Agency With Virtual Learning:
Prioritizing children's social emotional health in the pandemic

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Educators Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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"Mama," she whispered. *"Mama, I can't click on this. Mama, the password doesn't work. What is it again?"* For the young child, learning through the screen can be disempowering because she requires so much support from adults in order to participate. With the recent need for schools to conduct learning virtually, families are navigating extensive stress concerning how to support their children's education while they continue to put food on the table, manage their household responsibilities, and parent without community support. In this article, we explore the value of making decisions for children informed by a child's experience of agency that prioritizes a relationship-based approach and social emotional health.

As we weather both a global pandemic and the fight for racial justice, children are extremely stressed; many families report an uptick in challenging behaviors and relational upsets. Children may hear news stories about racism and rampant inequity and worry about what it all means. They may startle at loud sounds, associating it with news of violence and unrest. They might see yellow tape cordoning off a playground and feel sad that they cannot play on the slide. They may be struggling to make sense of what it means to have to stay home because of a virus. All these stresses may lead to more outbursts or meltdowns.

At Positive Parenthood, we follow a relationship-based approach to bring calm and comfort to the adult-child relationship (be it between parents and children or teachers and children). We focus on children's sovereignty and the adult's capacity to nurture the relationship in order to support children's resiliency and cooperation. We encourage parents, teachers, and other adults in children's lives to consider a child's experience of agency and social emotional well-being as they make decisions about virtual schooling and consider how they might best supplement the child's learning.

Relationships, Screen Time, and Children's Agency

A relationship-based approach means honoring the child's agency as a being and as a learner, and relying on the relationship between adult and child to be a force of regulation and resiliency. When children experience consistent or significant upsets, a relationship-based approach means retooling how we "be" together, it means focusing on presence and praise as foundational tools of cooperation, and it means acknowledging and reducing the stressors children are experiencing (acknowledging them as mattering to the child without qualifying them as minor or major).

During the pandemic, screens have become the portal through which many of our children learn and experience relationships with extended family. I myself identify as a screen-positive mama. I have established simple boundaries around screen time—we have a weekend movie night, Facetime with family, and Zoom calls with teachers and classmates. When I have a really critical work meeting or moment when I need to focus on a complex issue, I sometimes rely on a show to occupy the children. This is the exception, however, not the rule. Like many of the families with whom I work, I have negotiated my own share of distress as boundaries around screens are set, broken, reworked, and revisited. With screens coming to play a prominent role in everyday familial and educational lives, fostering the child's capacity to experience both agency and connection in a virtual setting will be critical—and will differ from child to child and family to family.

For children who have technological access as well as the capacity to manage the links, assignments, and the tech troubleshooting, virtual learning can be empowering. Their screens offer the potential to enter into a world with friends, bright images, familiar content, and teachers who miss them. They may be transported from their bedroom or living room into a digital classroom that is vast, if two-dimensional. Young people who are able to navigate virtual schooling on their own may benefit from exercising a sense of agency. The capacity to maintain control over, manipulate, and participate in digital worlds can, like a sense of agency in other spaces, help children maintain emotional regulation and nurture their resiliency.

It is important to note, however, that power differentials among historically marginalized young people are replicated and even deepened in virtual spaces. Children without technological access and children who are unable to manage a virtual platform (whether because they have yet to develop their digital literacy or because their fingers are too small to manage clicking and dragging) may experience a *loss* of agency when virtual learning is necessary. While older children and more advantaged children may experience an *increase* in agency, young children and those without the advantages of access may experience the opposite.

Young and inexperienced children may be unable to manage multiple Zoom meeting numbers, or they may struggle to connect with teachers and friends without being able to read their body language and affect. Sitting still in front of a screen might be too demanding, especially when they must periodically interrupt their parents for help. Likewise, their parents may be struggling as they try to manage their own work. These struggles often result in a negative cycle of co-regulation between child and parent. Also, young children's bodies might be sensitive to the blue light from screens.

Most parents and educators alike will agree that distance learning is far from ideal. Yet, our current lived reality mandates distance learning for our own safety. As we question what it means for children to be and feel safe in this context, we urge parents and caregivers to consider how the child experiences agency in this new context.

