

## **Tips for Reed School Parents: How to Support Your Children's Social Emotional and Academic Skills During School Closure, April 2020**

Dear Reed parents,

I want you to know that we think about you and your children every day. We miss seeing their beautiful faces on our school campus. We miss teaching and supporting them, in all the myriad ways that school allows. As educators and parents alike, we find ourselves in an extraordinary time, where we are being asked to teach and to work in an unprecedented new way. We are all grieving this change in our lives, and it is important to allow ourselves, and our children, that grief. As a school psychologist, I have been thinking about what might be helpful for you to hear from me during this time. And while the web is filled with extensive resources and articles, and there seems to be a veritable army generating more each day--my central message to you as parents is that I encourage you to focus on kindness and safety during this school closure. Be kind to yourself. Try your best to manage your own anxiety and to care for your own needs, as that will allow you to be the best parent you can be. Try your best to help your child access their online schoolwork, but also know that online learning is a work in progress, and remember that you have many talents, but most of you are not teachers, and this is OK! We are educators, and we will meet your children where they are when school resumes. This, after all, is our job-- we chose it and we love it, with our whole hearts. And for your children, try your best to be kind to them, too, of course. Provide your child with extra love and physical affection, take breaks from each other, go outside to move your bodies when you can, and try to wrest some moments of joy from this time together. Below are some additional ideas for supporting your children's social-emotional development and their academic work at home:

### **Social Emotional Supports:**

- **Be a role model. Do your best to manage your own stress and anxiety effectively.** Children will react to and follow your reactions. They learn from your example.
- **Be aware of how you talk about COVID-19.** Your discussion about COVID-19 can increase or decrease your child's fear. If true, remind your child that your family is healthy, and you are going to do everything within your power to keep loved ones safe and well. Carefully listen or have them draw or write out their thoughts and feelings and respond with truth and reassurance.
- **Explain social distancing.** Young children may not fully understand why parents/guardians aren't allowing them to be with friends. Tell your child that your family is following the guidelines of expert scientists (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which include social distancing. At its most basic, social distancing means staying away from others until the risk of contracting COVID-19 is under control.
- **Take Time to Talk and Let Your Children's Age and Questions Guide your Response:** Answer their questions truthfully, but don't offer unnecessary details or facts. Often, children do not talk about their concerns because they are confused or don't want to worry loved ones. Younger children absorb scary information in waves. They ask questions, listen, play, and then repeat the cycle. Children always feel empowered if they can control some aspects of their life. A sense of control reduces fear. For early elementary school children, like those at Reed, this means you should provide brief, simple information that balances COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people make every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as "adults are working hard to keep you safe." Older children can be provided with more details but try to let their questions guide what you share.

- **For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!** Acknowledge the sadness, disappointment and unfairness they express. Tell them you feel it, too. This alone has tremendous power.
- **Demonstrate deep breathing.** Deep breathing is a valuable tool for calming the nervous system. Do breathing exercises with your children.
- **Focus on the positive.** Celebrate having more time to spend together as a family. Make it as fun as possible. Do family projects. Learn more together about an interest of your child's. Organize belongings, create art. Sing, laugh, and go outside, if possible, to connect with nature and get needed exercise. Allow and encourage older children to connect with their friends virtually.
- **Establish and maintain a daily routine.** Keeping a regular schedule provides a sense of control, predictability, calm, and well-being. It also helps children and other family members respect others' need for quiet time and when they can connect with friends virtually.
- **Identify projects that might help others.** This could include: writing letters to the neighbors or others who might be stuck at home alone or to healthcare workers; sending positive messages over social media; or reading and recording a favorite children's book for younger children to hear.
- **Offer lots of love and physical affection to your children.** Provide them with physical contact and extra snuggles. It matters, now more than ever.
- **Expect behavior changes or possibly some regression.** Young children often express worry through their behavior. Behavior communicates feelings. Many children who did not show behavioral difficulty before the closure are showing it now; this is likely your child reacting to their change in environment. Try to have compassion and to be loving and firm. (I know you are sad and frustrated, but you can't say hurtful things, you cannot hurt your brother...). Some children may also demonstrate behaviors you thought they had grown out of, such as potty accidents, the use of a baby voice, or tantrums. This is also typical. Again, try to be compassionate, patient and accepting, but also firm and clear.
- **Stay Connected.** Related to managing your own stress, connect with friends online and help your child to do the same, if possible, although this can be tricky for younger children, who have not yet learned how to talk well on the phone. Communicate with your school and teachers and psychologists if you have concerns.

### **Academic Supports:**

- **The younger your child is, the more actively you will need to be involved in supporting their schoolwork from home.** Try your best to help them engage with and complete the provided work. Do not expect perfection, either for yourself, or for them.
- **As many have noted, have a daily schedule,** but be flexible with it. Young children thrive on routine.
- **Have a designated work location** for your child, where he/she completes schoolwork at home.
- **Reduce distractions as much as possible** in your child's work space.
- **Break the work into manageable chunks of time for your child.** For a kindergartener, we might expect them at school to be able to work for between 10-15 minutes at this point in the school year, for a first grader, between 15-25 minutes, and for second graders, between 20-30 minutes.
- **Take breaks when you need to,** incorporating physical activity when you can. Reed teachers incorporate movement breaks into their lessons throughout each school day. GoNoodle is a popular source for ideas about movement breaks. Many parents also recommend scheduling clear recess and snack times during each school day.

- **If your child resists working, try using a timer for short bursts of time and allow them to take a break between these chunks of time.** Many parents have found luck using a timer while they are on a call for work, for example, and providing a clear activity for the child to begin once the timer goes off, if you are still occupied. You should also remind your child that school at home is their job, just as everyone has a job.
- **Remember that young children learn many important skills through play. So, play!** Board games, puzzles, creative projects, cooking and work in the garden all can provide opportunities for learning. Children learn many important skills through play as well, including executive functioning skills, decision making, planning, collaboration, self-regulation skills and so many others.
- **Other tactics that help encourage engagement with academic work include using reinforcement.** Simple praise of the child's hard work and effort can be powerful in its own right. I always recommend praising effort and not only the work itself, as this encourages a growth mindset. Other reinforcements you might offer if your child needs them include earning a privilege or reward (you can earn a star for every 10 minutes, and if you get to 5 stars you earn a reward) using natural consequences (if you don't do X, you also won't get to do Y), and providing choices, when possible (If you don't feel like doing X right now, you can pick either option Y or Z now and do X later. This allows the illusion of choice when in fact all three items should be completed.)

If you are having difficulty supporting your children's social emotional or academic needs during this time, reach out to their teacher first, but also know that I am available to support you as well. If you'd like to speak with me, send me an email at [mvanputten@reedschools.org](mailto:mvanputten@reedschools.org) and we can communicate by email or set up a time to talk on the phone. Please note that I am available on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays during school hours. You also might find our Reed district school psychologist website useful, as it contains many resources to support parents, and it can be accessed via any Reed school website: <http://rusdpsychologicalservices.weebly.com/index.html>

Overall, again, we are living in extraordinary times. Be gentle with yourself and your children and focus primarily on kindness and safety. We do have an opportunity to learn from this experience, spend time with our children, and teach them new skills. Remember that adversity fosters resilience and we can rise to this challenge together.

Warmly and with gratitude for all your hard work at home these days,

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Sources: NASP, CASP, Psychology Today.