

## Learning at Home: Considerations for Students with Language Impairment

As parents, a big part of your self-isolation during the COVID-19 global pandemic has been helping your children with learning from home while also supporting their emotional and physical needs. Children who have delayed language skills or a formally identified Language Impairment (LI) may find this learning environment extra difficult. As educational speech-language pathologists (SLPs) with the Thames Valley District School Board, we can help you to support your child at home just like we usually do with educators in the classroom. We identify barriers children face with language delays and then fit specific solutions to help your child succeed.

Supporting children with language delays with learning may look a little different at home than it does in the classroom. Also, there may be days when school work gets to be too much for your family. On those days, remember that reading a favourite book with your child or engaging them in conversation during mealtime are great ways to support their language learning.

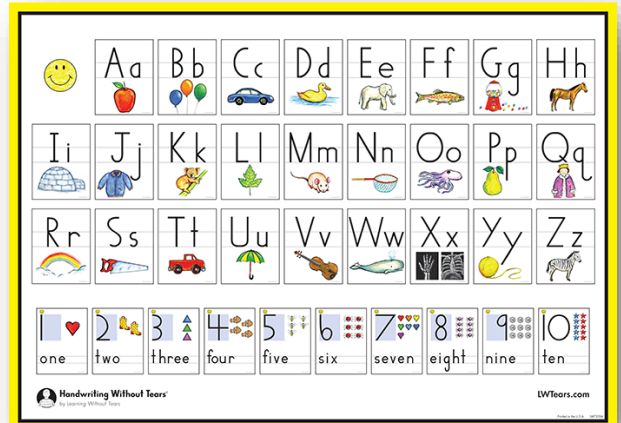
We have put together **five aspects of learning** that may be affected and have detailed a variety of **possible supports you can try with your child**. Every child and every home is different, so test out different ideas and see what feels best for your family!

### 1.) Home Learning Environment

Homes are not set up to focus on learning like classrooms are. Also, children do not associate their home environment with learning the way they do with the classroom. Learning from home has challenges: homes may be noisy and busy with other family members and students may need some form of technology and internet, as well as other school supplies like markers. Try these ideas to make a home learning environment a good fit for your child.

- Find the best spot for your child to work. Ideally, find a quiet space, but if this is not possible, try turning a table to face a wall to reduce distractions.
- Involve your child in designing this space so that they enjoy the look and layout, owning it as their learning space. Their participation will help them feel positive about entering the space every day for their learning time.
- Keep all supplies within reach of their workspace so that they do not need to disrupt their thinking to find things they need.
- A set of headphones may help your child to focus if the environment is busy or noisy.
- Ask your child's teacher what **visual supports** your child used in the classroom, then do your best to make a copy. These may include items like:

- a word wall (a list of common words sorted alphabetically to support correct spelling)
- an alphabet strip
- a number line



## 2. Learning Mindset and Self-Regulation

The big changes to everyday life that have come with the pandemic bring up lots of 'big feelings' in children, many of which are difficult for them to understand. Children with Language Impairment (LI) can struggle to label these feelings, so families don't know how to help. Children with LI may also have a hard time explaining why they are upset about a school task or project. A child may feel overwhelmed and frustrated with learning from home, making them more likely to act out. Consider these ideas to help set a positive mindset for learning and help your child self-regulate during home school time.

- Offer choices when possible; children then have a sense of control in the moment and may feel positive and calm. The choice can be simple ("What colour marker would you like to use?") or more significant ("Which book are you going to read? Which task will you complete first?").
- Openly discuss your own feelings during difficult moments and support your child's ability to label and discuss their feelings as well. Offer a variety of emotion words to them so they can pick the word that best describes their feelings in that moment. Spend time chatting about how this feeling feels in their body (e.g., tension in their face, heavy chest, urge to yell) and then brainstorm together things to do that help release the big feeling.
- Be mindful of the effect not having friends and classmates around has on your child's learning. Classmates often act as a support in the classroom for each other by repeating and rephrasing information for their friends. Try to fill in this void by chatting about the topics they are learning



