Pros and Cons of Remote Learning for Kids with ADHD and Learning Differences

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Research has shown children with ADHD and learning disabilities struggle in the classroom with attention. Studies have also suggested that the same group favors screen time. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed children to attend school virtually, thus combining screen time with learning. This ongoing study has interviewed over 100 children and teens with ADHD and learning difficulties to gain a better understanding of the pros and cons of remote learning. Participants expressed concerns for distractibility, trouble with focus, organizational issues, social isolation, along with others. This data was used to develop recommendations for children struggling with remote learning that can be used by their parents, teachers, and themselves.

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Children with ADHD historically have had difficulties with maintaining their attention in traditional classrooms. However, many research and anecdotal reports describe how they can become intensely focused on screens. COVID-19 inspired remote learning, presented an opportunity for kids with ADHD to learn primarily through their screen time.

Remote learning resulted in the decline of academic progress for most students during the initial phases of the pandemic (Kuhfeld, et al 2020). But for children with preexisting mental health and educational concerns this loss may have been even more dramatic. Even though kids with ADHD are recognized to love their screen time (Masi, et al, 2021), remote learning did not engage them. A study by Becker et al. (2020) found that adolescents with ADHD experienced more difficulties with remote learning than their typically developing peers, and that one-third of their parents described home-based learning as “very challenging.”

Anecdotal reports from parents and children describe the frustration many of these kids experienced, particularly during the first phase (March- June 2020) of remote learning. Other studies also support how distractibility is a common struggle in remote learning for kids with learning and attention issues (Serhan, 2020). Interestingly, a study conducted in France by Bobo et al. (2020) found that parents of kids with ADHD described remote learning as a positive experience in which children and adolescents with ADHD “experienced stability or improvement of their well-being and improvement in school-related anxiety.”

**Method**

**Participants.** The current structured interview study of more than 100 children and teens with ADHD and learning difficulties led to specific recommendations for improving executive functioning skills.

**Design.** A series of questions were asked, including: “How would you describe your experience with remote learning?; How often did you see your teachers and how did they teach you?; What were the best and worst things about remote learning? Prompts, additional questions, and follow-ups with parents provide further data.

**Results**

Many themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The major issues identified by both younger and older students was the inability to focus on school work. Young children reported that they were easily distracted by television or what other people in the house were doing. Older students often reported distracting themselves by using their computer for social media activities or playing online games during class.

Organizational struggles were another common concern. Because they were learning from home, parents of high school students often were able to observe their child’s lack of organizational skills directly with all of their schoolwork, not just homework. Elementary students described difficulty with staying organized as a result of having “a lot more work to do virtually.”. Concerns about the importance of organizational skills is seen in research by Black et al. (2020) who emphasized the importance for students to stay organized and feel supported while engaged in remote learning.

A third theme observed in the data was a sense of social isolation. Many children reported feeling disconnected from friends and peers due to the barriers of distance learning. One fourth-grader states she wants “to go back to school and be around friends again and teachers so they can help better.”

Many children reported the lack of live teacher feedback where education consisted of asynchronous work and found it harder to remain attentive without the opportunity to interact directly with their teacher. One 10-year-old student explained that one-on-one conversations with her teacher lasted less than 10 minutes per day.

**Discussion**

Some children with ADHD reported that aspects of remote learning helped them with their academic performance and attitude towards school. Increased flexibility, opportunities for movement, open note assignments, and working at one’s own pace were cited as helpful.

The data from this study led to a set of recommendations to improve executive function skills during remote learning. These include specific remote learning strategies for time management, task initiation, task persistence, organization, and planning. These strategies were developed for parents, teachers, and students.

This study is ongoing and hopefully, new data will reflect positive changes based upon new strategies for remote learning.
References


