Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Navigating the Learning at Home

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

Introduction

This tool is written for parents/caregivers to navigate and support their children’s learning at home. It was written in response to the shift to learning-at-home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic although the strategies are just as relevant now that most students in Australia have returned to school. The tool recognises the challenges and frustrations parents/caregivers and their children may face in making sense of the learning that has been sent home. This tool is also relevant to educators planning work during the COVID-19 pandemic or another situation that requires a student to be learning-at-home (e.g., recovering from surgery).

The tool is underpinned by the Universal Design for Learning Framework[[1]](#footnote-1) which highlights the importance of being able to identify what the learning goal is (the point of the activity) and to look for options in the way the learning can be carried out (the ‘how’ of the activity) that suits your child’s needs, interests and abilities. If the learning goal or the pathway to get there are not clear this can lead to frustration, confusion or a lack of motivation. This tool will equip parents/caregivers with strategies aimed at empowering your child to take control of their own learning. A four-step process to unpack the learning is presented to help parents/caregivers support their children with homework tasks, assignments and lessons delivered remotely.

Schools are encouraged to provide this tool to parents/caregivers whenever students are learning remotely. Educators can refer to the four-step process to unpack the learning in conversations with parents/caregivers and can empower parents/caregivers to understand their role in supporting their child’s learning at home.

Ideas

It is important to remember that the teacher is responsible for designing the learning to be delivered at home and should take into consideration the impact of the home-learning environment as well as the individual needs of each learner. A key role of the teacher is to engage with families and guide families in how they can support their child’s learning.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This tool offers four clear steps for parents/caregivers to unpack the learning, underpinned by the Universal Design for Learning Framework:[[3]](#footnote-3)

Step 1: Making sense of the learning

Step 2: Working out what your child is being asked to do

Step 3: Prioritising learning over busy work

Step 4: Reflecting on the learning

These steps can be applied to homework tasks and assignments as well as lessons being delivered remotely. At each step comparisons are made with how we use a GPS to navigate our way in day-to-day life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Actions

**Step 1: Making sense of the learning**

Before starting any learning activity, it is important for your child to be clear about what the teacher wants them to learn rather than just what the teacher wants them to do. There is a subtle but important difference that can impact how motivated your child is to engage with the activity.

Think about how you use a road map or GPS. Your goal is to get from one location to another. You know where you are going to start. You know where you want to end up. What you haven’t worked out yet is which route or which mode of transport you want to take (we will do this in Step 2).

It’s the same with teaching and learning activities. Look for the road map that tells your child where they are heading with their learning. The road map on a learning activity might be shown as …

* an achievement standard or outcome
* a learning intention or learning goal

Talk with your child about the purpose of the lesson.

If the purpose of the lesson is not clear to your child don’t feel pressured for them to continue. That would be like continuing a journey without a map or GPS. Who knows where they might end up or how frustrated they may feel. Instead use this opportunity to support your child to feel confident to ask for help by:

* connecting with a friend
* contacting the teacher

In so doing you can empower your child to take control of their own learning.

**Step 2 – Working out what your child is being asked to do.**

Now your child is clear about what their teacher wants them to *learn* (your destination in the GPS), they can work out what they have to *do*.

Is there more than one route that you could take? Which one will you pick? The route you pick may be different to another person for all sorts of reasons. Someone may choose the fastest route, another the most scenic, another may make their choice based on the number of road tolls or sealed versus unsealed roads. You get to choose your own adventure but remember the goal hasn’t changed. Everyone still gets to travel from his or her starting point to the same end destination.

It’s the same with teaching and learning activities. Look for the options available. The teacher may have assigned one particular route (e.g. you will write …) or given options (e.g. you can write, record your voice or make a video…) and given some signposts to show what the learning will look like along the way. This might include:

* success criteria
* a marking guideline or rubric
* an example of another student’s work

Talk with your child about the option they will choose. Their choice could be based on their preference to be creative, to collaborate with others or simply to get the activity completed as quickly as possible. For example, draw attention to options provided by the teacher and ask:

* Which option appeals to you the most?
* What do you think is the best way for you to get this done?
* What has worked well for you in the past?

If your child is not feeling particularly motivated by the options (or lack of options) made available by the teacher don’t be afraid to consider alternatives that may be more motivating. The aim is to help them achieve the same learning, but in a way that works for them. You don’t want to embark on the journey via an unsealed road if you are not a good traveller and at risk of having to abandon the trip halfway. Instead use this opportunity to support your child to come up with his/her own ideas by asking:

* Is there a better way for you to show your learning?
* If you go about this a different way are you still demonstrating the same learning?

