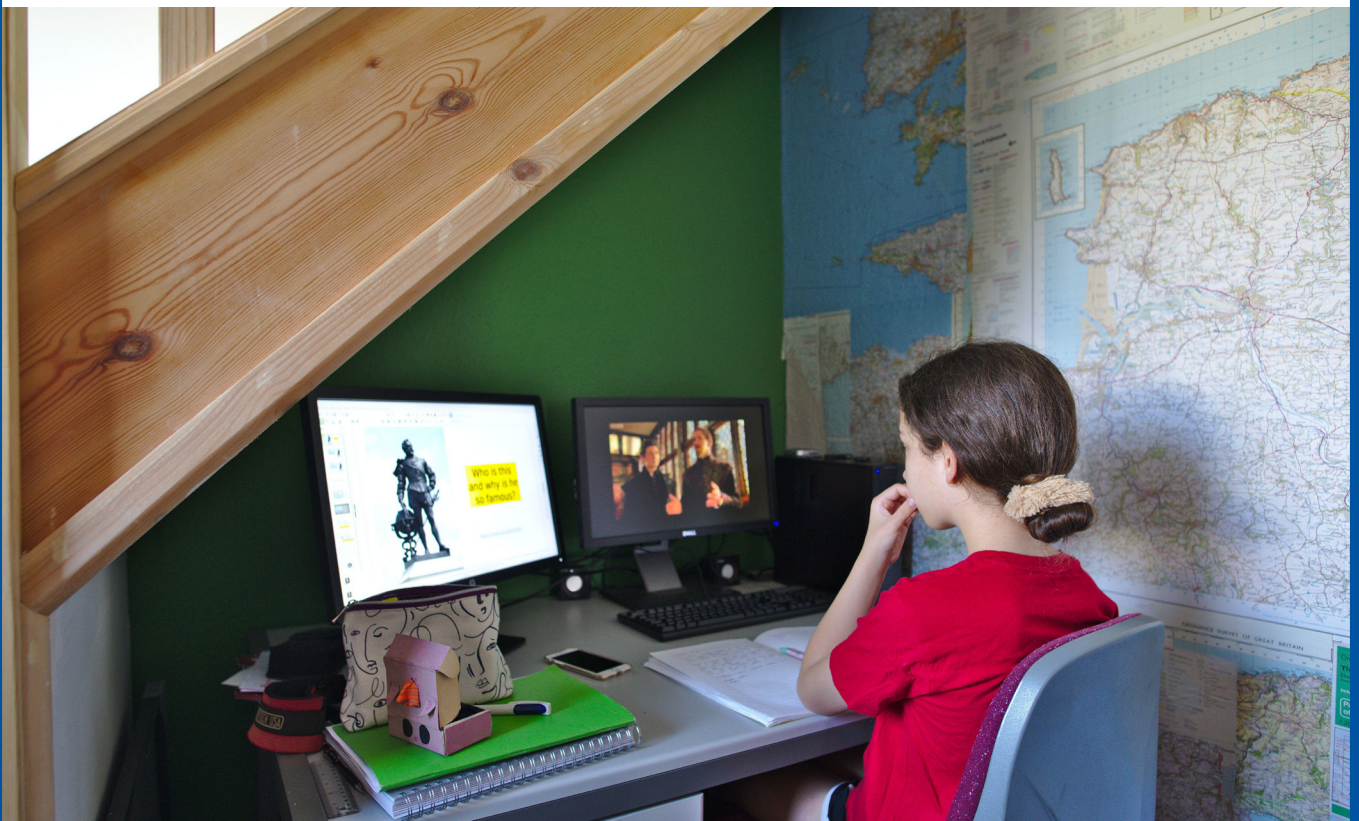




Supporting occupational health
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Meeting the impact of home learning on parents and employers

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INTRODUCTION

Following the scientific evidence regarding the transmission of COVID-19 between children at school and the subsequent spread between families and the community, the government has made the decision to close schools. Parents have been asked to support their children's education by moving to home-schooling and remote learning via live or recorded lessons.

Parental involvement in home learning is very much dependent on the child themselves, although generally younger children require more parental help in accessing and benefitting from the resources provided by schools than secondary school age children. Working from home and educating children is a real challenge for parents, employers, teachers, and the children themselves^{1,2}. This situation can be further exacerbated for those with children with disabilities³, or for those in poverty or from deprived areas^{4,5}.

ONS data from an opinions and lifestyle survey highlights the negative effects on jobs and wellbeing felt by parents. Overall, women spent more time on childcare than men, particularly 'non-developmental' care (such as washing and feeding) whereas men were more likely to engage in developmental activities with their children (e.g. home-schooling, playing and reading). The qualifications held by the parent also made a difference, with 83% of parents with a degree-level qualification home-schooling in a particular week compared with 62% of parents without any formal qualifications^{6,7}.

This guidance is aimed at employers and parents as well as providing useful links to additional information.

FOR PARENTS

The guidance below is aimed at supporting parents; however it provides employers with an appreciation of the challenges facing their employees as they support the education of their children.

The best approach for parents is to open up a dialogue with their employer sooner rather than later if you feel that supporting the education of your child will present significant challenges. Recognising the need to be flexible, create a list of ideas and proposals to discuss with your employer that would allow you to be more productive. Where possible document any temporary changes to the way you work and agree to keep your situation under review.

