

Transform Your Home into the Ultimate Social Emotional Learning Setting:

A Jewish Parents' Survival Guide to Remote/Distance Schooling

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Every morning, since March 16th 2020, at about 8:45 am, my cell phone starts buzzing nonstop. No, I am not that popular and/or important. It is the 4th grade parents' WhatsApp group for my children's Jewish Day School. Parents are unsure as to the daily schedule or cannot find the right link for the live Zoom lesson their child is supposed to be in. There is also an ongoing confusion as to which pieces are "mandatory" and which are optional. Every day is a bit different, but with 75 4th grade students, odds are someone will be reaching out for help. As a full time working Jewish educator mother of 4th grade twins and an 8th grader, life changed dramatically with two words that most of us had never put together before: "social-distancing." At first, it did not seem that challenging of an idea. Our school was working hard to provide age appropriate distance learning modules, and I would be able to supervise my (clearly) motivated and compliant progeny in their studies as I completed my own work responsibilities and attended several required Zoom meetings per day.

Two months later, the truth is out, parents are struggling tremendously across the board. This "suffering" does not discriminate, it is shared by single parents, households with two parental figures, full time working parents, and part time working parents and "stay at home" parents alike¹.

As Rabbi Michael Knopf of Richmond, Virginia shared publicly on his own social media

"...our struggle and our pain is real, and just because others are hurting doesn't mean we aren't. And while we most certainly should advocate on behalf of others who are suffering right now, that doesn't mean we can't figure out how to advocate for ourselves, too. And here's the truth:

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<https://theconversation.com/working-parents-dealing-with-coronavirus-quarantines-will-face-psychological-challenges-134498>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/parenting/single-parents-coronavirus.html>

our leaders — on the local, state, or federal level — have not done nearly enough to help working parents in this moment. It feels like we got hit by an earthquake; the building we were in collapsed, we're trapped in the rubble, and no one is able or willing to help pull us out. And, as this author points out, the pandemic has revealed that the building wasn't structurally sound in the first place. Deep systemic problems and inequities made life a challenge for working parents before COVID-19 are making life impossible now. Shouldn't someone be calling for more help today, and systemic change tomorrow?" (May 5th, 2020)

In a world where before March 2020, fewer than 50% of families with children ate dinner together at least several times a week,² we are now required as family/household units are forced to spend more time together than this generation of children has ever experienced. **Rather than succumb to the struggle, I challenge my peer group to seize this time as a gift.** By committing to restructuring our "COVID-19 stay at home order lives" to **Social Emotional Learning** friendly spaces, entire families will benefit and, dare I say, thrive, from this strange "pandemic quarantine." Social Emotional Learning (SEL), when properly understood and utilized, offers tremendous wisdom and results proven techniques that families of all shapes and sizes can implement in their own homes.

What is Social Emotional Learning?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is a unique approach to education that focuses on fostering and strengthening an individual's successful navigation of the many aspects of daily life, from a social and emotional framework. It is a process through which children and adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness.³ This includes relationship building, problem solving, embracing diversity, managing change, etc. SEL practice focuses on building/strengthening skills in five core competency areas- which can also be seen through the famous wise words of Hillel the Elder in the Book of Mishnah *Perkei Avot* (Ethics of Our Fathers)⁴

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/05/meals-coaches-bedrooms-kitchen-table/590026/>

³ Social and Emotional Learning: Three Signature Practices Playbook, CASEL 2019, p. 53

⁴ Creative translation by Shoshanna R. Schechter

- Self- Awareness (mindfulness)
 - “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”
- Self-Regulation (controlling reactivity)
 - “Who is strong? One who controls their passions.”
- Social- Awareness (empathy, understanding other perspectives)
 - “But if I am only for myself, what am I?”
- Relationship Skills (communication, listening)
 - “Be like the followers of Aaron (the High Priest)-loving peace, pursuing peace and being a loving presence to all whom surround you.”
- Problem Solving and Decision-Making Skills (anticipating consequences of one’s choices)
 - “...(Life is a constant learning process).. One who stops learning and attempting to increase their knowledge will, over time, begin to lose what they have learned.”

