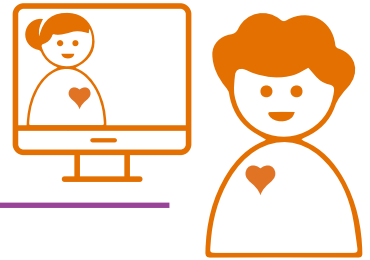


# EFFECTIVE FAMILY SUPPORTS

## for Out-of-Classroom Learning during COVID-19



Back-to-school season looks very different this year, as districts adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic by adopting new policies and procedures. Many localities have turned to virtual or hybrid models of teaching, requiring teachers to learn new ways of engaging with children and, perhaps just as importantly, children’s families. Effective interactions, such as those described by the CLASS® tool, are at the core of teaching, and these same interactions can be a model for productive relationships with children’s families. While establishing a relationship with families is important every year, it is particularly important when instruction is virtual, as teachers lose the natural daily opportunities to interact with families presented by drop-off and pick-up and, at the same time, families become essential to helping children access instruction. Younger children may need assistance getting online and organizing their work, while older children may need help structuring their virtual school day. This document uses CLASS principles of effective interactions to provide suggestions about ways teachers can help families support their children’s education when some or all instruction is virtual.

### Build and Maintain Supportive Relationships

Families who see their child’s teacher as a “secure base”—someone who cares about and respects their child and their family—will be more likely to turn to teachers if they have questions or concerns about their child’s education. Building supportive relationships with families will require new strategies when school is virtual. Many of the ways teachers typically get to know families (home visits, back-to-school nights, ice-cream socials, parent-teacher conferences, school-based extracurricular activities) may not take place. Nonetheless, there are many things teachers can do to build and maintain these important relationships, both before the school year begins and as the year progresses.

#### INITIAL OUTREACH

Help set positive expectations for your virtual school year by communicating with care and enthusiasm before the first day. The following are some suggestions of specific strategies you might use to begin building your relationships with families:

- If you know your class list early enough, send a postcard to each child to let them know that you’re excited to meet them when school starts.
- Contact families via email or telephone to introduce yourself.
- Schedule a meeting with each family so that you can learn more about each other. This could be a physically distanced meetup in the school parking lot or a virtual call.
- Share something about yourself—for instance, where you’re from, your family structure, why you decided to become a teacher, or what you like to do in your free time.
  - How would you like me to address you?
  - Describe your family. Who are the people in your household?
  - Tell me about your child. What do they like to do? What are they good at?
  - Tell me about your experience during the pandemic.
  - Are you working outside the home? If so, who will be with your child during school hours?
  - How are you currently planning to be involved in your child’s schoolwork? Have you heard any expectations you are concerned about?
  - What is the best way for us to communicate?
  - What are you hoping your child will gain through online instruction?
  - How can I support you as you support your child this year?
- If a meeting is not possible, record an introduction video to welcome children and families to your classroom and encourage families to record a video to send to you.
- If possible, get in touch with children’s previous teachers to learn about them and their families and help you build connections.

- Anticipate questions families might have. Provide information about how instruction will be scheduled, as well as expectations for virtual sessions and out-of-school assignments (for example, “log in on time” and “dress as if you were going to school”).
- If families are not fluent in English, arrange for interpreters for your meetings with them.

## MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS

After the first few weeks of school have passed, check in with families, using their preferred method of communication to get their perspective on how things have been going. Ask questions such as

- What has been working well?
- What has been problematic?
- What changes might the school make to help your child be successful with virtual learning?
- How can I support you?

As the school year continues, periodically check in with families via text, email, phone call, or video chat to see how they and their children are doing outside of dedicated school time and find out whether or not their needs have changed.

- Hold office hours when you will be available to chat with parents—by phone, text, or computer. Communicate with families to determine what times work best.
- Some families may be harder to reach because of hectic work schedules or other demands. Track your communications and make an extra effort to connect with families who are harder to reach.

