

Working with Preschoolers and Recruiting Family Support in an Online Environment

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Teaching preschoolers in an online learning environment can be challenging. If engaging active preschoolers with limited attention spans is not always easy in a typical learning environment, it is especially so with the lack of proximity and filtered attention that learning through a computer screen provides. Preschoolers need to be engaged—not only by what they hear and see, but in physical and tangible ways. As concrete learners, preschoolers learn about their world through their experiences and through play. Social interactions and emotional connections are necessary elements that also strengthen confidence in their ability to navigate new learning experiences.

Consider the challenges to educators, and families as well. For the teacher, it may be the first experience using technology as a primary tool to teach, rather than a supplementary tool to support learning. Planning the content of lessons may be the same, but the delivery of that content will be vastly different. A reliance on families to support teaching is practically a necessity. Let's face it, teachers need family support in order to help children make learning connections in a virtual environment. As educators become more adept at navigating the new approach to teach, they must also coach families to navigate the experience.

If we recognize that for many young children, preschool may be the very first experience interacting with others regularly outside of the home. We must also recognize that, thanks to their physical proximity to the child(ren), family caregivers are the connecting link in helping make meaning of the content being taught by the teacher. It's a critical role that takes the idea of family

engagement to a whole different level—that of true partnership in teaching children.

For families, the challenge is navigating how to support student learning—not only in the traditional role of supportive family member, but in some cases, as the facilitator of their child's learning in the home. For many families, it may also be the first experience with institutions of learning. It may also be a role which may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar to families. Some may even resent this new role and feel unprepared or inadequate to give the needed support.

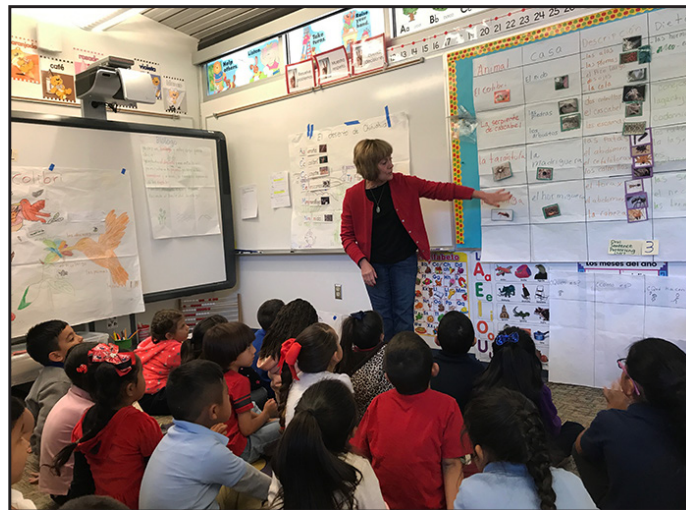
This is where the need for the educator to give support and guidance comes into play. The question then becomes, how can we empower families to embrace this reality with confidence

so they can support the child's learning effectively? While we cannot guarantee a mistake-free experience, we can provide some tips to consider as educators navigate the balance between teaching from a distance and creating effective partnerships with families.

Tip #1: Plan activities where students can learn about one another

Research tells us that before learning can occur, children need to feel safe in order to trust and be receptive to new learning. We all know children's favorite topic: themselves! They are experts and it is a topic of inexhaustible interest. Use that knowledge to engage children while they learn to navigate your online classroom. Creating opportunities for children to get to know teachers

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Teacher and trainer Laurie Magill uses Preschool GLAD® strategies to engage active preschoolers. Online learning requires more family support.



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and peers also goes a long way to establish trusting relationships that will foster and support learning.

Some suggestions to build strong partnerships with families in this endeavor is to make time to develop a relationship with the families of the children you teach. Scheduling a conversation or gathering information about a child's likes and dislikes goes a long way in demonstrating interest in the child, their experiences, and traditions. Admittedly, while this process can take some time, it is a crucial step in developing a working relationship that supports the child to learn in meaningful ways. Plus, by getting to know the parents and their talents, teachers may discover an untapped resource in the process!

Tip #2: Plan for activities to take more time in an online environment

An online classroom is different from a brick and mortar classroom. Connections will be lost, sound will be off, and everyone will be learning to navigate this new environment of learning. Roll with the punches. Take the time to teach skills like muting and unmuting, using signals like thumbs up. Plan for everything to take more time. It is going to take longer, but rest assured, this is learning, too!

Consider frontloading information to parents and family caregivers. A weekly meeting, newsletter, or informational video to familiarize them with the technology and skills being used can help them prepare to support what will be occurring in the virtual classroom.

