

Bringing Learning Home

Many friends have asked me for advice as they find themselves in a new position of parent-teacher due to COVID-19.

My first suggestion is to create a **routine**. (You can also skip the “routine” talk and scroll down to the bulleted list of learning activities below.) Creating a routine is not the same as creating a schedule. Some families thrive with a schedule, but I think all families benefit from a routine.

A routine differs from a schedule in that things aren't segmented rigidly by time. Rather, they're an order to our day.

We can create our routines around the schedule that works best in our individual families. When our kids learn at home, it doesn't have to happen during traditional school hours or even traditional school days. Lots of students have learning time in the afternoon/evening, or into the weekends instead of weekdays only. This flexibility allows us to consider following the recommendations pediatricians have been making for years and let our kids wake at a healthy time, whatever that looks like in our own families. Then, we can think about what our own family considers important and loosely schedule the day to include those things. This is helpful no matter the age of the students. It's knowing what comes next, but having wiggle room in case something unexpected comes up.

At its most simple, a routine creates a few grounding points in our day. It's how we begin our day, or pause during our day, or end our day. One of my routines is to begin my day by making an iced Americano, a bowl of Cream of Wheat, and taking a few minutes during breakfast to check the news and a few blogs I follow. When I do those things, I feel ready to do the next things (including thinking clearly!). My kids have a routine of completing certain chores before school - they care for the chickens, bunnies, duck, cats and dogs before beginning their learning activities. When we complete our morning routines, we feel capable of productivity. A simple routine might be Bible reading before leaving the bedroom, a read-aloud during lunch, or an afternoon walk.

After we think about what we want our days to look like, and what kinds of routines we might put in place to support that, it's time to think about educational activities that might fit into our days. Please consider three guidelines: **1) This isn't the time to buy curriculum, or to enroll in classes, or set a rigorous schedule that mimics a classroom.** For most, this is a temporary time where learning will by necessity look different. Learning is still happening. Work within your family's routines. Embrace the freedom as a gift, and enjoy spending time together. **2) If your child's teacher sent home work, do your best to help your child complete it to the best of both of your abilities.** Set this learning time in your routine. If you can't explain something, ask the teacher for help. If you can't complete the work for whatever reason, talk with your teacher. Understand that if your physical or emotional health needs require just setting this aside, taking a month off school will probably be just fine. And finally, **3) Some of**

the best learning doesn't look like learning. I have a huge list of suggestions that are ALL learning activities. These are the types of activities that support classroom learning. But they're also a lot of fun! I hope it's not obvious by looking at them that they're educational :)

A quick note about homeschooling ... homeschooling and doing public school at home are two different things legally. They have different sets of requirements and responsibilities. I'm happy to help anyone (who would like to) learn how to make the move to legally homeschool. Before high school, this can be a temporary move; once your student begins earning high school credit this becomes a more permanent choice. I **do not** recommend withdrawing to homeschool temporarily once a student is in high school. Parents who are considering homeschooling temporarily may end up with *more* requirements in the short-term if they make the switch. Again, I'm happy to speak with anyone who has questions if this is something on your mind.

- **Nature walks, and nature journaling.** Right now, we're not restricted from spending time outside - we just need to distance ourselves from others while we're out there. We can take a walk around the block, or along a hiking trail, or even just around our yard. Nature walks are generally more of a meander than aerobic exercise :) The purpose is to notice things. What is budding or blooming? What can we hear - can we identify the sounds? What do we smell - and where does that come from? If our kids are interested, we can investigate further at home with online resources or books if we have them. We can take pictures for reference, if needed.

Nature journaling is just going into nature with the intention of recording what we encounter. We can draw pictures of plants or animal footprints, or bring watercolors and paint. We can write poetry, or make a list of things we notice. We can take photos and include them after they're printed, or even tape samples of some things to the pages. Sometimes we'd bring a hula hoop to our back yard, set it in the grass, and ask the kids to study it and record their findings. Sometimes they'll sit in a tree, or find a spot to sit after a hike.

- **Cooking.** We all have to eat, right? My kids have loved to cook with me, and cooking classes are some of the most popular at homeschool co-ops. This doesn't have to be complicated, and unless our kids have a lot of experience cooking, it shouldn't be. This can be anything from making popcorn on the stove, to baking brownies from a mix, to roasting a chicken or making marshmallows from scratch.