Prioritizing Social-Emotional Health

Using agency as a framework to evaluate how our children are faring as virtual learners, and to make a decision on how to best nurture their social-emotional well-being, highlights the child's experience from their own perspective. Many educators and parents have already sounded the alarms that social-emotional health is far more important for our children right now than academic learning. A really significant piece of feeling grounded in childhood is developing the capacity to reign over everyday occurrences; when those everyday things are shaped by and through screen engagement, capacity to engage with digital

spaces and a felt sense of agency in digital spaces become paramount.

For parents who elect to go down the virtual learning route, whether they do so out of choice or necessity, being present with their children will be critical. Being present means removing other distractions so you can truly engage with your child on their level. Living in a world defined by distractions, multi-tasking, networked relationships, and light-speed decisions and interactions, it can be challenging to slow down enough so that one can be truly present with a child. And yet in order to nurture positive human development, being present with children *in their world and on their terms* is exactly what adults must do.

Presence in the relationship between adult and child nurtures a sense of safety for the child. Feeling safe is an optimal state for learning and growing. Stress, which is higher than typical for most children during the pandemic, makes it challenging if not impossible for children to settle enough to learn. The quality of presence in the relationship between adult and child supports not only learning and development but also cooperation. When parents come to us at Positive Parenthood and recount, with heavy hearts, the significant and intense behavioral challenges they are experiencing with their children, we immediately consider the foundations of their parenting. When the foundations of the relationship are not firm, rich, and nurtured, the challenging moments that are sure to arise with childhood can result in truly difficult situations that tend to loop, with the child and the parent getting into a negative cycle of co-escalation. In order to disrupt this cycle, we turn toward strengthening the quality of presence a parent can offer a child, with an eye toward growing connection and what is working instead of eradicating negative behavior. It is through this connection that we can foster a sense of agency in our children, honoring their interests, perspectives, and experiences. This sort of deep connection enables children to maintain regulation more consistently, even when they may experience a destabilizing loss of agency. For example, if they are unable to participate autonomously in virtual schooling, they can rely on the connection with close adults in order to maintain regulation.

We want to be clear that it is the *quality* of presence that is stabilizing for children, rather than the *quantity* of the time an adult can be present. Ideally, of course, children would receive high-quality presence from their teachers as well as family. In virtual environments, however, the affective experience of presence shifts, especially for very young children. Some children experience regulation difficulties when trying to interact with a screen environment for a very long period of time. To support children participating in virtual learning as well as other screen-related activities, cultivating a felt sense of presence throughout the day is going to be critical. A felt sense of presence can be cultivated in everyday activities—what you already must accomplish during your day.

The Power of Positive Relationships

As we continue in what is potentially one of the most unique and unexpected eras of our lives, we encourage parents and teachers to cultivate a sense of curiosity around challenging moments. When a child refuses to stop playing Fortnight, *be curious, not furious*. Can you join in? What is the child accomplishing, learning, or persistently pursuing? What level are they on, how many levels have they completed, and what have they learned in the process? Co-viewing and co-playing are important ways to enter a child's world and cultivate presence. When a child becomes frustrated and misbehaves because their drawing doesn't turn out or the movie is over, *be curious, not furious*. Cultivating a sense of lightness and a willingness to more deeply understand what is going on honors the child's experience and strengthens a relationship. Positive relationships help adults feel more capable, joyful, and hopeful, enhancing the quality of their presence for the child.

As we work together toward reimagining what schooling can be, we encourage you to consider both children's felt sense of agency and the quality of your presence. Knowing that challenging behaviors are expressions of stress and working to reduce stressors in the environment for our children help us to re-focus their needs and position ourselves in order to support them. It is also important to practice self-care during a time of extreme stress. As you care for your own heart, remember to notice how children's agency intersects with virtual learning and digital spaces, as well as how their sense of agency is cultivated in the relationship with you and through supplementary learning experiences.

A fundamental need of all humans is to have agency over our lives, and to be able to express that agency in age-appropriate ways. Parents are being called on to be present in children's learning experiences in new ways. Through a relationship-based approach to guiding cooperation and supporting agency for our children, all families can achieve peace and calm at home—even in the midst of distance learning.