Five Steps to Transforming Your Home into a Social Emotional Learning Space

- 1) **Be The Nachson, Jump in With Two Feet:** Full participation and holistic implementation- As has been shown in school settings, **SEL is most effective when an entire institution**, from the administration, to the faculty and staff, students, school families and the building/facility itself are included. Like the Montessori school methodology, **at best, it is an either all or nothing**⁵. Just by committing as a family to take on this new approach, the family is “building a community” of SEL practice, where all individuals (adults included!) are expected to behave in way that models SEL core competencies (Kress and Elias, 2020, p. 18 and 19 and Ashley, D.M. 2015).

⁵ Of course, this may seem like an odd recommendation for those who have yet to understand the fundamentals of SEL- but don’t worry, read on!

*ProTip- While parents/caregivers can guide the approach, it is recommended that a family meeting is held where the SEL practices are discussed, explained and then, to serve as a reminder, written in bright marker on a large piece of poster board. This poster board should be displayed in a prominent place in the home. Topics for discussion should include:

- New SEL based schedule
- Appropriate communicate styles
- Self-regulation tools/mindfulness
- Self-awareness practices

Note: It is important to remind everyone in your home that feeling stressed, angry, anxious or depressed during this time is NORMAL. **Parent/caregivers need to verbalize out-loud!** If a child sees their parent/caregiver working, they may be reticent to “bother” them- which will eventually result in a much larger meltdown/reaction from the child. It is the parents’ role to actively encourage and support their children to share their feelings in an equitable, validated and non-judgmental way.

2) **HaMakom: Designate and then create a Welcoming and Inviting Learning Space:** Think about where your children are spending their distance/remote learning study time now. Is your teenager isolated in her room while one twin is on the couch in the living room and the other one is sitting at the dining room table? (Oops, I just described my home!) As a family, walk around your home and choose a new special space to be devoted to schoolwork. Then discuss how that space can be “repurposed” for both conducive to effective learning (appropriate lighting, seating, etc.) as well as encourage positivity, creativity and joy (Kress and Elias, 2020, p.19). This space should be reserved as “holy space”, if possible, ONLY for distance/remote learning time. It is special!

*ProTip- This is an area where online ordering, including Amazon, is your friend. Some suggestions include: brightly colored rugs and pillows, inspirational quotes/posters for the wall, a “creativity corner” with art supplies, ample outlets for tablets, chromebooks, etc. and easy to

find school supplies. Depending on age, children can either help decorate or parents can “surprise” children with a “ribbon cutting ceremony.”

This does not need to be a costly or expensive process! For an extra “earth friendly” approach, try to utilize what you already have at home.

- 3) **Panim Yafot: Create a Morning Meeting Ritual-** Every “school day” morning should begin like a “normal” school day. Children and parents should wake up in time to get dressed, eat breakfast, *daven* (if appropriate) and hold your special “Morning Meeting” before the first “class” or parent Zoom meeting of the day/phone call takes place. The concept of the “Morning Meeting” as an effective classroom management technique is not new, but it is highly recommended to be used in the home for setting a positive tone for the day as well as giving everyone in the family a sense of recognition and belonging (112). While your own family can develop a short (10 minutes is plenty) “Morning Meeting ritual, **the ritual must begin with a “greeting”- the greeting must include three components: greeting each family member by name, direct eye contact, and some kind of physical gesture such as a handshake, first pump, or “high five”** (Kriete, Chapter 12, *Morning Meeting: Teaching the Art of the Caring Conversation*).”

*ProTip- After the greeting portion, be creative in include an extra “Morning Meeting” element- some ideas include: having each family member share something that they are looking forward to that day, plans for an outdoor activity, “voting” on the dinner menu, etc. It does not matter what is done, what matters is that each voice is heard, the individual feels included and that the process is collaborative.

**Extra ProTip- To increase executive functioning building skills- which can be especially difficult during months of quarantine, it will also most probably be helpful to review the coming day’s schedule.

- 4) **Areyvut Ishit: Practice and Model Self-Regulation-EVERY DAY**-Let’s face it, when we combine the fact that: technology does not always work as planned, most of your children’s teachers are not distance learning instruction experts, and the “Learning Continuation” plan that your child(ren)’s school has chosen may or may not be intuitive for you or your child to navigate.

Frustration will happen, there will probably also be tears- and- yes, we might be tempted to raise our voices. This is your opportunity to commit here and now to changing the way that YOU the parent/caregiver react when there is a frustrating moment. Just like when they were learning to walk and kept falling down, children will mirror your response in their behavior. First practice the following self-regulation technique on your own- and if age appropriate, model for your own children. The goal is to recognize the negative energy within yourself so that you can learn to control it- and therefore model the best possible self-regulation behavior for your children.

