

Supporting Students with Disabilities and Distance Learning

What is the issue?

Moving an entire public education system from classrooms to virtual spaces within weeks is unprecedented. Distance learning is an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is not a “one-size fits all” solution to education. As we adjust to this new reality, the technological challenges ranging from the [digital divide](#) to [accessing devices](#) highlight the assumption that all households have the necessary tools for learners.

Ensuring students with special needs have the necessary support within digital classroom is another concern.

What are some of the challenges?

The Ontario Human Rights Commission states that “barriers to education...can be physical, technological, systemic, financial, or attitudinal, or they can arise from an education provider’s failure to make available a needed accommodation in a timely manner.”¹ Being mindful of barriers is the first step towards removing them, however, the at-home learning environment may not have resources such as a quiet space or adequate support for individualized instruction.

Creating differentiated learning and accommodations for students with special needs may not always transfer easily to virtual learning spaces. While reviewing Ontario’s [Learn at Home resources](#), it’s important to consider that all tools may not be accessible. For example, videos may not have closed captioning, texts may be in a font that affects readability and online games may have flashing graphics that are not suitable for students with a variety of exceptionalities. Since educational providers, such as schools, have a [duty to accommodate](#), how can educators support students with special needs when distance learning is the new norm?

¹ Ontario Human Rights Commission. n.d. (Main barriers to education for students with disabilities (fact sheet).

ohrc.on.ca/en/main-barriers-education-students-disabilities-fact-sheet

How can educational professionals support students with disabilities?

Using knowledge of student needs while ensuring that teaching resources are adaptable is an initial start. Principles in [Universal Design for Learning](#) can support differentiated instruction while [integrating accessibility](#) throughout curriculum development. Creating [accessible educational materials](#) is essential for accommodating diverse student needs.

As educational professionals continue to support students with disabilities with the transition to distance learning, it is imperative to remove [barriers](#) so that inclusion is a practice within the virtual classroom as well.



Supporting Students & Families with Distance Learning

For Parents

Please find some simple ideas as to how you can support your child during distance learning.

Establish overall routines and expectations:

- Maintain regular bedtime and morning routines.
- Visual schedules are helpful. This can be easily created together on a piece of paper that includes labels and simple drawings. There are also free printables online.
- Try to distinguish the weekday from the weekend. The weekend may include something special such as having a different breakfast or playing a favorite game.

Establish “school” routines:

- Create a quiet space for ‘school’ that has little distractions and includes materials such as pencils and paper.
- Make sure someone is able to monitor learning and checks in at the start and end of each day.



- Establish a start and end time for distance learning (this may be dictated by the school). For help, Khan Academy has free learning schedules for children ages 2 to 18 on their website that you might find useful ([khanacademy.org](https://www.khanacademy.org)).
- Ensure that recess, lunch and physical movement breaks are included. This will look different for everyone.
- If possible, have age appropriate toys and books accessible.
- Please remember the regular school day cannot be replicated at home.

Establish daily physical activity or exercise: indoor or outdoor while practicing social distancing.

Be mindful of the child’s feelings and their expression of stress to the changes in their daily schedules, which will vary for each child.

- Set up daily or weekly check-ins with everyone in your household.
- Stay connected with friends and family through social media, phone or video callings.

Many curriculum activities and skills can be hands-on and performed during daily chores around the home.

Life skills:

- making beds;
- tidying up; and
- putting the dishes away.

For Educators

Please find some ideas to help support your students and their families.

Parents, caregivers and/or guardians want to hear from you. A weekly email or telephone call will help reduce overall anxiety or stress.

Provide short daily or weekly check-ins with your students.

- These check-ins can be used to have students share artwork, visual expressions or stories through oral communication. If students are shy to share, a sentence starter may help begin the conversation.

REMEMBER: The school day cannot be replicated through distance learning.

Review the [Ministry guidelines here](#):

- **Kindergarten-Grade 3:** five hours of work per student/week (focus on literacy and math)
- **Grades 4-6:** five hours of work per student/week (focus on literacy, math, science and social studies)
- **Grades 7-8:** 10 hours of work per student/week (focus on math, literacy, science and social studies)

Curriculum expectations:

- **Math:** counting and sorting when folding laundry, helping with meal preparation and measuring ingredients, helping with the grocery list, estimating cost; and
- **Language:** listening to stories online or read aloud, telling stories orally to family members through social media, phone calls or video calls.

Provide choice for students and a variety of ways to submit work.

Take into consideration access to technology and time constraints and/or stress levels in many households.

Make time for those ‘teachable’ moments when they occur during distance learning.