I cooked with my younger two kids weekly for part of last year and part of this year. Some things they've enjoyed learning to make include eggs (scrambled, fried, hard-boiled), muffins, our favorite chocolate chip cookies, Caesar salad with homemade dressing, vinaigrette, homemade pizza, chicken soup, and meatballs with homemade tomato sauce. My 5th grader, mostly by himself, baked an Egyptian flat bread a few weeks ago and it was delicious. And my

youngest daughter still doesn't realize the time she was complaining about fractions and I let her make cookies instead, she was still working on fractions! lol!

If you're reading a book together, you can try to cook some of the foods mentioned, too. And don't forget about our pets - there are recipes galore available for dog (and other pet) treats!

- **Read alouds.** Pick a book everyone can enjoy and read a chapter (or more!) each day. I let the kids keep their hands busy if they'd like, whether it's by coloring or Legos or knitting. It's ok if it's a little above the kids' reading level, or below it. The Little House series is calling me right now, probably for its simplicity. :) My 5th grade son is listening to an audiobook version of The Iliad and the Odyssey and loving it - and all my kids enjoyed when I read a children's version of Beowulf. My middle school daughter would be in heaven if I read a joke book. We've also read Hero Tales and other books about missionaries. We've read some classics, some more current. We like to alternate lighter and heavier reading.
- **Reading aloud to animals.** It can be easier to kids to practice reading aloud when their listener can't judge or correct. :) My 5th grader LOVES to read to his dog, Coco, and Coco actually lays down to listen. In the absence of a pet, stuffed animals make great reading partners! Or, for a personal connection, the kids could call grandparents or family friends and read or even take turns reading if both have the same book.
- **Crafting.** Pinterest has more ideas than anyone could do in ten lifetimes. YouTube is full of tutorials - but most of us have friends or family members who would appreciate a Skype crafting session with our kids! If you have books or are a crafter yourself, you can just set aside time to work on what you know. (And in that case, you'll probably already have the supplies on hand.) My kids will probably do a little sewing in coming weeks because that's what we have.
- **Art.** Anyone can create art using pencils, crayons, chalk, watercolor or acrylic paints. You can make watercolor-type paint with water and food coloring. Simple projects abound on Pinterest. We subscribe to the Masterpiece Society, but they have a few free projects as well. We have also really enjoyed See the Light chalk art projects. They have a YouTube channel with free projects. (These are both Christian resources.) I do have materials available to borrow, including extra blacklights that make the See the Light chalk art projects so fun!
- **Letter writing.** This can be expanded to picture drawing for the really young ones, with an older sibling or parent taking dictation. When I was younger, I'd write letters to friends and pen pals. Many of us did! Getting mail from a loved one was a great feeling. Writing letters will help us keep in touch with people we can't physically visit for awhile. Kids can write to their friends or relatives. They can write to seniors in nursing homes who might be cut off from visitors

for awhile. They can write to missionaries. They're practicing penmanship, communication skills, and blessing others all at once.

- **Creating story worlds.** Some of the best stories happen in their own worlds. My Father's Dragon has Wild Island, Pooh has the Hundred Acre Wood, The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings has Middle Earth, Dr. Seuss has Whoville, and there are many more. Why not watch a movie (or ten) that takes place in their own world, and ask your kids what kind of world they would make if they could? Can they draw a map of it? Build it in Minecraft? What kinds of creatures or characters would populate it? Can they draw pictures, or describe them? What kinds of things might happen in this world? Can they make a list? These are all fiction prewriting activities - and all can be done with words OR pictures - or both.
- **Putting on plays.** Let the kids lead if this is something that interests them. They can come up with the story, the costumes, the props better than we parents ever could.
- **Coding.** My kids like scratch.mit.edu. It's a free, user-friendly way to introduce coding concepts. Please keep in mind that people of all ages use this and can communicate with others. They seem to monitor comments well, but parents should also set their own rules for how their kids use it and monitor as well.
- **Auto mechanics.** Lots of kids are interested in this! It's a handy skill to have, and it can demonstrate physics and other STEAM concepts. This is a great learning activity if someone in your home can teach this.
- **Creative writing.** I find the best writing happens when I stay out of it except where the kids ask for help. Young writers benefit from dictating to an adult because their minds often work faster than their hands! Patricia Zaballos' workshop approach largely informs our approach on writing. My kids have also enjoyed working at their own pace through the free NaNoWriMo young writer's curriculum. The internet is full of prompts if our young writers get stuck. One fun exercise is to find an old photo without knowing the story and to write about it or tell a story orally. My kids have voluntarily read books on the craft of writing geared toward both teens and adults, and I'm happy to recommend some. But the best way to learn to write is by writing, and it just takes paper and pencil (or a word processing program on a computer) to do that.

