

Coronavirus: Distance learning poses challenges for some families of children with disabilities

At a time when schools are closed due to COVID-19, many parents are juggling work, finances, child care and distance learning. It's a lot to manage. For parents of children with disabilities, some unique challenges have emerged.

In Canada, it's unclear exactly how many students between kindergarten and Grade 12 receive what schools call "special education services," but according to provincial figures, percentages range from 10 per cent to 20 per cent of total student enrolment.

Figures from Ontario, Québec, British Columbia, Alberta, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick show there are more than 750,000 students receiving special education services out of about 4.3 million students enrolled in those provinces alone.

Students receiving special education services may have a learning disability, autism spectrum disorder or a mental illness. Canadian schools offer different types of supports. Most children access differentiated teaching approaches in regular classes and some have individual learning plans, while others participate in tailored programs offered in specialized classes.

While schools are closed

Along with several researchers, I am engaging with families across the country who are sharing stories about how they are supporting their children with special education needs while schools are closed.

Through responses to a survey and in-depth interviews, we are hearing about the range of approaches that exist, some of which fit well for families and their children, and others that simply don't.

We hope to learn about ways that distance learning can work well for students with special education needs and also about families' needs. We hope our findings can then be used to better inform planning as schools begin to open.



Collaborative approaches to supporting children with special needs have been interrupted by coronavirus closures. (Shutterstock)

Collaborative approaches

A collaborative team approach is typically adopted when children need special education services, with students, parents, teachers, educational assistants and other school and community-based staff working together to plan and implement programming.

Given the human supports required by many students with disabilities in order to flourish socially, emotionally and academically, it's a challenge for systems to provide the right types and amounts of distance learning opportunities and supports.

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Some students who find structured schooling to be a poor fit are benefiting from the shift to a more relaxed pace and self-directed learning. They can dance, jump and wiggle to their heart's content. They can engage in tasks for a length of time that works for them and make choices during their days. The right kind of distance learning paired with accessible technology and available supports may be a great fit for them.

Other students who thrive on a predictable routine, struggle with transitions and depend on the strong relationships built over time with teachers and educational assistants are experiencing a range of emotions, including worry, fear, anger and sadness.

Some feel that they've lost a second home and may not understand why. Some students may also communicate these difficult emotions in ways that are challenging for parents, caregivers and siblings.



Some parents are describing feeling overwhelmed without respite and collaboration with school staff. (Shutterstock)

Family challenges

Parents of students who have worked hard to make gains in their learning worry that they may fall behind. This is particularly the case where parents may not have the English- or French-language skills to provide help or the

time to engage with their children because of work and life commitments. Where internet access and technology in homes is the exception rather than the rule, the situation is further complicated.

Parents who typically work in partnership with school staff and community organizations are especially struggling with the disappearance of face-to-face networks and collaboration in supporting children.

Many researchers have found that parents of children with disabilities wear many hats — as full-time caregiver, advocate and social worker — and find the experience extraordinarily stressful. Without respite and collaboration with school staff, parents are describing feeling very overwhelmed.

Social, emotional supports

It's helpful for all families, and necessary for some, to find ways of connecting with others — for both parents and students. Connecting with school staff, community groups, family and friends may look different right now, but some of the benefits remain.

In my work with teachers, I focus on the need to emphasize social-emotional learning alongside academics as key to well-being. This is vital right now and will continue to be in the tricky transitions ahead. Across the country, school staff have reached out to students in different ways. Some are recording themselves reading favourite books and others are connecting by phone or video chats.

Some regions have social workers or psychologists reaching out to students or discussing mental health via virtual classes.

Peer connections matter

Connections with peers are also crucial for students. Building and maintaining friendships is not always easy for students with disabilities. Many students rely on school-based networks for friendship and may not have these connections in their neighbourhoods, particularly if they haven't been in an inclusive environment at school.

Some community groups have come up with creative solutions to virtually connect students. As one example, the Special Friends Network, a grassroots organization operating in the Halton region of Ontario, has organized Zoom sessions where youth with all types of disabilities can chat, play games, create art work and take part in talent shows.

Peer and social support for parents is also crucial at this time — connecting with others who are in similar circumstances, seeking respite supports and collaborating with schools where possible. Organizations like the Parents Lifeline of Eastern Ontario are offering virtual peer support groups and others have created a range of virtual options for families.



Can we imagine how we can nurture and develop social networks among students with and without disabilities? (Shutterstock)

Expanding inclusion

Our conversations with parents are bringing to light issues of inclusion and exclusion, of balancing academic and social needs and development and of the challenges of differentiating distance learning in ways that allow it to be meaningful.

It's our hope that whatever schooling looks like in the fall in context of coronavirus, our schools and communities can create learning opportunities that reflect the unique strengths and needs of all our students.

We will be continuing to encourage educators and school communities to imagine how can we develop social networks among students with and without disabilities, how can we build authentic communities that live inside

and outside the brick and mortar of a school and how can we support partnerships between families and school staff.

As researchers, educators, families and the general public, we're learning a lot from the often-difficult experiences of students and families. Let's make sure this learning isn't lost.