10 Tips

**Tips for Combating Frustration with Online Student Engagement from the CEC Community**

As you work to provide special education remotely, here’s some advice for keeping students and families engaged from the CEC Community, where more than 20 fellow educators of exceptional children shared their views on the [topic](https://community.cec.sped.org/communities/community-home/digestviewer/viewthread?GroupId=349&MessageKey=cb985a6e-ec3b-4aef-a9c5-7142f6678c12&CommunityKey=76229297-5574-45fe-9f79-3719114336a0&tab=digestviewer&ReturnUrl=%2fcommunities%2fcommunity-home%2fdigestviewer%3fcommunitykey%3d76229297-5574-45fe-9f79-3719114336a0%26tab%3ddigestviewer).

**1. Revamp your thinking.**

*“I started to plan new lessons and revamp my way of thinking. We can’t teach to the classroom we are accustomed to because that classroom doesn’t exist right now. My lessons are not as long and not as work intense as they usually are. My expectations are still high but in a different way. I want my students to still engage and I need to meet them where they are. I use Loom.com to record sessions so that the students can access the lessons on their own time. Also, assigning multiple assignments and letting them choose where to start has been a great help.“*

– Exceptional Children Teacher, NC

**2. Create individualized checklists.**

*“One thing that seems to help is creating individual checklists. We always have an agenda on the board and I have noticed students frequently referencing it when they enter the room or complete an assignment. While some of our students have autism, many have ADHD, and several are not even special education students, we realized that when we would use checklists during class (for the class period individualized for missing assignments), the kids were much more productive. So, I create individual checklists for some of them using Google Sheets, listing their assignments by subject and in the order of their classes, and insert check mark boxes where they can check off each assignment that is completed. This seems to have helped some feel less overwhelmed and provide that organization tool they need. Moving forward, I will try to adapt checklists for them and possibly create an assignment list for the day.”*

– Middle School English Teacher, VA

**3. Focus on maintaining.**

*“Focus on maintaining previously mastered skills. The only acquisition programs I am targeting are programs parents have indicated are socially valid, or meaningful, to them. Since the families are choosing the priorities for acquisition programs, they succeed because they care about the child learning the skill. I try to program things (i.e., design instruction) in a way that the parents will achieve success quickly – their efforts need to be reinforced or they will not continue to try.”*

– Associate Professor, TX

**4. Teamwork and understanding.**

*“I had a parent who began to cry on the phone, saying she had no idea how hard our jobs are. She was also overwhelmed with so many providers contacting her. We decided on a streamlined approach with one primary contact person. The other providers make ‘guest appearances’ via embedded videos if the student is working online, or they contribute materials to the packets sent out to students. We want to avoid more stress on our hard-working team and on parents who are struggling to keep their jobs. Our district is developing a ‘COVID’ statement that can be used on year-end progress reports in cases where parent response is non-existent or minimal. We are not expected to show progress on goals – just maintain if possible.”*

– Teacher Consultant, MI

**5. Use visual and verbal prompting.**

*“I use a visual and verbal prompting (learning tools; Tools Inspiring Action! in the Classroom) framework as well as ‘video’ read-alouds of children’s books that teach self-regulation. Each book follows with an activity. The learning tools provide the cognitive action skills needed to initiate and engage in goal-oriented behaviors. The students and parents find that they provide just enough structure for kids to get started and to remain on-task. Teachers also use them during online learning as visual and verbal prompts to redirect their students. To see videos of students using the tools, visit*[*childbehaviorconsulting.com*](http://childbehaviorconsulting.com/)*and hover over ‘Shop,’ then click on any of the “Tools Inspiring Action!” headings and you’ll see many videos of students learning and using the tools to help them stay focused and engaged.”*

– Special Education Teacher\Behavior Specialist, NY

**6. Incorporate movement.**

*“I am a student teacher in the physical education domain. Incorporate movement in the delivery of your lesson. I have worked with students with autism spectrum disorder and let me tell you: they love yoga and any activity that uses music! Implement a yoga routine in which students connect their minds with their bodies. There are a lot of yoga poses in which students can imitate animals. If you have your students move physically, they will be more eager to concentrate more, calm themselves, and feel motivated to do the requested tasks.”*

– Student Teacher, NJ

**7. Meet them where they are.**

*“My issue is that parents are not digitally savvy and are frustrated, so they have decided to hunker down with less stress and requested paper as their primary source of educating their child. I use a 2.5-gallon plastic bag that I put their material in when I receive the completed papers, which are also in the 2.5-gallon plastic bag, I wipe them down and set the papers out for 3 days, then I review them. Paper is primary; anything digital is secondary. We email, text, and video chat. It is the best I can do for my parents. (A few teachers said they get 100 percent participation using these paper materials.)”*

– Special Education Teacher, OH

**8. Start with the families.**

*“Many districts are experiencing the same thing with not only special education students but general education students. Students that are doing well during this time are students who either have parents who can motivate their students or are able to self-motivate. If your students are not the second type, then communication with parents is paramount. No amount of engaging lessons or printed packets are going to make a difference if the students are not motivated to do any work. Many parents may not feel capable of acting as their student’s*[*Learning Coach*](https://schoolvirtually.org/parentsfamilies/)*especially if their student has special learning or behavioral needs. You may need to spend time encouraging parents and developing their capacity to support their students. Phone calls need to be about more than technology needs or learning websites. Find out why students aren’t completing assignments. Help parents understand how important it is for the students to keep up with their work, and how important parental support is to their student’s success. If parents are overwhelmed, find out if their need is something you or the school district can address (food, or other basic needs). Find out if there is someone else in the home who can act as learning coach (older sibling, or another relative). This site from School Virtually may help:*[*schoolvirtually.org/parentsfamilies.html*](http://schoolvirtually.org/parentsfamilies.html)*.”*

– Parent Advocate, PA

**9. Try different models.**

*“I have more success with the early intervention model of ‘routines-based intervention.’ Can you ask families what they are struggling with their child or what they would like to see their child engage in more in terms of family routines, activities around the house, etc.? Maybe you can help with strategies and ways to incorporate skills (like communication, following directions, schedules, etc.) in activities they are doing anyway.”*

– School Age Performance Specialist, MD

**10. Be sensitive.**

*“We need to be very sensitive and careful during this time. Parents are very busy with many of them working from home plus having their children to care for. I teach self-contained Autism in the elementary school and at first, I wanted all my students to participate but I realize that is not possible. I read an article that said only 50 percent of students are participating in online classes. We also need to be reminded that our student population is very dependent on prompts and they often have not learned the skills to work independently. I think you will find a lack of participation in all student populations. In my county we are not allowed to teach new material and the students do not receive services on IEPs.”*