

## Keep children busy by creating memories and writing diaries

There are some kinds of learning in which parents and families can take the lead, writes Dr Anne Looney



Amy McArdle with her daughters Eve (11) in sixth class, Lucia (9) in third class and Esme (5) in junior infants, who are keeping up with lessons from Faughart Community School, Co Louth, via the internet.

Photo: Arthur Carron

**Dr Anne Looney**

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For educators - and, indeed, all other sectors - employment was upended last week. Colleagues in the early-years sector found themselves temporarily laid off, emphasising once again the disparity between the working conditions of early-years employees and almost every other education professional.

Primary school teachers mobilised around digital champions who have been sharing ideas and resources across a number of social media channels and lower-tech platforms like WhatsApp groups.

Our post-primary teachers have learned new skills from each other and from the PDST - the Professional Development Service for Teachers - and have been prepping for the brave new world of online teaching at scale.

teaching and learning experience.

In two days last week, the revolution happened. And there is no doubt that when all of this is over, educational institutions are another of the 'things that will never be the same again'.

The focus of all learners - children, young people, and adults - has switched from an institution to a kitchen table. Our youngest learners are in a different space. Because much of their learning is still being adult-led, requiring careful scaffolding and support, their engagement with online learning (with online anything) requires a lot of adult mediation.



Dr Anne Looney

Depending on their school, parents and caregivers may be getting messages through Aladdin or other similar platforms, or the school website may be offering daily updates. And some primary schools have rolled out online platforms that will connect teachers with students on a daily basis.

But in all of these scenarios, it is the parents and those family, friends and volunteers who have stepped in to support parents at work, who will be supporting children and their learning in the weeks ahead.

I'm not a psychologist and there is some great professional advice out there about how to reduce children's anxiety levels and handle their hard questions. And I know that some parents have decided that these weeks are not for school, but for play, talk, movies, popcorn, staying in pyjamas and under duvets on the sofa.

All of the above are commendable (indeed, I plan on most of them myself at some point!). But my advice would be to give at least some time each day, or even every second day, to what is available from school.

When this is over and schools reopen, your children may well be Ireland's greatest Harry Potter experts, but they will also need to have had the shared experience of connecting with their teacher and their class in that time off. Schools will be in catch-up mode and teachers, most of whom are parents, will know that children will have very different experiences in these weeks, but will have a reasonable expectation that children have accessed the material sent out to them.

As events unfold, we may well all find ourselves under the duvet, or singing from our balconies, but for this week, build some time for what comes from school into the day.

The National Parents Council has usefully reminded us that these weeks will be a partnership between home and school, between families and teachers.

There are some kinds of learning in which parents and families can take the lead. These are unprecedented times, but giving children a sense of the 'special', and of their importance in 'the emergency' can give them a sense of agency, as a counterbalance to feelings of helplessness and fear.

Today, think about giving children (aged 10 and over, but some younger children may well have a good go at this) a new notebook and pen (right) and ask them to start a diary with an entry for every day, documenting not just their school work or their play/popcorn/duvet experiences, but how they connected with their friends online or over the phone, and how they felt. Set a time at the end of each day for writing in the diary (this might be something for the adults to try too!). Remind children that, in the future, they can show these diaries to their children to tell them all about what happened in 2020.

Make them the researchers and curators of these strange and unnerving times. A memory box is also a good idea - gathering artefacts from these weeks. Museum curators are doing this on a professional scale, gathering masks, hand sanitiser, toilet rolls, photographs, press releases and the like for posterity.

What about 'curating' at home and filling a box with 'stuff' from these weeks? Younger children might be given the task of capturing the 'photo of the day' using an adult phone, but with the promise of a printed photograph when normality returns. Use the photos as talking points too and, with the child's permission, share these with the extended family to validate their view of their homebound world.

Later, some of these photographs can be brought to school and used in the many discussions, essays and projects that lie ahead.

In 2030, when we mark the anniversary of Covid-19, these will be important testimonies from our youngest citizens.

They will offer unique insights into how we lived, how we learned, how we lost, how everything changed, and how we survived.

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