5 Questions Answered: How Can Parents Help with Online Learning Success?

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As online learning becomes more prevalent in schools, more and more students are completing some of their coursework online. Some states even require students to take at least one online class to meet graduation requirements. While technology is the way of the future, many parents may feel uncomfortable with the unknown aspects of the virtual learning process. To ease some of that stress, we address five of the most common questions parents have about online or virtual learning, and provide strategies for parents to help with online learning success.

What are the benefits of online learning?

Convenience

For the most part, students can log on anytime of day or night to complete their coursework. Some schools may require exams and other high-stakes assessments be completed on campus, but the vast majority of coursework can be done whenever and wherever (as long as you have an internet connection and a computer or device). This makes online learning convenient for students who cannot go to school on a set schedule, such as athletes, working students, or those with medical conditions.
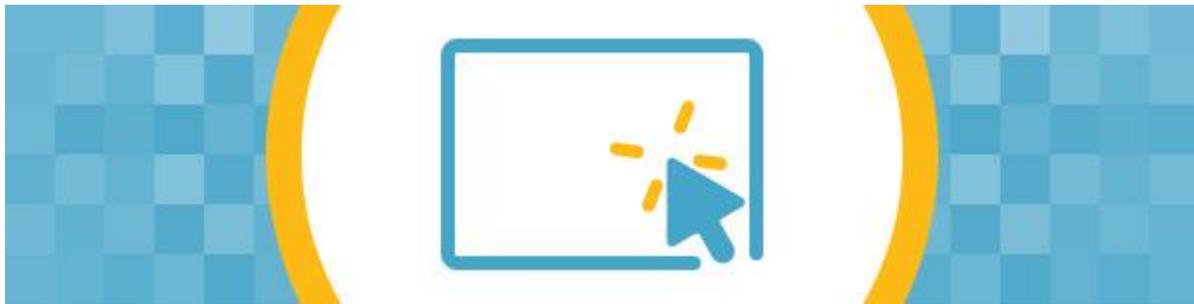
Self-paced learning

The beauty of online learning is that students are in charge of their learning pace. If students struggle with a concept, they can go back and review that specific section

without embarrassment. And students who are working ahead can progress quickly through a class without waiting for their classmates to catch up.

Variety of presentation

In an online classroom, the lecture is broken into small, digestible pieces where key concepts and vocabulary are highlighted, and activities are dispersed throughout the lesson to keep students actively engaged. A skilled teacher can only personalize the learning experience so much with a classroom of 25 (or more) students, but an online learning platform allows students to work at their own pace, offers embedded learning scaffolds, and alerts the teacher when students are struggling. Furthermore, an online classroom can provide students experience with technology enhanced items, which are appearing more and more on high-stakes assessments.

Is online school easier than a traditional classroom?

In short, no.

The workload for online and offline classes is the same. Just because a class is online doesn't mean it's less rigorous. Online students often have interactive lessons requiring them to respond to questions throughout the instruction and perform tasks to prove their understanding. A classroom teacher often only selects one student out of the class to answer a question and check for understanding. An online program asks every student every question to ensure they are understanding the concepts before moving on to new subject matter.

A good virtual program is so much more than a textbook on a screen.

Quality learning providers are offering courses with on-screen teachers and interactive, multimedia-rich instruction that utilizes graphics, simulations, and props. Assessments are used to collect data on exactly where students are struggling or excelling so instruction can be differentiated accordingly. A good course is also standards aligned, and the instructional model should be based on proven research on learning. Lessons

should also include systematic and explicit instructions, along with frequent checks for understanding.

Online courses also require more self-motivation and independent work than traditional, in-person classes do.

This can make the same coursework much more difficult because the student must stay on task without a teacher explicitly guiding them from one exercise to the next. Luckily, parents can play a pivotal role in that.

How can I help and support my student with his or her online learning?

