



**Make Working from Home Work... for You AND Your Child**  
**A Parenting Guide Brought to You By: The Hangout Spot, LLC.**

When schools announced short-term closures for distance learning in response to coronavirus, parents were concerned but also hopeful that in a few weeks, things would return to normal. At that time, the community anticipated that while working from home for the near future would be difficult, ultimately it would differ only slightly from other extended school vacations, with the caveat that instruction would continue. We were familiar with summer reading requirements and math packets, right? With an end in sight, our communities rallied with enthusiastic confidence and a determination to persevere.

Then, without much forewarning and virtually no training, parents transformed into educators overnight. That first week of working from home felt more like six months than five days for both parents and students. Week two was only slightly improved for those who figured out how to adjust to a career in front of a screen, establish some routine, and login to the neverending list of websites critical to online learning. (How do kids remember all those passwords anyway?) Now, as long-term school closures become a strong possibility, parents are on triple duty—simultaneously working, parenting, and teaching from home, which begs the question... how can parents successfully balance work and family demands? How can we make working from home *work* for parents and children alike?

- 1. Create designated spaces.** Creating separation between work, home, and school is critical to maintaining boundaries and supporting effective transitions between work time and downtime. Start by designating spaces intended for work and learning versus leisure and play. Defining these locations is simple if you have extra space in your home or apartment. For example, transform the living room into your home office and the dining room table into the classroom. If you live in a smaller space where a single room serves multiple functions for multiple people, create a similar effect by organizing the environment accordingly. When it's time for work, put away the toys, the snuggly blankets, and the TV remote. Replace them with laptops, notebooks, and pencil cases instead. When learning and work is over, clean up these materials, signaling that the shared space is ready for some much deserved rest and relaxation.
- 2. Add structure.** Both adults and children crave routine, especially during uncertain times. So, embrace your new normal by creating a visual schedule outlining each day. Note the sequence of activities and expected timeframes. Older children who read independently can access simple checklists. For younger children or children with limited verbal repertoires, consider using pictures instead of words. At each transition, remind your child to “check the schedule,” crossing off tasks as they are completed and noting what is coming up next. Maintaining consistency from day to day can help

establish a sense of routine. For example, even though we don't have school busses to catch or commutes to endure, set your alarm for the same time each morning. Start each day with a breakfast and a movement activity. Wind down with a good book or a bubble bath before bed each night. Develop new family habits and put them on the schedule.

- 3. Build in breaks.** It's easy to lose track of time when you are working from home. Sitting in front of a screen continuously can cause fatigue and grumpiness. Remember, you don't work for eight hours straight when you are at the office, and students don't either. Our days are broken up by the opportunity to grab a coffee in the break room or chit chat with a friend during passing time. So, it's important to incorporate frequent breaks into the schedule, allowing everyone in the home to feel refreshed and ready to get back to work throughout the day. Every forty five minutes, schedule a fifteen minute break - for you and your child. Pull yourselves away from the screen and focus on a physical activity together for approximately fifteen minutes. Need break time ideas? Try making a snack, going for a walk, or a quick meditation. We love Headspace for Kids, free for families during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- 4. Create rules.** Establish working from home expectations together as a family. Including children directly in the process of rule development increases buy-in and motivation. Post the rules in a visible location, and reference them regularly throughout the day. Picture representations of family expectations are helpful tools for children who are not yet reading. For increased personalization, have family members act out the rules and take your own photos to use as visual reminders.
- 5. Use a timer as a school bell.** Students often rely on the ringing of the school bell to signal the beginning and end of each class, so use a timer when schooling at home to define activity periods. The ring will serve as a prompt for your child to finish up what he or she is doing and reference the schedule to see what's next. Use the timer technique to increase your child's independence with daily routines. With decreased dependence on adult reminders comes a few extra minutes for parents to focus on work or, better yet, self-care.
- 6. Expand the definition of learning.** Learning from home allows parents the opportunity to teach skills that, despite being critical to an individual's success, aren't addressed in traditional curriculum, including activities of daily living and personal wellness to name a few. Do not underestimate the degree to which life skills can support academic and social success. Important lessons are hidden within out-of-the-box learning opportunities. Dive deep into fractions by baking a cake. Teach geography by planning a family biking route on Google maps. Focus on the real-life practicality of reading comprehension by finally assembling that model airplane you've kept in the box for years, following the complex directions step by steps. Find engaging ways to teach functional, foundational, and meaningful skills that otherwise are left forgotten. Here's an extra tip. Have you ever been asked, "When am I even going to use this in real life?" Well, now's your chance... show your child how reading, writing, and math come to life beyond the classroom.