Although most of my kids' writing never gets to this stage, I LOVE publishing my kids' writing. They hand write or type a story (preferably with illustrations), create a cover, and I drop it off at the UPS store to spiral bind it with a clear plastic cover and black plastic back. It's just a few dollars to do this, and it's a great memory!

- **Hosting a family poetry tea.** Make a sweet treat (cooking class!) or open a box of cookies or crackers, brew a cup of tea (or make hot chocolate or pour some

milk), clear the table, and read a poem or two. If the kids are so inclined, they can try to write their own version. Acrostic, haiku and Tanka are all poem forms that are simple to emulate.

- **Playing games.** Every game is educational whether it seems like it or not. They also foster family relationships.
- **Making play-dough.** Or salt dough, or clay. Then use it!
- **Going fishing.** For the time being, most fishing spots are closed, but they'll open back up. Stay 6' away from others at your spot, but enjoy the fresh air - and hopefully, dinner! Think together about why you choose the bait you do (what does this kind of fish probably eat?) and let the kids take part in cleaning your catch (even if you don't identify any of the parts).
- **Raising chicks.** This comes with a higher cost than the rest, but it's fun and the eggs (in a few months) will taste great!
- **Planting seeds.** At its most simple, you just need a container of some kind, some soil, seeds, and a sunny window. With kids, I often use two clear, plastic cups: filling the bottom cup half full with soil, planting the seed, watering, then taping the second cup to the top to create a mini greenhouse until the seed sprouts and gets big enough to remove the top. You could do this with plastic wrap to keep the moisture in, removing the plastic wrap when the sprout reaches it.

I've also helped kids place a few bean seeds with a damp paper towel in a Ziplock and taped it to a sunny window. The seeds sprout quickly, and when it's big enough you can transplant it in a container. Ask them, what do they observe?

When the libraries open back up, many have seed libraries that have packets you can "check out." Then you just need to try to collect seeds to "check in" after your harvest. Walmart also carries seeds, as do feed stores and hardware stores. Neighbors and friends may have seeds to share. The only thing that's left is planting the seedlings in your garden or in a pot when the weather warms up!

- **Visiting state and national parks - from a distance!** Many state and national parks offer a Jr. Ranger program, and many that do also offer the program online. Your family can visit parks you may never get the chance to visit, and learn from each of them, online. You can become a junior cave scientist, junior ranger angler, night skies explorer, spaceflight explorer, junior archaeologist, and more. Some of these programs offer a mail-in badge program (on pause now while staff works from home), so upon completion our junior rangers can collect badges!

- ***Just doing what's interesting.*** My kids are weird - and I mean that as a compliment. :) My 11th grade son raises ducks, and started years ago as a project to demonstrate his learning during science. He knows breeds, how to raise them, how to shelter them (including building the shelter), how to process them, and how to cook them. He also has studied (on his own) space and space travel and has a pretty deep understanding of the topics. My 10th grade daughter is into sword fighting. She knows all the things about different kinds of swords and is constantly learning about how different groups used different types of swords. She's also an artist and spends a lot of time learning about and working on her art. My 8th grade daughter is a creator, too. She is always singing, and learning how to improve. She sews, takes photos, knits, creates art, writes, and spends a lot of her free time discovering everything she can. My 5th grade son is really into history, geology, art and music. He spends his free time learning about and practicing these things. All of them read and write for fun. We encourage them to dive into these topics - on their own, only helping as they ask for it or providing resources for them to explore. These things are completely interest-driven and student-led. And they provide a very rich component to their educations. Encourage your kids to explore their interests!

Hope this helps!