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From a Distance: Teaching, Learning, and Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Melanie Love

On March 13, 2020, schools closed.

Since then, as a busy wife, mother, and first grade teacher, I've gone through the motions; however, I honestly haven't known exactly how to react or what to do. I felt like this ugly pandemic made me out to be a liar to my young students. I promised I'd keep them safe, I told them I'd be there for them. I said I'd help them have access to the same resources our more affluent neighboring schools have. I promised to advocate for them when their own voices needed a boost.

As a Teacher

As a teacher at a Title I school, I had already worked on building trust and resiliency. For example, using Becky Bailey's *"Conscious Discipline"* approach (2015), I created a safe space in one corner of our classroom called the "Quiet Cube." My students quickly learned they could use our calming corner if they were feeling overwhelmed, angry, or simply needed a few minutes to be alone. We memorized meaningful community building rituals, such as the partnering activity where I taught them new words to the familiar tune of, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
What a beautiful child you are.
With your big, bright eyes and your cute little nose,
You're the best, from your head to your toes.

My students would sing with a partner, sitting face-to-face and knee-to-knee, adding inflection to the tone of their voices and using eye contact, so their partner would feel valued. This – along with so many other activities – occurred on the large, oval carpet at the front of the classroom. My students understood this was our safe place for daily news to share, classroom discussions, read alouds, brain breaks, problem solving, social emotional connection activities, and many other familiar classroom routines.



Melanie Love

The reality is, first graders can't be handled well from a distance. Teaching amid a global pandemic is uncharted and unsettling territory for me. The uncomfortable truth is that I still have far more questions than there are answers, as I strive to be an educator who teaches with the whole child in mind.

How will I be able to stay true to who I am for my students from a distance? Even when we do go back to in-person teaching, how will I comfort a crying six-year-old from six feet away? How will I help the budding author as she learns to proofread her own writing? How will I assist the little one who can't yet tie his own shoes, or the one who simply feels sad for no reason at all and needs an extra hug?

My brain has been reeling, trying to pick up all of the pieces and fit them into some sort of "new normal" that actually makes sense for my life. My first impetus was to continue. The first week away from my students, I reached out constantly. I wrote them daily "News to Share" messages, I recorded daily YouTube videos of me reading familiar stories. These were my best, yet highly vulnerable attempts to be as close to the teacher my students knew and loved.

Many of my students or their families called and sent notes to let me know they enjoyed the stories I was reading. This made me happy because with everything having been suddenly yanked out from under my

first graders, I wanted to give them whatever sense of normalcy I could. I wanted and needed them to feel safe and to remember I still loved them, even though I wasn't able to be with them.

Our district was not yet enabled with 1:1 technology, so remote teaching was a daunting undertaking, to say the least. There was no colorful, quadrilateral carpet on our Zoom calls. There were so many unknowns wracking my brain. Many families I serve now have to figure out where they will get their next meal. Fortunately, my district has been steadfast in providing the continuity of school food for families, which is a huge coordinated effort by many of my concerned and also reeling colleagues.

As a Parent

As worried as I was about my students during those initial vulnerable days, I was also immediately faced with the daunting task of educating my own children: second and fifth graders. Much like I did for my school students, I tried to impart the security of continuity for my boys. This was a difficult adjustment for all of us. We are fairly accustomed to being in “home mode” when we are here, and this transition into doing “distance learning” required a tremendous amount of flexibility and patience. While we are fortunate enough to have a reasonable internet connection and devices for both of them, they do not have any prior knowledge with *digital learning*, especially not while socially distanced from their friends and teachers. In that sense, this may be the first technology-related undertaking we've attempted where I inherently know more than they do.

Although our pandemic lifestyle has been full of lots of changes and intense feelings, I've also had our many blessings forefront in my mind. We have a kitchen so full of food, those we know who are affected by COVID-19 are not within our closest circle. We are not “essential workers” who must don masks and go out into this new and very scary world each day.

Given all of this, my strategy is to slow things down, take it all as it comes. I try to navigate this new, murky normal and use coping skills such as those found on

Brain Gym, including motion and deep breathing exercises, daily journaling, staying connected with friends and colleagues, and to “keep on keeping on” as best I can. I do this and try to stay calm for my children. I also sometimes hide in the bathroom for a few extra minutes. I take a break so my kids won't see the worry seeping through my expressions.

Like my own routine journal writing, I ask my sons to do the same. I tell them we are living through extraordinary times they may someday want to share with *their* children. In this way, I build in a sense of hope and resiliency for them so they don't get scared. We make responsible choices about which and how much news to consume. Each morning we watch a kid-friendly news segment together and talk about what we learned. On late nights when sleep eludes me, my mind runs in circles to the tune of background TV and the sleeping sounds of my family. At least I can rest in that knowledge for now. At least they are safe.

As Teacher and Parent

With my strong desire to provide normalcy and routine for all of the children in my care, I've decided a plan and tried to stick to it as much as possible. I worked hard to transform our dining room table into a make-shift classroom, and I carved out space where learning could be nurtured. I spent close to two hours one day thinking of all the components needed for a healthy daily home-learning routine. Much like I had done in my classroom, I labeled these activity blocks onto card stock and affixed pictures to add interest.

When I first showed these to my 5th grader, he scoffed at me and rolled his eyes. Groaning, he said, “Mom, you're treating this like it's your classroom!”

Although I didn't share my thoughts with him at the time, it occurred to me that I have no other lens through which to look at all of this. The teacher – and mom – in me both understand the importance of daily routines in creating a sense of security. In my classroom, I devoted weeks to explaining, coaching and practicing our classroom routines with my young students. I used the Responsive *Classroom* methods from

the book, *"The First Six Weeks of School"* (2015) to help my students understand our routines so well they could run through our day from muscle memory, without much conscious thought at all.

Even though I knew our home routine wouldn't be as firm as my classroom, I wanted to make sure my children knew what I expected of them and that they had a safe, well-organized space to work. The initial negativity I received from my son when I showed him our schedule did eventually lessen. He gave me the gift of his cooperation and encouraged his little brother to do the same. They even posed for this picture, for a moment.

We have no choice but to blunder on through this darkness, doing our best to stay grounded. I am comforted by the thought that I do know my kids best. While I'm not a proponent of rigidity and overbooking kids, mine, like most, thrive on some form of a routine. As the Council on Early Childhood suggests, children need to read or be read to and spend quality time away from screens (2014). They do need to have clear, factual age-appropriate information about what is going on, while not getting too bogged down in news and world events.

In this same vein, I continue as a teacher by encouraging and supporting the families of my first graders as they too find their own versions of a routine amongst this new digital landscape. To my way of thinking, we all have only one choice during these times and that is to continue moving forward. I will do my part by pointing out, even searching for the good of these slower mornings at home. The found time with my family, the increase in our shared mealtimes and the blessing of this unexpected, additional time together.

Perhaps what matters most is not what they learn or what gaps still remain when this is all behind us but how our children will remember these times. What legacy will we leave? What lessons will we inadvertently teach them about survival and perseverance? What are the greater lessons here are about kindness, grace and finding joy in the simple moments of life?

As much as I would be comforted by having all the



Figure 1. Love's children, learning from home during the COVID-19 quarantine. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

answers now, I think we all will have to be content with slowing down and taking the world as it comes for now. Even if I treat my home like a classroom, time will tell what ultimate detriment – or maybe even delight – comes from all of this.

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