At the beginning of the pandemic, I wrote about the pandemic as a marathon needing a training plan. As the months wear on, and we get ready to begin a new school year, the “finish line” still hasn’t revealed itself. And our endurance is waning. This is especially true of those in parenting and caregiving roles. A recent study has highlighted the specific impacts for women in academia. It is important to acknowledge that the lived experience of many, and to name that the struggle is, in fact, quite real. We are asking individuals to solve systemic – and national-level – problems, and the ‘village’ that many caregivers rely on is limited. For young children who require frequent, if not constant attention, this is a particular challenge. So what do we do to prepare for a year of childcare needs and distance learning and hybrid models (oh my!), aside from soldier on?

- **Give yourself, and everyone else, grace.** You’ve heard it before but now is another opportunity to practice empathy for all decisions. Each family is different and the ‘right’ solution will vary based on needs. We may not all agree, but let’s agree to assume that we are all making the best decisions we can and acknowledge that to each other.

- **Secure your own oxygen mask** before helping others... especially children. (They will definitely need your help). Make sure you are finding other adults who can provide support (virtually, in-person, quick texts, social media posts... it all counts!), especially when you are feeling stretched to your limits.

- **Know what’s coming next (as much as possible).** Children like to know what is happening (as do we all!). Although there are a lot of uncertainties right now, the more you can tell your children about what to expect the better. Talk to your child’s teachers/childcare providers and get a sense of changes in rules (distancing? Wearing masks?), routines (more handwashing? limits on previous activities?) so you can start practicing and talking about these changes with your children. For those doing in-person learning, these short social stories or popular children’s social-emotional learning-focused shows can help. (And remember, be patient if you aren’t getting responses from schools right away. If everyone follows this advice, teachers will have 20+ parents asking questions that they may not yet have answers to!)

- **Prepare your child’s learning/activity space.** Even before you have all the answers, you can start getting your environment ready. Try to create a separate area with specific learning materials (e.g. a pencil box with ‘school markers’, scissors, glue, pencils, etc. that can stay in that ‘school area’). Involve your child in creating this area so that it can feel special and personal – this helps with buy-in when you remind them to go to their learning space while parents have their own meetings.
  - If your child has special education accommodations, know that these still apply during distance learning. Make sure to ask for updates and information as to what these accommodations will look like in the virtual world. You can also ask for additional accommodations specific to the virtual learning context that may not have been needed in in-person learning.

- **Focus on predictable routines and daily schedules**, especially if you are preparing for distance learning, and don’t be afraid to tweak them from week to week as you learn more about your child and family’s needs. Here are some specific tips to consider.
• Keep kids occupied. One of my favorite early childhood ‘isms’ is that if you don’t give children something to do, they will make their own fun (and often it isn’t what you would want them to be doing). At the beginning of the pandemic, I curated a thread of resources to entertain and keep kids busy (it also includes resources on talking to children about the pandemic). Find what works for you and your children and incorporate them into your day. And remember, if your child is having trouble with screen-based activities, learning opportunities are everywhere.

• Keep kids active. Building in movement or brain breaks can help children of all ages refocus and re-regulate their bodies and their emotions. Take a dance break. Walk around the block. Make a living room obstacle course and do time trials between activities. Go Noodle is a preschool favorite that many children may already be familiar with.

• Celebrate the positive. Acknowledge big and small goals – some days, getting out of bed is a feat. Make sure to provide positive attention, praise, and small acknowledgements when desired behaviors happen. And when they don’t, pick your battles in order to minimize power struggles. Many parents I know have given up on having kids wear anything but pajamas (or swimsuits). Choosing their clothing can actually provide some semblance of control for kids, so if that is one thing we can give them and it doesn’t interfere with the day’s activities, so be it.

• Acknowledge the less positive. There have been a lot of recommendations that parents only accentuate the positive and hide their own frustrations or sadness in order to shape their child’s perceptions of the coming year. That can be a mistake. While children don’t need to see our most raw emotions, it is absolutely okay to acknowledge that the current situation is not ideal. In fact, it can be helpful for children to see adults model calm ways of expressing negative emotions. Sharing something like “I’m sad that you can’t go to school and see your friends too. I wish that you could start kindergarten in your school building instead of over the computer.” can help to build emotional literacy and resilience too.

• Speaking of resilience… one thing we know is that connections with a safe, caring, and predictable adult is the best predictor of resilience! Children also learn emotion regulation from adults through co-regulation. (This is also why self-care moments are so important!). Take a few minutes to connect and do something enjoyable. Even if it is 5 minutes at the start or end of the day, these moments of connection with your child will go a long way to buffer the inevitable challenges that occur throughout the day.

• Add to the list! Here are some more ideas for how to support children through modified in-person and distance learning this fall. Feel free to add more ideas and let us know what is working for you, so other parents and caregivers can benefit too.