

Are Kids Learning More at Home During COVID-19?

More than one billion students around the world are currently missing school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Several US states have already canceled school for the remainder of the academic year, turning to online learning when possible, and other states are likely to extend their school closures soon. Some educationists panic about learning loss while children are at home with their families, and headlines abound about how “homeschooling during the coronavirus will set back a generation of children.”

Learning Outside of a Classroom

Rather than focusing on the alarmist narrative of what is lost during this time away from school, it is worth emphasizing what is gained. There is so much learning that can happen this spring, within families and outside of a conventional classroom.

In many school districts across the country, any assigned coursework has been deemed optional, compulsory attendance laws have been relaxed, and annual testing mandates have been removed. This regulatory respite can provide an opportunity for parents to regain control of their children’s education and expand knowledge using the abundant online learning resources now at our fingertips. Free from state and federal curriculum and testing directives, parents can nurture their children’s education and development, helping them to explore new interests, dive into self-directed projects, and reveal passions and talents.

Whether it’s taking a virtual tour of one of 2,500 museums around the world, listening to a live concert, learning in-demand technology and coding skills for free, engaging in livestream story or art time with renowned authors and artists, or just enjoying special, slower moments together as a family, this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to disconnect from standard schooling and discover how much learning can really happen.

Some worry about children’s learning slipping away during this time at home. Writing recently for *The Washington Post*, former Tennessee education commissioner Kevin Huffman notes the alleged “summer slide” phenomenon when students purportedly lose during summertime much of what they learned during the academic year. He suggests several strategies for combating the learning loss that he says will occur during the pandemic, including adding “more instructional days next year and beyond,” and “opening schools in the middle of the summer, lengthening the school day and the school year, or potentially eliminating summer vacation for the next couple of years.”

Does Learning Loss Occur?

But as I’ve written previously for *NPR*, we should be skeptical about the overall idea of

“summer slide,” or learning loss when children are away from school. If learning is so easily lost when a child’s school routine is disrupted, did they ever really learn at all? They may have been effectively *schooled*—that is, trained and tested on certain material—but they likely never *learned*.

Now, children and their parents have an unprecedented opportunity to learn without school. While this is a stressful time for all of us, as our routines are altered and we are mostly stuck inside, distanced from our larger community, it can also be a time to use the enormous, and mostly free, digital resources that are sprouting daily to support learning and discovery. It can be a time to nurture and rekindle our children’s natural curiosity and creativity, qualities that are so often dulled within a mass compulsory schooling system focused on compliance and conformity. It can be a time to get to know our children in ways that might have been difficult during our previously packed, always-on-the-go days.

Most parents will eagerly send their children back to school when this is all over, but some parents will be surprised by what they discover during this break from ordinary life. They may see how much calmer their children are and how school-related ailments such as ADHD are less problematic at home. They may see that their children’s mental health has improved, particularly for teenagers who report the most unhappiness at school.

Parents may see their children’s love of reading and writing reappear, when they are allowed to read books and write stories that are meaningful to them and not tied to an arbitrary school assignment or grammar lesson. They may see a strong interest in science and technology emerge, as their children want to know more about how viruses work and what inventions are being created to help fight the pandemic. Parents may see real learning happen and decide not to send their children back to school.

Fortunately, there are now so many more ways to facilitate education without schooling, including hybrid homeschooling models, virtual learning, microschoools, self-directed learning centers, and co-learning spaces. With more demand from parents for innovative, out-of-school learning options, more entrepreneurs will build experimental K-12 education models that will expand choices for parents and learners. Opting out of conventional schooling has never been easier or more worthwhile.

Rather than dwelling on the schoolwork that isn’t getting done this spring, let’s celebrate the immense learning that is occurring, in our homes and with our families, as we experience this historic event together. Let’s focus on what we gain, not on what we lost.