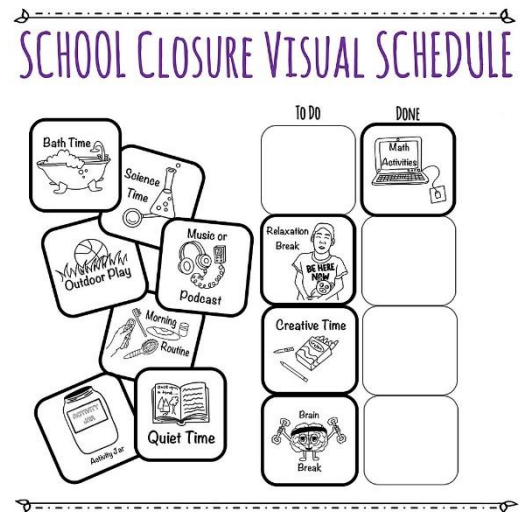
and sharing your own experiences with the information. For example, if your child is learning about nouns and verbs, share stories of when you learned these things and ways that helped you remember the difference between the two.

- Provide positive comments to your child when they are completing their school work. Labelling these moments and providing positive encouragement may support your child’s internal motivation to push through during a difficult task. Remember we need to reward the effort, not the actual work they produce.

### 3. Schedule and Routine

Establishing routines is an important recommendation for at-home learning. Children thrive on routine and things they can predict. They function within routines at school—a known timetable tells them when their breaks, meals and subjects take place. However, at home right now, a consistent routine is not always realistic. Try to set even a basic routine for learning time and breaks, but know that it’s okay when routines can’t happen. Try to get back to the routine the next day. Here are some ‘routines’ considerations:

- Start by thinking of the time(s) of day when adults are most available. Also consider when your child is at their ‘learning best’. Some children are early risers who tire by lunchtime; others take hours after waking to become their most awake. With those two things in mind, decide on the best hours for learning. Try to make those times the schedule for school work. Chat the schedule with your child so they can help figure out their best learning time and feel valued.
- Create a visual schedule to outline your child’s day. How you design this will depend on the age of your child. For younger children, use simple pictures to show the order in which tasks/activities will happen. For older children, use pictures and/or words to describe the task and also provide the length of time for each. Ideally this can be done with reusable materials (like paper inside a page protector, or on a white board) so that your child can check off completed tasks as they go—and then you can wipe it clean and reuse the schedule the next day. You can check out some examples of visual schedules by Googling ‘visual schedule’.



- If you are sharing technology devices with your child or children, plan out times for each family member to have access. Keep in mind that for children with LI, access to software like speech-to-text or text-to-speech can make a huge difference in their ability to complete work. It's natural to think that giving everybody an equal amount of time on a device is what's fair. But your child with LI may benefit from more technology time with assignments.
- Scheduled physical activity and “body breaks” are important for all children, but especially for children with LI. Your child is expending lots of mental energy to work through tasks and they need a complete break from that thinking in order to recharge. Breaks don't need to involve getting outside, but your child does need to get up from their working space to move. Do

simple activities in short bursts like jumping jacks, 10 minutes of yoga, or dancing to a video. Students in primary grades should work independently no longer than 20 minutes before taking a physical break. Older children can work for about 35-40 minutes before getting up to move. Schedule in these breaks and then follow the schedule—the energy recharge and mental break are very important to your child’s ability to focus on, understand and complete tasks.

#### 4. Comprehension of Learning Expectations

Understanding the instructions for an assignment or task may be challenging for students with LI. They may be able to control their working pace and the order in which they do tasks, but they will have a harder time taking in and understanding things, like instructions. From home, a child can’t ask their teacher to repeat an instruction, rephrase a question or slow the pace with which information is presented. Understanding directions can be extra challenging. As a parent, you may offer to help explain a task to your child. As you talk with your child to help them understand an assignment, you are adding *more* language to the mix. Now your child is working to understand and focus on the task *as well as* the language you are using to help. Here are some ideas to support your child’s understanding of learning expectations.

