

Harnessing the Power of Parents | For K-12 Teachers

Now that kids are home, how can you *help parents be powerful partners in your students' learning*? Here are some tips inspired by the fields of adult learning and behavioral science. Behavioral science studies how people act and make decisions in a complex world.



One concept especially relevant today is *limited attention*. Research has shown that at any given moment in time, we have a finite amount of attention at our disposal. When we are worried about an important matter, we have less attention available for other tasks. You can address limited attention by *reducing the complexity of the information* you present, helping parents *process complicated information* even if they do not devote their full attention to it, and/or *providing reminders*.¹

E-communication

1. **Be very direct in email subject lines.** These 3 categories can help parents quickly prioritize and take the needed action:
 - a. What my student needs to do now. [Ex: “Math assignment due Friday”]
 - b. An offering of resources [Ex: “Resource - helpful math websites”]
 - c. A friendly update and check-in [Ex: “Just Checking In”]
2. **Place the most important piece of information first.** In the body of the email, place up front and bolded what the student must do and when. If parents read through the whole communication, they might miss what’s important.
3. **Self-Identify in every email.** Many parents have multiple kids in multiple schools. Please include your school name and for middle and high schoolers, the subject you teach without acronyms – in every communication.

School work

4. **Give limited assignments.** Don’t make it too hard on kids right now; they have a change of routine too. Overwhelm can cause stress and families giving up on the schoolwork if it seems too much.
5. **Remind parents to have a balanced approach.** Reassure parents regularly that it is okay if they don’t get to everything every day. Advise them to enjoy this time and join them in

¹ [Behavioral Interventions for Labor-Related Programs, published by Mathematica](#)

some of their activities. If something is not working out exactly as the teacher sends it, be creative with learning activities and have fun! Break up learning activities with down time, even if it means a video or nap.

Another helpful resource is the [Healthy Mind Platter](#) by Dan Siegel. This visual can help parents who worry that if they don't do all the suggested classwork every day, they will get behind. For kids who struggle with attention and focus, try spending time in a different mind area. *Movement, connection, and spontaneous play are all as important to mental health as focus time on academics.*



Virtual class time

6. **Slow down when you are talking;** even more than usual. Multiple distractions and the newness are taking kids longer to settle and to process.
7. **Teach online etiquette at the beginning of every session.** For example, instead of yelling out answers, kids could give a thumbs up when they want to respond.
8. **Wait.** Give extra time for kids to process the information on their own. Try counting silently to 10 before asking for responses.
9. **Include time to connect.** Start or end with time for kids to just talk about what they are feeling. Examples: Kids can acknowledge other students, family, teacher. Host a “show and tell” with items from home.

Feedback

10. **Keep a spirit of openness.** You have done your best thinking on how to prepare for this crisis. Feedback is asking for others' best thinking to make the strongest plans possible. At GLP we say *the purpose of feedback is affirmation and suggestions for the decision-maker.* Giving parents a specific (rather than freeform) method for feedback will get you the information you need without adding to your overwhelm. Try these questions in a simple google form to collect data for yourself or your team. (Read more about feedback with additional potential questions [here](#).)
 - a. Be specific: I am asking for feedback on _____ (today's lesson, technology, etc.)
 - b. Question for affirmation: What do you like about this _____?
 - c. Question for suggestions: What are your suggestions for strengthening _____?