As an employee you have a number of statutory rights which may be helpful. However, if you are a freelancer, self-employed or you work for an agency, you are a worker and not an employee and as such you would not be entitled to the same rights as an employee:

Flexible working

After 26 weeks working for an employer you are have the right to request flexible working, referred to as making a statutory application; however the employer does not have to agree. <https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working>

Time off for family and dependants

The right to a "reasonable" amount of unpaid time off to care for a dependant, and some employers offer a certain number of days' paid leave. <https://www.gov.uk/time-off-for-dependants>

Parental leave

For employees with more than one year's continuous service they may request up to 18 weeks unpaid parental leave for each child up until the child's 18th birthday. The limit on how much parental leave each parent can take in a year is four weeks for each child (unless the employer agrees otherwise). You must take parental leave as whole weeks (e.g. one week or two weeks) rather than individual days, unless your employer agrees otherwise or if your child is disabled. <https://www.gov.uk/parental-leave>

Holiday request

You may choose to use your holiday entitlement to support home-schooling however your employer must be in agreement with when and for how long this holiday is taken and they have the right to deny requests according to the needs of the business.

HOME LEARNING

It's important to remember teaching is skilled and that parents are parents and not teachers. The level of parental involvement needed for home learning is a sliding scale and very much depends on the child. Everyone's circumstances and challenges are different but everyone has their own obstacles, whether you are two parents working in a high pressure job vs a struggling shift worker.

- Be realistic, understand what is and isn't in your control. There are only a set number of hours in a day – what is sensible and achievable?
- Be flexible. Create a routine that suits your family; see how that goes and make changes that you think might work better.
- Support your child to set up friendship groups around the home learning which are helpful and motivating. (Isolation can be a factor in reducing motivation and effectiveness of remote learning – using social media can help with this⁷.)
- Have fun! Encourage your child to explore their interests independently and find their own resources online.
- Share the load if possible where there are two parents at home. Focus on what you can achieve, not what you can't!
- Make time for exercise and breaks throughout the day – their day at school would include breaks and lunchtime etc.
- Include other activities. Get grandparents to listen to them read over Zoom, get them to write postcards to family members, let them help you cook etc.
- Communicate or get your child to communicate with the teacher so that they know what is going well and what might work better.
- Find the best place for your child to do their school learning, designate a work space if possible and at the end of the day have a clear cut-off to signal school time is over e.g. get them to write a diary of what they have achieved in the day.
- Provide structure and routine; establish expectations and involve the children in setting the timetable then help them stick to it where possible.
- Talk to the teacher, don't leave issues and let a small problem become a big one. Motivation and engagement can be a barrier for some children, which can be boosted by speaking directly to the teacher.
- It is easy to get fatigued by the situation so communicate this with the teacher if the position persists for longer than a day or two.
- Keep home and school learning separate. Distinguish between weekdays and weekends. Have cut-offs and time for relaxation and free choice.
- Focus on quality not quantity.

FURTHER READING

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/support-resources-for-schools/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jan/25/three-teachers-on-remote-learning-and-returning-to-school-covid-lockdown>

<https://www.acs-schools.com/parents-guide-distance-learning>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/help-children-aged-2-to-4-to-learn-at-home-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/help-primary-school-children-continue-their-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

FOR EMPLOYERS

How can employers maintain their business while supporting their employees with the temporary closure of schools?

Most employers recognise that their employees are vital to the success of their business and that by supporting their health and wellbeing they can increase their motivation, productivity and loyalty, which are crucial to getting through these challenging times. With school closures, it is important employers engage with employees to understand the impact on them and their family, show compassion and consider a variety of different ways in which they could be flexible with homeworking arrangements.

- Try to offer flexibility in working hours, adapt the nature of the role, consider paid time off and reduce working hours, targets and deadlines.
- Encourage parents to take a break, to block out time in their day including a lunch hour.
- Reduce unnecessary meetings, restricting when meetings can be arranged, avoid changing them at the last minute, make sure they are no longer than they need to be, and fix an end time and stick to it.
- Have conversations about what is 'good enough'. The feeling of not being a good enough employee, or a good enough parent, while not being able to give 100% to either of these things can negatively impact on parents' mental health. Have open conversations about expectation levels.
- Provide time for home-schooling parents to create self-help groups where feelings can be shared, ideas can be swapped, and where parents are able to support each other to understand how to help their children with the subject matter.
- Acknowledge and accept that employees with children could be interrupted when working from home.
- Make it okay for employees to have their cameras off, should they choose to.
- Ask employees if there is any additional equipment or technical support would help such as an additional laptop or a headset to prevent distractions.
- Ensure the employee has adequate internet access by funding the upgrade of their broadband package.
- Consider providing creative, educational and physical activity based resources to help employees to keep their children active, creative and happy.

In some circumstances it may be worth considering wholly or partially furloughing employees. The government guidance indicates that furlough is available to employees who are required to stay home because they have childcare or other caring responsibilities resulting from coronavirus. However, there is no automatic entitlement for an employee or obligation on the employer for the employee to go on furlough⁸.

FURTHER READING

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm>

<https://www.acas.org.uk/working-from-home>

<https://daveylaw.co.uk/safeguarding-employees-working-from-home/>

<https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/how-can-HR-support-working-parents-during-lockdown>

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