

## Westheimer: Forget trying to be your kid's substitute school teacher during COVID-19

Stop worrying about the vague and evidence-less idea of children 'falling behind' or 'catching up.' This is a worldwide pause in life-as-usual.

**Joel Westheimer**

March 31, 2020



*No, your family room doesn't need to become a classroom while the kids are off school.*

I am really struck by the variety of media inquiries I've been getting about the impacts of COVID-19 on education, what parents should be doing at home, and so on. The interest doesn't surprise me (I am an education columnist on public radio), but the preoccupation with whether kids will "fall behind" or with how they will "catch up" has. I see hundreds of stories, websites and YouTube videos that aim to help parents create miniature classrooms at home. Maybe some parents have folding chairs they can bring up from the basement and put in rows. Where's that big blackboard we used to have? Is there a run on chalk at Costco?

Stop worrying about the vague and evidence-less idea of children "falling behind" or "catching up." This is a worldwide pause in life-as-usual. We've spent the last 25 years overscheduling kids, over-testing kids, putting undue pressure on them to achieve more and more and play less and less. The result? Several generations of children and young adults who are stressed out, medicated, alienated and depressed.

This is not a time for worksheets. This is an opportunity (for those of us lucky enough to be at home and not in hospitals or driving buses or keeping our grocery store shelves stocked) to spend meaningful time with our children to the extent it is possible in any given family.

Parents shouldn't be thinking about how to keep their kids caught up with the curriculum or about how they can recreate school at home or how many worksheets they should have their children complete. They should bake a cake together. Make soup. Grow something in the garden. Take up family music playing. And neither school personnel nor parents should be focusing on how quickly or slowly children will return to school because none of us know. We should be focusing on ensuring that teachers are afforded the conditions they need to best support their students — now when school is out and later when school is back in.

Remember that ditty about the two Chinese brush-strokes that comprise the word "crisis"? One is the character for "danger" and the other the character for "opportunity." We are more and more aware of the danger. But we're missing out on the opportunity: to spend time as families (in whatever form that family takes in your household).

This brings me back to the questions I keep getting. What are my recommendations for what to do with your



Photo: Peter Thornton

children at home when they are missing so much school?

Stop the homework (unless you and your children are enjoying it). Stop the worksheets. Stop trying to turn your kitchen into Jaime Escalante's A.P. math class. But do help your children structure their day. Help them process what is going on around them. Help them engage in activities that do not take place on a screen.

Help them maintain physical activities, whether that means running around the block, running up and down the stairs, or running around the kitchen. Help them be creative. Give them — to the extent possible in your household — the gift of time and attention.

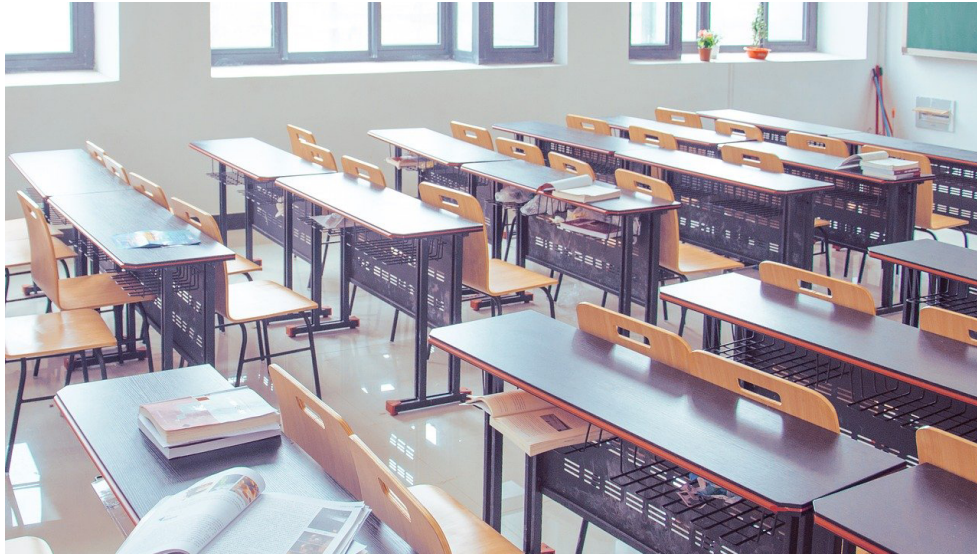
And when brick-and-mortar school (hopefully) returns next Fall, let's give teachers a great deal of latitude in what, how and when to teach any particular subject matter. Their primary job should be to restore a sense of safety, nurture a sense of possibility and rebuild the community lost through extended social isolation.

*Joel Westheimer is University Research Chair in Democracy and Education at the University of Ottawa and an education columnist for CBC's [Ottawa Morning](#) and [Ontario Today](#) shows. His most recent book is [What Kind of Citizen: Educating Our Children for the Common Good](#). Twitter: [@joelwestheimer](#)*



## Is taking a pause from the classroom so bad?

Posted on Thursday, April 23, 2020



Unprecedented in every way, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed life as we know it, not least of all how we educate our children. With schools closed, children are now learning remotely, leaving many parents wondering how their academic progress will be affected. Joel Westheimer, a professor in the Faculty of Education who holds the University Research Chair in Democracy and Education and the education columnist for CBC Radio in Ottawa, shares his insights into this singular version of “distance education.”