- **The key to practicing self-regulation begins with mindfulness-** Take some time to do some serious *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, self-reflection, to evaluate your own “triggers” and reactivity. What kinds of things annoy or anger you? How do you currently express that annoyance/anger frustration? Write your “trigger points” on a list so that you can see them in front of your face.
- **Try to begin noticing your body response-** When you are angry or upset, do you feel it in your body? Where does that feeling live? Are you able to go deeper and isolate how it first feels when annoyance begins? This is not easy work, but very worthwhile. Try to pinpoint the exact physical feelings associated with your own negative reactivity, from start to end.
- **Notice and Pause-**This last step is the true key to self-regulation. Once you are able to notice the early feelings of anxiety or discomfort on some level- PAUSE. Ask yourself, why am I feeling the rumblings of negativity? It might take a few deep cleansing breaths (Inhale for a count of 5 and exhale for a count of 6) to be able to think clearly (Goleman, 1995, Chapter 2).

- **Do a Truth Check-** Are you truly “angry” for a justified reason or just feeling ‘cooped up’ from being in the house too long? Is this a stress than you **CAN** control or something that is out of your hands? If this is something you can fix, set a plan to fix it. If this anxiety is coming from something beyond your control, allow yourself to “learn into” the feelings, and then let

*ProTip- It sometimes helps to visualize negative feelings as a cloud that you allow to rolls in and then out and over you. This can be good for children as well. The Calm App and other meditation smart phone applications have special mindfulness practices for children and adults, including an “emergency calm” for serious moment of panic/anxiety. Light yoga exercises, can also help release negative energy.

NOTE: It is normal for individuals of all ages to go through periods of depression, grief, anxiety etc. during this period-, which could manifest as anger, frustration, extreme reactivity, or even complete disengagement. It is important utilize both self-awareness as well as social awareness of all the members of your home and seek out help from a licensed mental health professional if you are concerned about yourself or others. It is always better to err on the side of safety⁶.

- 5) **Tekes Sikkum: Create a “End of School Day” Optimistic Closure Ritual-** Based on your children’s distance/remote learning school schedule, create a fixed time every day for the family unit to come back together to end the day with the positive and future oriented activity. This could be an excellent time to practice reflective listening by putting out a special snack and having every member of the family share one either “favorite” or “important” take away from the day. In order to practice this effectively:

⁶ Here in Maryland there is a 24 hour mental health crisis hotline: 240-777-4000

- Everyone must participate every day.
- No one will be allowed to interrupt the speaker when it is his or her turn to speak.
- One might choose to set a 2-minute time limit for each person.
- After the speaker is finished speaking, the person speaking next must repeat back what they heard the speaker say- including using their name and eye contact.
- Like the Morning Meeting, the “End of School Day” ritual should also include some sort of physical gesture⁷.

This now ends the Distance/Remote Schooling portion of your day.

A few closing notes:

- Perfection is the enemy of progress. You will not get it right all the time, but with SEL and especially mindfulness work, consistency is the key.
 - Be prepared to allow yourself additional self-compassion on challenging days. Try, experiment and learn!
- Equity is at the heart of SEL- All members of the family should still be encouraged to practice good SEL habits throughout the day- especially regarding communication, collaborative problem solving, self-regulation, etc.
 - ProTip: Don’t be scared or hesitate to require/encourage children of all ages to take on at least one important family task daily-this will ensure that each family member ends the day with a sense that they have made a meaningful contribution to the daily functioning of the family unit.

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https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/2018/12/CASEL_SEL-3-Signature-Practices-Playbook-V3.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0c4ONGFDKukXEWohjtRqd4o9eUmnSth69iqeHmUeD02sRXelrxTDCQc08

- This guide is truly just the beginning to implementing SEL practices into your parenting and home life. To learn EVEN MORE tools to implement SEL practice in your home, check out:
<https://casel.org/> and <https://www.shalomsesl.org/>
 - For an excellent Jewish spin on SEL at home, check out *The Joys and Oys of Parenting* by Dr. Maurice Elias.
<https://www.amazon.com/Joys-Oys-Parenting-Maurice-Elias-ebook/dp/B01M0XLFS0>