Tip #3: Keep online lessons brief

Remember that children's attention span is short. Integrate activities that require movement and allow brain breaks for children. To expect a preschooler to sit through an hour of only auditory input is unrealistic and developmentally inappropriate. Hold a short class meeting introducing content, sing a song or two with movement, do a read aloud, and provide an

activity to complete when they are not online. Be intentional with the activities you chose. Consider holding small-group sessions throughout the week to work with children in follow-up and review. Chunk the learning into multiple learning opportunities to avoid marathon sessions.

Provide families with specific activities that can be done in the home that support the conceptual ideas that are being introduced in the classroom. Preschool GLAD® uses the Family Grid of Activities strategy. In lieu of the use of learning centers, having a list or grid of suggested home activities can provide parents with guidance and support for the expansion of student skills. For example, in a theme of study around the senses, families might be able to engage children to talk about how a new food tasted, felt, or smelled. This activity will promote oral language practice, vocabulary development, and expression. Families might make a snack together and have children identify or record what senses they used to make the snack, incorporating oral language development and fine motor skills.

| Family Grid of Activities for Transportation Unit | | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|---|---|
| Fine Motor | Gross Motor | Math and Science | Language and Literacy | Oral Language Development | Social and Emotional Development |
| <i>draw their favorite vehicle</i> | <i>take laps riding a tricycle</i> | <i>sort pictures of vehicles and passengers</i> | <i>sing transportation songs</i> | <i>imitate the sounds that different vehicles make</i> | <i>talk about a time that going somewhere caused happiness</i> |
| <i>make a collage of vehicles</i> | <i>pull or push a wagon or other item with wheels</i> | <i>Count the number of red cars you see passing on the street in a minute</i> | <i>find the initial "letter" of a vehicle's name in a story</i> | <i>have child describe a vehicle and have adult guess what it is based on the description</i> | <i>talk about how the child feels when they know where they are going, versus when they aren't told</i> |
| <i>cut out vehicles or road signs from magazines</i> | <i>draw a road with chalk and move around it</i> | <i>placing a block or tube at an angle, race different toy vehicles for speed</i> | <i>have a puppet show with the drivers of different vehicles</i> | <i>tell or make up a story about how people can travel by land, sea, or air</i> | <i>talk about modes of transportation the child has not experienced What do they wonder?</i> |

A Family Grid of suggested home activities provide parents with guidance and support to extend student learning.

Tip #4: Communicate with parents as co-teachers

Invest some time to frontload parents/guardians about the content you will be teaching the children. Families are often willing to be creative in doing whatever is necessary to support their

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child's learning and will come up with ways to enhance their understanding of the concepts you are teaching. By providing advance notice and including families in the planning process, families can begin to prepare to support the learning that is to occur. This is also a wonderful way to incorporate culturally authentic and relevant experiences.

It is also helpful to establish a consistent time for office hours when parents/guardians can check in to know when they can receive needed information or reach out for guidance, advice, and clarification. Another idea is to record activity instructions using tools such as Screencastify or Loom for parents to access asynchronously in order to support their child in reliably navigating their learning experiences.

By knowing there is a consistent and predictable time to connect with you, families can count on your support and plan accordingly. It also supports teachers in avoiding the fielding of calls, texts, and emails at times when the teacher is unable to dedicate full attention to the concerns of the families s/he is working with.

Tip #5: Promote predictability

Some things never change. Routine and structure still help children to rely on patterns and allow them to focus on learning. Those routines will also help parents support the process of learning. Create your weekly schedule with predictable activities: a daily message, a book reading, music and movement—those activities at regular times in a predictable order allow children to feel comfortable as new learning occurs. The Preschool GLAD® strategy, Intentional Message jumps out as critically important to keep focused on the intended outcome for the day. It is a written message to students stating what will be achieved

as a result of the day's activities. The Intentional Message also informs parents what the day's lesson hopes to achieve. Predictability is also helpful for family members. If they are familiar with the teacher's schedule and routines, they can more easily anticipate ways to be supportive of teaching efforts and help get the children acclimated to routines.

Final Thoughts

Schools and preschools across the nation are faced with the reality of teaching in an online environment. It is not the easiest challenge we face as educators. There is a lot at stake, and everyone wants to do it right.

However, it is not a challenge we must face alone. As we embark on supporting preschoolers with online instruction, it is important to remember

that we are all in it together. Talking to colleagues, sharing experiences that have been successful, seeking resources online, and creating strong and truly meaningful partnerships with families will make the difference.

A true partnership is one where families feel valued for their role, given respect by providing them with information they need, and given avenues to communicate with you. Making the effort to acknowledge and include families as partners in the virtual learning process can only benefit and enhance the learning support offered to all our young children. Embracing the challenge with humor and open communication is key.

To learn more about Preschool GLAD® or other topics related to Preschool dual language learners, please contact the author at Csanchez@ocde.us.



The Intentional Message, a Preschool GLAD® strategy, lets students and parents know what to expect for the day's activities.