This suggestion requires some confidence from parent/caregiver and child. If you have a good rapport with your child’s teacher you may want to run the idea by them first for reassurance that you are on track. If your relationship with the teacher is fractured or your child is at risk of not engaging with the task at all, you have nothing to lose by supporting your child to identify his/her own approach to the learning. In so doing you are empowering your child to take control of their learning.

**Step 3 – Prioritising essential learning over busy work**

This step is about finding the balance between competing priorities. Those priorities could be a combination of schoolwork, extra-curricular activities or family commitments.

Your child might be wondering:

* How much do I have to do?
* How long do I need to spend on this?
* Why do I have to do this?
* Why does this matter?

Look for any indication from the teacher about how long they should work for or how much they have to complete. There is no agreed guideline about how long children should spend on remote learning[[5]](#footnote-5), although much emphasis has been placed on not trying to recreate a typical school day[[6]](#footnote-6). Establish whether the work is about learning or about keeping your child busy. For example, when learning about Highest Common Factors in Mathematics some children will benefit from repeated practice and completing multiple exercises to help them remember. Others may grasp the concept more quickly and may only need to complete one exercise before they get it.

Sometimes when planning a journey, we may need to consider how essential the journey is. If we decide the journey is not essential we might postpone it, or cancel it all together. Delaying or cancelling a journey is not going to cause any harm and allows us to focus on what matters without added stress.

If your child is feeling overwhelmed, bored or is struggling to start or finish tasks it is time to prioritise the workload and don’t be afraid to let some things go.[[7]](#footnote-7) Use this opportunity to support your child to prioritise what they can manage by asking:

* How is the activity supporting learning?
* Can this work be left out or revisited at a later stage?

In so doing you are empowering your child to take control of their learning and your child may in turn show their teachers that there are other ways to get things done. You can support your child to communicate with their teacher and explain why and how they are prioritising the workload for their learning.

**Step 4: Reflecting on the learning**

This final step is about supporting your child to think about their own learning and make their own decisions about their own progress and guide their own effort. The goal is for your child to have the satisfaction that they have learned something new or have mastered a skill that they have been practicing over a period of time. The goal is not just about completing something to hand in to the teacher. It is important to understand that learning is a process rather than a product. Expert learners are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, strategic and goal-directed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When you have followed your GPS directions and completed your journey you have achieved your goal of getting from one location to another. You may make a decision to save that route to your favourites; you may memorise the route for future trips; you may decide that the route you chose was not the best option and you’ll choose a different option for the return journey.

If your child doesn’t think they’ve quite got there you could encourage them to think about how they might adapt, edit or improve on what they’ve done. Look for:

* Examples shared by the teacher that model what is expected
* Checklists
* Marking guidelines that describe what needs to be included and at different levels of complexity
* Success criteria
* Offers from the teacher to provide feedback – this could be via email, in class or by submitting a draft. Feedback is a strategy backed by research[[9]](#footnote-9) – it is not cheating! If you were lost or unsure of the direction you were travelling in, you would ask for help to get you back on track. Same thing. Feedback is about teaching and learning.

Support your child to think about what they have learned, whether they have achieved the goal and what they could do improve by asking:

* How successful do you think you’ve been at achieving the learning goal?
* What mark would you give yourself right now? How do you think you could improve on that?
* What will you do differently next time when completing a similar assignment?
* What is one thing you learned in the process of doing this work?

Reflection is another important step in empowering your child to take control of their own learning.

More Information

Listen to the author, Sarah Humphreys, explain how to unpack the learning at home in this Vodcast <https://inclusiveschools.com.au/unpacking-the-learning-at-home-a-guide-for-parents/>

Watch Luis Perez present at the 2019 UDL-IRN International Summit in which he uses the GPS and other analogies to highlight the important role technology plays in ensuring everyone can access their environment. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Du9lRYDSPLA>

Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Sarah Humphreys, Co-Founder Inclusive Schools Australia. Sarah Humphreys is an education consultant with a passion for developing and promoting curriculum access for all. She presented at the UDL Implementation and Research Network, USA on how the principles of UDL were applied to the development of the Australian Curriculum and now works with schools supporting its implementation. https://inclusiveschools.com.au/



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