food to puzzles, the littlest of learners thrive on making that concrete connection through their play.

But in 2020, the coronavirus stopped in-person school in its tracks. What's more is that even for campuses that have opened this fall, many teachers and children are dealing with extensive safety restrictions that force educators and students six feet apart from each other, and protocols that prevent touching shared objects like toys in classroom centers.

The stark reality is that for many of the nation's youngest school children, the very foundations of their learning is currently hinging upon them being a successful online learner, often long before they're ready to interact with laptops and a teacher through a

screen. That leads us to the question that many teachers and parents are asking this year: just how effective is online learning for the youngest kids?

While most folks would surely say that virtual classes are not ideal for elementary children, it surely is better than having no classes at all, which would be the alternative if the pandemic struck decades ago. Join us as we unpack fact from fiction when it comes to the effectiveness of online [learning apps for kids](#) and keep reading to find online learning tips and tricks that teachers can employ to improve engagement and success.

Effective Learning: Do Remote Classes Fit the Bill?

For many families, 2020 has proved to be the first year that their children participated in virtual classes. Even so, online courses have grown in popularity with a dramatic rise in virtual programs and classes offered through states, districts, and both private and charter schools over recent years. With a more widespread implementation this past spring, educators who were previously teaching in person, were thrown head-first into the virtual classroom, and many were surprised to find out that online classes that serve K-12 schools often mimic the traditional school schedule.

Theoretically, such synchronous classes can run almost exactly as they might in the classroom, allowing for ample interaction with peers and instructors. However, according to Brown University's professor of education and public affairs, [Susanna Loeb](#), there are a few factors that make online classes less effective for kids:

- An in-person class encourages kids to engage thanks to social pressures that are absent when students are online

When children come together in a classroom, they are aware of the many social pressures that surround them. As humans, we are always looking to what other people do on a daily basis. Most folks just want to fit in, and they feel proud to be recognized. Children are the same, and even yearn for this attention more than adults. For that reason, many students are encouraged to participate in the classroom because they flourish when working with and performing for others.

In addition, the youngest and neediest learners depend upon a positive rapport with their teachers, which can be tough to build through a screen. A classroom environment motivates students to perform at their best for instructors they respect and love, as children thrive on relationships with their trusted adults. But when kids learn virtually, there is an inherent disconnect as the teacher often can't interact with or see the child on the other end.

- Many students do not have the support they need at home to facilitate learning

One of the biggest barriers that prevents children from learning online is the fact that their home lives may not provide them with the supports they need to be successful. Many working families are struggling to provide for the family alongside helping the kids complete schoolwork while supervised.

Other students may come from cultures or backgrounds that are not conducive to academic learning. When displaced from the classroom, these students fall further behind because they are not exposed to the structured environment that school provides.

- Students who struggle in school often face many more challenges while learning online

For the layperson, it may be hard to imagine how a student can enter preschool or kindergarten already behind and struggling in school. Unfortunately, this occurs every year, as many children are developmentally behind due to tough home conditions, learning disabilities, developmental delays, or the lack of learning materials early in life.

For those students, learning online will be even tougher, as they will continue to face more challenges as they proceed with online classes because they do not have the specialized help and accommodations they need to catch up to their classmates.

- Resources, such as hands-on manipulatives and opportunities, are absent while learning from home

Think about all the hands-on resources that are stored in your own classroom. Elementary educators have access to [learning games](#) and manipulatives such as play money, base blocks, clocks with movable hands, counters, building blocks and tiles, and more! Young learners need concrete ways to internalize information. When learning virtually, students simply don't have access to these manipulatives they so badly .

All said, it's easy to see why remote classes may fall far short of in-person classes in terms of effectiveness. So, what's a teacher to do when faced with the reality that many classes must be online due to the ongoing pandemic? Fortunately, there are ways to make online learning more successful, even if it can't replace the traditional experience of face-to-face classes.

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Tips for Online Learning Success



- Foster relationships by scheduling one-on-one time with each student

Of course, this may not always be easy due to the fact that many teachers now have larger student loads due to distance learning, but where feasible, it's important to schedule one-on-one time with each child to help build that relationship he or she so badly needs.

To maximize your time, conference with a student about a particular assignment, [printable worksheet](#) or lesson and focus on getting to know that student's strengths and weaknesses. By carving out the time to spend individually with each student, kids will learn to trust you. This will build motivation over time, while giving you the information you need to best serve every student in the class.

- Communicate clearly with parents to promote healthy school habits, such as study tips and keeping kids organized

Plan to send parents a weekly update or email that lets them know what's going on in class. Include a checklist of upcoming assignments to help keep students and families organized and on task. Furthermore, understand that parents are going through a tough time, too. Many are busy working from home or juggling childcare to make online learning work. Keep consistent with emails and include positive tips or tricks that

parents could use to help their children as they navigate this strange era of online [learning videos](#).

- If possible, offer to sign out manipulatives or hands-on resources to students who need them the most

Check with your school to see if hands-on tools, such as base ten blocks or counters, can be checked out to students at your campus. Even if this isn't a possibility for all students, it may be possible for students who have special needs or circumstances. Communicate with your campus leaders to see what is possible; manipulatives may be labeled and bagged and signed out to parents according to your unique campus and district policies.

- Create a newsletter that offers parents advice as to what can stand in as substitutes for the manipulatives young children use at school

For circumstances where the above tip is impossible, create a newsletter that offers advice as to what they can use at home to help their children learn. For example, students can use many objects as counters, such as dried corn kernels, nuts, or seeds.

For elementary art and music classes, think about what supplies around the house could be utilized to make art or music. Include those tips in the newsletter for the parents to use at home. Encourage parents to participate in any district-sponsored parent trainings that are aimed at helping them learn more about their role during this strange era of online learning.

Most of us can agree that online classes are not the most ideal situation for children, especially for those who are just starting out. While it has its flaws, distance learning is still better than what it would be like if the coronavirus pandemic hit years ago. Thanks to the technology we have today, teachers and students could come together to have class online. If you're a teacher trying to navigate the 2020-2021 school year, take heart, and utilize the above tips to make your classes as successful as can be.