Encourage open communication

The foundation of parental engagement comes from the parents' ability to facilitate communication and nurture close and trusting relationships with their student. Parents agree that adolescents begin to make decisions "they have to live with" but "don't always see the end from the beginning." So it's essential for parents to offer guidance on decisions that could affect a student's future (like academic integrity… see question #5). Parents can also help foster a relationship between the student and his or her teacher and provide other needed support when they know what's going on in the student's classroom.

Boost self-motivation

An online program provides students with great flexibility, but with that flexibility comes responsibility. Even though some students are very self-motivated, parents need to encourage this and work with students to learn to be accountable without a teacher literally looking over their shoulders. Have open and honest conversations about how your student is doing in the course, and if she is struggling, encourage her to reach out to the teacher. Some programs even offer free tutoring services, so explore all of your options before allowing your student to give up.

Check student progress

Depending on your child's age, it's helpful for parents to be aware of their student's progress and looming deadlines to ensure he is working on pace. No one wants to be up at 2am trying to finish a project before a deadline, so parents need to teach children how to use their time wisely before that situation presents itself. Parents are integral to helping students learn time management and prioritization skills, both of which are essential for success in an online program. Help students write to-do lists, keep track of their calendars, and schedule their time wisely.

How do I help my child feel connected with his or her teacher?

Many parents worry that when students take classes online, they lose their interactions with an actual teacher, but in a quality virtual program, the opposite is true. While the teacher does not stand in front of a classroom, he or she is actively engaging with students via emails, group chats, forums, or discussion boards. Many students are too shy or embarrassed to raise their hands in a traditional classroom, but the virtual classroom allows students to ask questions anytime throughout the lesson or assignment, and get a quick response without thinking about how they appear in front of their peers. Furthermore, many virtual programs offer on-demand tutoring, so students can get the help they need right when they need it. Students can also contact their teachers during office hours to discuss questions or concerns regarding the content or their progress in the course.

Encourage your student to remain in contact with their teacher and to communicate throughout the course, not just when they are falling behind or struggling with their grade. There's not much a teacher can do with two days left in the semester, but if the student contacts her early on, she can often develop an action plan to help the student succeed. This also prepares your child for college or career, when professors and bosses expect that all is well unless they are told otherwise. By encouraging your student to proactively seek help and encourage open communication, you are setting her on the path to success in her future.

How do I ensure my student's academic integrity?

Most parents only think the best of their children, but, unfortunately, many students try to find the easy way out, and it is up to the adults in their life to teach them how to behave with integrity. If students cheat in an online class, they can face serious consequences ranging from losing credit on an assignment, to being dropped from the class, all the way to expulsion from the school or program. One way parents can encourage students to behave with integrity is by openly discouraging cheating. Emphasize the importance of actually learning the material presented in the class rather than just looking for an easy completion.

But why do my kids need to know random facts when they can just Google them?

There is much debate about whether general knowledge itself is important to know when technology is at your fingertips. But widely known general knowledge helps build a civil society and inform civil discourse based on commonly accepted norms and facts. This common core of general knowledge also helps people understand the historical significance of an event and give it context within their society's story. A wide breadth of general knowledge has also been tied to reading proficiency and the ability to make connections when reading. Thousands of studies show that without good background knowledge, students are at a disadvantage in school, networking, dating, job interviews, sales, and public speaking. Encourage your student to study for the test rather than looking the other way as she uses her smartphone to search for answers. And most of all, emphasize the importance of exams, papers, and projects, and doing well in classes overall. A parent's encouragement could be the difference between cheating and working hard in a class.

Parents play a pivotal role in their children's academic success, regardless of how the instruction is delivered. After all, parents are their children's learning role models, so be sure to wield that power with caution and help inspire positive thinking toward education. Offer your support and encouragement, and be sure to turn to the experts

(teachers and tutors) when you are out of your league. No one expects a parent to teach their child quantum physics, but asking your student what he learned and encouraging him to teach you something particularly interesting can help reinforce their learning. This interaction is invaluable and especially important if you choose online education for your child.

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