Back to school COVID-Style

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Like everything else, back to school will look a lot different this year. Many school-age children are beginning the school year virtually, while others will be part of a hybrid model. While families are working, the care of these school-age children is falling on the early childhood education community. This provides an opportunity for the early childhood education community to assist working families with the care of many of these school-age children. Centers and family child cares are welcoming larger than normal amounts of school-age children and supporting them with their virtual learning. While this pandemic has certainly produced many challenges, we are here to provide some back to school tips that will hopefully make this unprecedented start to the school year a little more manageable. When planning for supporting virtual learners, it is important to consider the logistics of your individual program. There is no one-size-fits-all model to follow and that's okay! Some things to consider:

- How many children are currently enrolled? What grades are the children in? What schools do they attend? Family and large family child care programs may want to take into consideration the number and ages of younger children enrolled as this may affect how many virtual learners they can take on.
- Space for virtual learning
- Daily schedules
- Internet access

These things will all influence your planning and decision making. It is also important to note that it is perfectly fine if some programs are unable to take on school-age students at this time. Each program needs to be making decisions based on the best interest of their students, families, and educators. For some that may mean providing families with other options that are better suited to their needs.

Policies and Procedures

For programs that have decided to support virtual learners, where to start? Policies and procedures! Before taking on this uncharted territory, it is important to set expectations for families and staff by creating some policies. Programs may want to consider the following:

- Although the early childhood educator is there to provide support during virtual learning, families should still be managing and overseeing their child's work. Encourage families to look over their work or assignments each evening and to stay in communication with the child's teacher. It is important for everyone to stay connected to ensure the best experience for the child!
- Families should provide the appropriate technology for the child to use. It may be helpful to provide a disclaimer that the child care program is not responsible for the child's device. Also, encourage families to send their child's device fully charged with the charging cord as a backup.
- The early childhood educator may want to request permission to communicate directly with the child's teacher. This will be helpful if a child is experiencing any difficulties during online learning time.

In addition to writing out these new policies and procedures, programs should review them with families. Although parents and educators cannot meet in person, there are ways to connect virtually. Consider a conference via Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype. For programs with multiple virtual learners, it may be helpful to have a meeting with all parents at once using an online platform. As always, it is good practice to have parents sign off on the policies.

Daily Schedule

To accommodate virtual learners, programs may need to adjust their daily schedules. Review the current daily schedule and make note of any changes that may need to be made. Family child care providers may need to adjust mealtimes or outside times if there is only one educator working with the children. Center-based programs may need to review their staffing schedules to accommodate a potentially larger amount of school-age children. It is important to note that children from different schools and different grades will have different scheduling needs. Consider the following items when reviewing/revising daily schedules:

- How many hours are considered "school time"?
- What time do the school-age children need to be online?
- What times are the breaks in their schedules? Encourage gross motor play for the children during these breaks, even if it is for a short amount of time. Providing opportunities for the children to get up and move around is important for their physical and mental health!
- Do they have independent work to complete offline?

Child Care Space

To accommodate virtual learners, programs may need to adjust their daily schedules. Review the current daily schedule and make note of any changes that may need to be made. Family child care providers may need to adjust mealtimes or outside times if there is only one educator working with the children. Center-based programs may need to review their staffing schedules to accommodate a potentially larger amount of school-age children. It is important to note that children from different schools and different grades will have different scheduling needs. Consider the following items when reviewing/revising daily schedules:

- Trifold learning space- This will help give each child some privacy. Keep in mind that the children should still be able to be easily supervised!
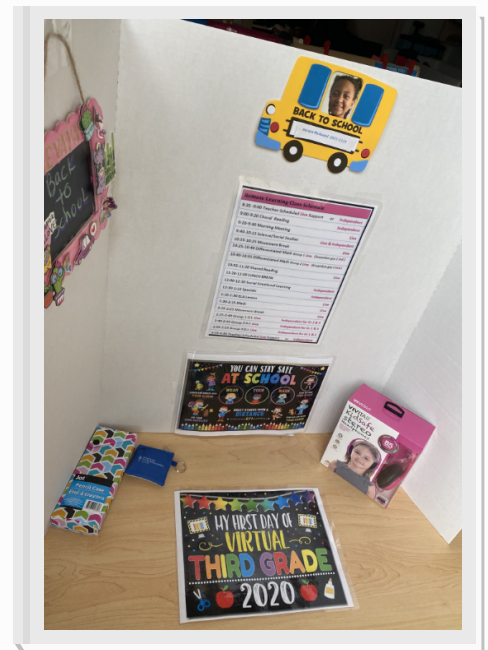
Picture provided by FCC provider, Carmen Wright

Child Care Space (con't)

- Headphones- This will help the children stay focused and eliminate outside noise.

- Individual caddies- This will ensure that each child has their own supplies available whenever they need them.

Additional Considerations

We should all keep in mind that this may be a difficult transition for many children. It is more important than ever for children to have opportunities for free play and creativity. Be sure that the school-age children have opportunities to play outdoors. Offer them choices in activities and materials for "after school". In addition, we should also be mindful of the mental and emotional health of our school-age children. The resources below may be helpful for both programs and families.

Not that we needed it, but 2020 continues to provide us with more and more evidence that our early childhood educators are true superheroes. Thank you for all that you continue to do to support children and families throughout Delaware. Please remember that Delaware Stars is here to support YOU!

Resource for Supporting Social and Emotional Health:

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning- https://casel.org/resources-covid/