- When appropriate, consider helping your child by chunking instructions or steps of assignment. For example, review the assignment with your child and work together to come up with what needs to be done to finish it. Then have your child complete one step at a time. In between steps is a good time to ask questions or have instructions clarified.
- Don’t assume your child fully understands assignment instructions, or how to use the technology or app they’re working in. Review tasks together first and encourage your child to explain the assignment to you in their own words. Taking this time will help both of you to feel confident that the instructions are understood and will prevent frustration later on.
- Be mindful of the extra mental energy that typing on a computer takes for many children. Consider using a variety of tools to get text down – dictation headset, typing, scribing or typing for them, handwriting and scanning, etc.
- Consider the vocabulary involved in your child’s learning. Before beginning a task or activity, review any words that may be new for your child. This includes topic-specific words (e.g., ‘metamorphosis’) as well as instruction terms like ‘explain’, ‘contrast’, ‘summarize’, etc.
- Whenever possible, use visual supports to help your child understand what is expected. Information they *hear* is gone after it’s spoken; information they *see* will remain as long as they need it. For example, consider a ‘visual dictionary’ to help them keep track of new words being introduced (pictures or symbols to represent a term/concept and cue its meaning). You can also use tools like graphic organizers, story maps, step ladders, cause and effect charts, or brainstorming webs to help your child structure their ideas and consolidate their knowledge of the topic/task at hand. A quick Google search of these tools will provide examples of what they can look like.



## 5. Demonstration of Learning Expectations

Once your child understands the instructions for a task or activity, they must successfully complete those instructions to demonstrate their learning. This can be hard for our students with LI, as communicating ideas can be a challenge both orally and in writing. In a classroom, students with LI use many strategies to share their ideas and demonstrate learning, and many of these are not practical in a home learning environment. For example, your child's teacher may ask specific guiding questions, scaffolding your child's responses so they can demonstrate what they know; that level of personalized support is difficult with e-learning. Below are some strategies to think about when helping your child show their learning and share their ideas in the learning from home environment.

- Be mindful of the extra time it may take your child to complete a task or assignment compared with their teacher's expectations. If a teacher suggests that a creative writing assignment should take 30 minutes, acknowledge that it may take your child much longer—and that's okay.
- When possible, start with the tasks that are most draining or challenging for your child. Start with language-heavy tasks or assignments with complex instructions so your child isn't mentally exhausted when starting to tackle them. When organizing these tasks, consider if and when an adult will be around and try to work on them during a time when support is available. Save less difficult tasks for closer to the end of learning times, or when your child needs to work on their own.
- Talk with your child's school team (classroom teacher, resource teacher, SLP, etc.) about strategies that work well for them in the classroom learning environment. Brainstorm ways to carry over those strategies to home. You don't have to reinvent the wheel! Your child may not be able to remember or explain to you strategies that help them in the classroom. It's important to communicate with your child's educators as they may have great, simple ideas about how your child can show their learning.

You are doing hard work as a parent, keeping your child safe and healthy during these stressful and unpredictable times. The added layer of supporting your child's learning at home can be a real challenge. Our hope is that even one of the strategies we mentioned may benefit you and your child.

We want you to remember that as your child is working through tasks and assignments, they are not only learning the content but also many valuable secondary skills. These include skills like how to break a task into steps, how to monitor whether they've understood instructions, how to present their information in different ways, how to know when they need a break, and how to try different strategies and decide what works for them. Even if learning the curriculum from home is far from perfect, your child is learning resiliency, patience, and perseverance! Those are skills that will last a lifetime. As you support your child in learning at home, even when a language impairment adds an extra challenge, know this: in *trying* and *persisting* and *encouraging*, you are doing incredible work as parent.

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