

Keeping Students With Learning Disabilities Motivated at Home

Using movement breaks and improving skills like the ability to focus can help high school students with learning disabilities stay on track in this unsettled time.

By [Daniel Vollrath](#) April 24, 2020

The things that used to be routine in schools—morning announcements, bells ringing, classroom interactions, hallway gatherings, lunch chats, and peer bonding—are temporarily gone with the wind.

As virtual learning continues with no end in sight here in New Jersey, staying on track and motivated can be a challenge for all students. This is particularly true for high school students with learning disabilities that affect processing, retaining information, and comprehension, who are more inclined to experience struggles in completing schoolwork. These students have difficulty climbing out of the [learning pit](#)—an analogy for being challenged in one way or another in learning. Getting out of the pit takes focus, skills, and strategies. For students with learning disabilities, learning from home means leaving their comfort zone and figuring out their best approach, and it's a real struggle.

Why not take this time to guide students to build weaknesses into strengths? Students with learning

disabilities may benefit from finding their peak times for learning, activating the brain through movement, and improving their focus.

Based on my work in special education, I have come up with practical techniques for strengthening students' self-regulation and other valuable skills.

6 WAYS STUDENTS WORKING AT HOME CAN STAY MOTIVATED

1. Harnessing strategic procrastination: Let's face it, when we're faced with a project deadline, it's very easy to push it off until tomorrow. In the end, procrastination wins and productivity loses.

What if procrastination can be advantageous? In an article called "[The Perks of Procrastination](#)," psychologist Adam Grant explains how procrastination leads to divergent thinking and new ideas for projects and assignments. This doesn't mean students should wait until the last minute to complete a task—it means they should allow the brain to wander and lead them to come up with better-thought-out ideas. By conjuring up these ideas over time, students will know when they are ready and empowered to complete the task.

Students can gain an understanding of their level of procrastination by taking this [self-assessment](#), which creates an opportunity for effective conferencing with their teachers, with the goal of building a better self.

2. Understanding sleep patterns: File this under “metacognition”: By identifying their **chronotype**, or typical sleep patterns, students should be better able to recognize their feelings, strategies, thoughts, and actions. Moreover, identifying their peak waking hours can lead them to adapt their schedule and produce better work. Instead of needing to start work at 8 a.m. because a bell rings, students can solidify a schedule that sets them up for success.

One of the best ways to encourage students to learn more about their chronotype is to suggest that they try engaging in school work at different times to see when they’re most alert and effective.

3. Walking and learning: By physically changing their environment, students can eliminate distractions, increase focus, and get an opportunity to engage in a different way of thinking. Advise students to review course content while walking around the neighborhood, on a nature trail, or even around the house on a rainy day—this can be a very effective learning experience. They can review in a variety of ways: carrying and consulting notes—on paper or their phone—or listening to notes they’ve taken with a voice recorder. Some may find it helpful to just walk while trying to recall course content.

Research shows that incorporating movement into a daily learning regimen increases retention of information, keeps the mind active and clear, and boosts energy for learning.

4. Reflecting on learning: Taking an opportunity for reflection opens the door to deeper thinking and making connections

within learning. If students structure a time to reflect before their learning day begins and again before it ends, it can make a world of difference in productivity.

For example, ask students to use breakfast time to identify how they are feeling about the day and to plan what they need to get done, ideas for how they want to spend their free time, and strategies that will help them stay motivated. They should share this with you through a Google doc or email to hold themselves accountable, and you may be able to offer advice on how they can best achieve their goals. This sets them up with a self-constructed schedule for the day.

Have students take five minutes at the end of the day to exit learning by reviewing successes and also strategies that may need altering for the next day. Once again they should share their reflections with you.

5. Practicing mindful hyperfocus: Being mindful in displaying the habit of persisting—sticking to a task until completion—can help students achieve success. Taking breaks and strategic procrastination are important, as discussed above, but when a student is in work mode, their mind and energy should be focused on one thing only: the task at hand.

Here is a process you can share with students:

- Select an assignment or activity.
- Set a timer for the stopping point—they can use an [online timer](#) for this if they're working on a laptop.

- Get all distractions—including smartphones—out of sight and out of mind.
- Once they begin working, they should focus solely on the one activity or assignment—nothing else.
- When the time ends, they can take a break.

Students may gain a better understanding of their persistence by taking this [quiz](#)—this knowledge is another example of metacognition, and it creates a chance for students to push themselves beyond their comfort zone.

6. Taking sensory breaks: The purpose of [sensory breaks](#) is to find calm, get focused, and regulate one's emotions. When a designated space is available [in a home learning environment](#), children with learning disabilities are able to balance their bodies and minds in order to be more effective and mindful in their academic work.

Think of this as being similar to a balanced food diet with fruits and vegetables to keep healthy. This is a sensory diet, a way to keep in check the sensory imbalances that may occur throughout the day. Depending on the student, it may be helpful to have fidget spinners, stress balls, or stretch bands in the home, as well as materials for doodling, drawing, or coloring. If possible, families can set aside a spot for exercise—jumping jacks, mini-trampoline jumping, or using a pull-up bar—and a soothing, relaxing spot where the student can listening to calming music.