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CLEAR COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL INCLUSION VITAL FOR PARENTS SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S HOMESCHOOLING

According to Associate Professor Sue Nichols of the University of South Australia, in the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools can support parents in the transition to home-schooling by providing a better understanding of online tools and clearer communication channels.



While many schools have implemented digital learning in the curriculum, parents may have limited current awareness of the particular approaches, tools and resources used.

“There needs to be consistency regarding the digital platforms and tools being used by schools for parents to successfully support their children’s learning at home. The current circumstances may increase parents’ interest in finding out more, so systems and schools should consider providing parent learning resources including online workshops for them,” Professor Nichols says.

She suggests that there are a number of key ways that schools can support parents in the transition to learning at home

Firstly, a range of communication channels needs to be available to parents. Even when schools have implemented online platforms, which include home-school communication, these will not be used by all families. A study in 2017 found that a digital bulletin board and forum was used by ‘relatively few’ parents. Therefore, schools need to provide the same information to parents via a number of channels.

Associate Professor Nichols also points out that families’ resourcing differs greatly. Some families only have digital phones, which she holds is the least optimal way to access online learning. “However with the economic downturn, families’ ability to purchase needed equipment may well be decreased,” she says.

Learning resources, such as web pages, instructions on accessing online materials and the teaching materials themselves, need to be translated into non English languages, as research shows that a minority of school websites provide information in languages other than English.

Along with accessible resources and language, clear communication is also critical.

“Just as in our schools, the parent community includes individuals with learning disabilities and difficulties that may or may not have been diagnosed. This may become more of an obstacle when a large amount of learning material is being sent home through online channels, and where parents are expected to support home schooling. School communications need to be written in clear, understandable language, avoiding cluttered screens, complex sentences and multiple hyperlinks. Numbered lists and dot points, with carefully chosen relevant images are advised.”

There has been very little research on parents with learning difficulties and online support. However, studies show that parents appreciate teachers sending photos, video and texts, and that a “lack of visual and nonverbal cues” can make communication hard for parents to ‘decode’.

Establishing boundaries are another important aspect of the home-schooling transition, Associate Professor Nichols maintains. Specifically, boundaries that protect educators.

“Implementing home-school digital communication can have impacts on teachers’ work by potentially extending the times during which parents will attempt to access teachers. One response would be to communicate to parents and students the times in which teachers will be available to respond to their enquiries. Principals may wish to communicate that teachers will be responding to emails during specific times and may direct their staff to set up out-of-office replies at other times,” Associate Professor Nichols continues.

An important thing to do when transitioning to home-schooling is to see home-based learning as an opportunity to expand horizons.

It is well known that the official school curriculum gives some students more opportunities to shine than others. However, home-based activities can enrich children’s learning, without the need to turn them into school-like tasks. Associate Professor Nichols says: “Planting, growing and cooking vegetables and herbs, for instance, is of inherent value. Encourage parents and children to share these activities; teachers can then bring a more explicitly pedagogical perspective, taking the pressure off parents to become teachers.”

Lastly, personalisation is appreciated, Associate Professor Nichols notes.

“Parents are interested in their own child’s learning and they appreciate their child receiving individualised attention from the teacher,” she says. While digital tools can offer personalisation in the sense that the system provides individual tracking and feedback, this is not the same as a teacher’s attention. In the home-schooling context, this may mean a weekly online meeting between teacher and child which the parent can either attend, or which can be recorded for later viewing by the parent.

Research shows that students need teacher support to recognise the educational value of out-of-school learning experiences, and that parents are not told often always aware of their children’s digital activities at school.

Associate Professor Nichols is hopeful that these key points will guide schools, systems and teachers in how to support parents.

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