

## Promoting Engagement in a Virtual Classroom

As students begin their virtual learning we have an opportunity to shape their perception of their experience (and then their memory of it) to promote better engagement during the experience and to increase their motivation to return to virtual learning. We want students to engage, participate, put in a good effort and sustain that effort so they can learn as much as possible, but we should be careful to ensure that our process engages, rather than disengaging students. Too much work that's too hard and going on for too long can create excessive stress, promote disengagement and form memories of misery about online learning.

In the beginning stages of the online learning experience the following guidelines may be helpful in promoting engagement and creating memories that motivate and encourage the student to want to return the next day:

- Reduce the length of the instruction or work task. Use shortened work blocks so completion points reached more quickly.
- Increase the amount of time devoted to having fun.
- Surround work tasks with rest/relief periods, various types of breaks and games, the teacher tells a cute joke or poses a riddle or shows a funny video.
- Read a story to the children between academic tasks.
- Play a game after completing only part of a task.
- Show the games, and the rest/relief, and the restorative breaks using an embedded schedule.
- Reduce the task difficulty, so success is likely with only moderate effort and the ratio of outcome to effort is high.
- Take frequent structured restorative breaks.
- Show visual progress through a task.
- Use language that reinforces effort, like "this is really moving along, we're getting this done" and "look, we're close to finishing."

Once there is a high level of engagement and there are established productive habits of completing a virtual school day, then there can be subtle changes to increase task difficulty and/or lengthen structured work periods (reducing time spent in rest, relief, and reward periods).

Usually we set up reinforcement systems to entice students to engage and to reward them for their efforts. The Green Zone and the Credit system may not be viable options, but that is not the only form of reinforcement we have available. Remember, the most powerful form of reinforcement is how much the student is enjoying the time. If the day has enough fun in it, there is less of a need for the other forms of reinforcement.

Another form of reinforcement is teacher recognition. Take this opportunity to deliver an abundance of very specific recognition ("That was a very creative answer Jayden, thank

you so much for that. I am so glad that you are in our class today"). It is an unusual parent who delivers recognition in this way, so the students do not get this level of personal recognition in their day at home, recognition that makes them feel important, cared for, and truly seen. This is very powerful, very reinforcing, and a good reason to return to class the next day.

Recap the learning session so students can see (and store as a memory) all that they have accomplished and all the fun that they had. This is the memory you want them to leave with and the narrative you want to build with your students. Make some of the fun a predictable part of the routine so you can have the students leaving the day wondering what fun they will have the following day.

Remember, on any given day there are a percentage of students who don't come in to school, and from that group that does come in, only a percentage are fully engaged for a sustained period of time. During this unprecedented period of time, don't create unrealistic standards for academic accomplishment that aren't even achieved with all the students under more normal circumstances. Focus on the strategies to promote engagement and participation, enthusiasm and motivation, and gradually increase the academic demand.