*Professor Joel Westheimer*

### **What is your main message to parents who are concerned with how school closures might affect their children's education?**

I don't think parents should be overly concerned about kids falling behind or needing to catch up. There will be a lot of accommodations in the fall at the K-12 and university levels for kids who haven't received the same kind of grading, who haven't taken standardized tests, or who have missed certain aspects of learning in the classroom.

Parents should not be worried about learning loss. We can't only look at what kids are missing when they don't follow the “normal” curriculum. We also have to look at opportunities for learning that are unique to this time. What can children learn from the world around them now – the crisis and the world's response to it? What can children gain from time with family, from watching nature, from cooking, playing, creating? Let's talk about learning gain and not just learning loss.

### **Do you have any tips for managing learning from home?**

One of my main recommendations to parents is to help your children structure their day. The day should have times when kids are engaged in cognitive, physical and hands-on activities, like cooking, gardening, or building something. That's very important because we don't want kids, or adults for that matter, spending eight hours a day scrolling through social media. First of all because it's not very

useful but, secondly, because it can lead to depression, and we know that depression can actually lead to a compromised immune system — something especially worrisome during a pandemic.

I would most want to see parents drawing on their own resources and interests, and on their kids' interests and passions, to develop activities based on what is available to them. If a parent plays a musical instrument, maybe this is a good time to teach those skills to their children. If Mom or Dad is a writer, then do a writing project. If a parent is a health worker, professor, or policymaker, then look into the social, economic, and political effects of pandemics.

### **What would you say to parents of high school students who are worried about their school year and handling schoolwork remotely?**

The Ministry of Education in Ontario has, in general, struck a very balanced and reasonable set of expectations, whereby it offers online resources while also making it clear that this isn't do or die. To the extent that it helps you and your child, use those resources. But don't let them add an extra layer of stress to an already stressful time. Universities, for example, are making accommodations for next year which will take into account the missed school time.

High-achieving kids are going to feel like they want to do it all. But sitting in front of a screen is not the same as being in a classroom. Parents should watch out for that. Is your child getting exercise? Is your child getting away from their screen and doing things offline? I prefer to see hands-on, project-based learning and using worksheets as little as possible.

### **What is your advice for parents of primary school students?**

The advice doesn't change much, but primary school students will need more help structuring their day and they will need a little more attention. I think it's great if they can check in occasionally with their teachers and their classmates online. The time requirements in front of the screen should, of course, be less than in high school. Make sure they're not getting lost in their screen for hours and hours.



### **How do parents, particularly of younger children, reconcile working from home with their children's schoolwork?**

This is a tough one. You should certainly look out for yourself and your family, and limit the amount of work that you can expect to do. For everyone's mental health, you should not stress about a child watching movies, for instance. You don't want them in front of the screen the whole day, but you have to balance work demands and what you can do. For those lucky enough to have two parents working from home, you can take turns. Most employers will be giving parents a little leeway in what they can and can't get done.

### **Can you think of another situation when school was out for a prolonged period? If so, how did it affect children's education?**

In our lifetime, there's never been this kind of global pause. I think, in some ways, a global pause is easier to manage than isolated events, such as school closures due to a strike, which occur in one

**If some parents follow the curriculum and others don't, will some children fall behind their peers when school resumes?**

*One of the things that bothers me about all these calls for parents to make sure their children don't "fall behind" is the way that is going to dramatically increase already existing inequality.* We know that some parents have the time and resources and education to demand their kids follow the curriculum, maybe even get ahead! Other parents are front-line workers, or holding down two jobs, or working at home with little time for other activities. Their children were always at a disadvantage and will be so even more now. The pandemic has served as an X-ray for society, revealing all of our fault lines including enormous (and growing) inequality. We know some households have high-speed internet and 3 or 4 of the latest speedy laptops. Others do not. Parents who want to do some schoolwork with their kids to fill the time and to keep little minds active shouldn't feel bad for doing so. If both the kids and parents like doing worksheets together, that's fine. But I don't want anyone to think that schools are issuing worksheets so that children of economically disadvantaged parents can keep up to their wealthier peers. Worksheets will not diminish the achievement gap between children from poorer and wealthier households. Enormous economic inequality was there before the pandemic, and it's here, now, during the pandemic. The more well-intentioned educators encourage middle class parents to have their kids "keep up" the more those educators contribute to the inequality they are railing against.

**Can you think of another situation when school was out for a prolonged period? If so, how did it affect children's education?**

In our lifetime, there's never been this kind of global pause. I think in some ways a global pause is easier to manage than isolated events such as school closures due to a strike, which occur in one place while the rest of the world keeps going. That's when you get more of a sense of falling behind.

The pandemic is a unique situation whereby everyone is going to be "behind," so let's acknowledge that and take it to heart. We're all taking a pause.