7. **Use visual cues to indicate when it's ok to interrupt and when alone time is needed.** Parents need kid-free time throughout the day, whether to catch up on working from home duties or to practice self-care. Post a sign on your workspace to indicate whether it's a good time to interrupt or if waiting is required. Be consistent in your response to interruptions, redirecting your child to the posted visual cues when they enter at unapproved times and responding enthusiastically to interruptions that occur when mom and dad are open for business. (*Check out our Hangout Spot Helper for a free, printable download*).
8. **Reinforce the behaviors you want to see.** Behaviors persist over time when they are reinforced. Simply telling your child the rules often will not result in meaningful change. In fact, children can memorize the rules but fail to apply them contextually. It's not because they don't want to. Rules are, for the most part, meaningless if adherence doesn't result in a better outcome for the child. So, praising moments of success throughout the day will increase the likelihood that rules will be followed again in the future. Remember, every child is motivated by something different, and rewards do not have to be huge to be impactful, nor do they have to be tangible. Some kids may be motivated by extra time to play a game, others by stickers, others by ending an unpreferred activity a few minutes early....you get the point. The positive outcomes that result from a behavior are absolutely critical. After all, how long would you continue going to work, if you stopped getting a paycheck?
9. **Review and refine weekly.** At the end of each week, review what worked as a family and commit to keeping these variables consistent in the future. Then, tackle the challenges. If the schedule was too busy or the rules didn't capture all the loopholes, make adjustments accordingly. A reflection practice can be completed more often if needed, but in order to really see if a strategy is working, it needs to be implemented consistently for at least a few days. Changing things too often is likely to create instability for the family unit and yield an environment that is not only confusing but also stressful. Embrace regular reflection but commit to consistency along the way.

Work-life balance before COVID-19 was difficult to achieve. Now we are faced with the need to parent, teach, and work from home, all at the same time. With the spread of coronavirus, this routine is likely to remain our normal for a bit longer than originally anticipated. The inability to connect directly with peers and teachers means our children require increased support, even more so than before. And, the growing stockpile of unread emails and pending deadlines can be overwhelming. Give yourself grace. Everything isn't going to be perfect overnight. But, you can make this new, temporary normal more manageable for everyone involved. These simple behavior analytic strategies can help make working from home *work* for your whole family.

**Justyna Balzar, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT)** and **Meghan Cave, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT)** are the Co-Founders and Chief Executive Officers of The Hangout Spot, LLC, coming soon to Fairfield County as Connecticut's first center using the **fundamentals** of science to foster social smarts by providing live online, and center based instruction (coming soon) in a safe, fun,

inclusive “home away from home” environment. The Hangout Spot is a behavior analytic social skills development center where we believe that all children have a right to meaningful relationships with others. We strive to eliminate barriers to friendship and empower children to be socially successful across the lifespan using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Everything we do is rooted in research, empirically validated, and proven to work. We conceptualize critical, previously considered “tricky to teach” skills through a scientific framework. In doing so, we achieve socially significant change for our clients, by providing the support they need to develop real connections with other people beyond our walls.

To learn more visit us on our website coming May 2020 [www.thehangoutspotllc.com](http://www.thehangoutspotllc.com). Connect with us on Facebook, Instagram @thehangoutspotllc, and subscribe to our [Youtube Channel](#).

# Can I Come In?

## A Helper From The Hangout Spot, LLC.

Print the signs and post them in your work-from-home office to indicate when interruptions are welcome and when waiting is required.