Regularly share information with families throughout the school year to maintain the sense of connection and availability. Update families about how their children are doing, being sure to include successes and achievements as well as difficulties. You might also send families a weekly e-newsletter describing what children have been working on and suggesting extension activities for children who are interested in doing more.

## EQUITY AND COMMUNICATION

It's important to consider the families you serve and recognize that different families have different resources, priorities, and concerns. Some have the capacity to respond to each and every communication, while others do not. This doesn't mean that they haven't looked at the communications or that they don't care. It may be that they are not fluent in English, have limited time at home with their children, or are too overwhelmed to respond. Don't take this personally. Rather, continue to share information, ideally using the mode of communication that the family requested at the beginning of the school year.

## Be Aware of and Responsive to Families' Individual Needs

It's important to make sure that each family has the support they need to help their child engage in school. In addition to keeping an open line of communication and asking families about their needs and preferences, be responsive to what you learn and willing to adapt and serve as an advocate for the family's needs. For instance, if a family has multiple children scheduled for virtual sessions at the same time and only one device, communicate this information to your district and see what resources may be available to ensure that all children in the household have access to instruction. Similarly, if a family does not have internet service, see if your district can distribute hot spots so that children can get online. The following are additional suggestions of specific strategies you might use to stay aware of and responsive to individual families' needs:

- Provide families with regular opportunities to ask you questions or share information about their children's needs.
- Provide options for how children complete offline assignments.
- Consistently and promptly respond to families' questions about school.
- When asked to do so, provide individualized support for how families can help with their children's schoolwork.
- Acknowledge and accept any feelings of frustration or confusion that families express.
- Provide communications and learning materials in children's home language whenever possible.

## Provide an Organized Learning Experience to Help Families Effectively Manage Time

Most families will be managing their child’s virtual schooling alongside their own jobs, their other children’s care and schooling, and/or hardships brought on by the pandemic. The following are some suggestions for helping families make the most of the time they have to help their children:

- Provide suggested daily schedules—with flexibility—and clear and well-organized guidance on how families can track their children’s progress.
- Encourage families to establish school-day routines with their children and set up a dedicated learning space if possible.
- Organize and label online resources in a clear and predictable manner so that families can easily find materials their child needs. Use any standards your program/school has adopted to promote consistency, especially for families who may have children in different classes.
- Provide a course outline that includes key information, such as assignments, assignment requirements, due dates and times, and methods of delivery.
- Provide supplemental resources to support families in facilitating their children’s online learning. Send all families the same links and suggest resources that are available in multiple languages when possible.
- For younger children, provide a daily checklist of tasks children need to complete.

## Provide Regular Feedback about Children’s Engagement and Performance

Keep in touch with families about their children’s engagement and performance in school. If a child is hesitant to share information or come on screen, reach out to their family to talk about this. Simple communications, such as “Manny did a nice job leading a discussion of the book we’re reading” or “Cecile had such a positive attitude today,” can help maintain the relationship and lead to more effective communication with families. Waiting until a child is struggling, or until you have important news to share, can interfere with the family-teacher relationship. Provide easy-to-understand information about children’s engagement and suggest resources to support families in facilitating learning as they are able.

### EQUITY AND CAMERA USE

There are a number of reasons why a child may not be visible during a virtual session. Some children may be joining from devices that don’t include a camera, while others may not have a dedicated work space from which to join. In other instances, children may not feel comfortable sharing their homes with others. Honor children’s right to privacy and do not presume that children who are off-camera are disengaged. Look for other evidence of engagement, such as asking questions, joining in discussions, and completion of school work.

We hope this information is helpful as you work to form meaningful connections with families this year, but we recognize that circumstances differ across the education landscape. Please use the CLASS Learning Community as a way to get feedback and dialogue with others about their approaches in this unprecedented time. If you have thoughts you’d like to share, or would like to consult with us directly, we’d love to hear from you. Email us at [interactions@teachstone.com](mailto:interactions@teachstone.com).