**Home Schooling – “Don’t Stress Too Much”**

*Ahmad Al Rashid and Thanuja Hettiarachchi (both parents of young children) report on how home schooling is causing high levels of anxiety for many migrant parents they spoke to. This blog raises awareness of the issues and gives some helpful tips to parents.*

Some of us parents have a good grasp of English, a reliable internet connection, and the necessary hardware to ensure that our kids can access online classes and do their homework. Even then, we may well struggle with home schooling. Many of us lack these basics, and that can make life very hard.

Many of us are struggling to make ends meet and cope with the psychological impact of the lockdown. Home schooling is an extra burden and a worry for parents. Are our kids getting left behind? [Anxiety levels are soaring across the UK](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusandanxietygreatbritain/3april2020to10may2020) during lockdown, and home schooling is one major factor for parents who feel they [cannot support their kids](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52151411).

For migrant parents, one key factor is often lack of the necessary spoken and written [English language proficiency](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-language-affects-refugees%E2%80%99-abilities-access-education-training-employment). They need support such as interpreting and translating services, but this is seldom available from schools and local authorities. It is provided by the NHS, in the criminal justice system, and in social services, but not widely enough in education.

The other key factor is the prevalence of [digital poverty](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/digital-poverty-risks-leaving-students-behind/) among many migrant communities. As we blogged recently, many (especially asylum seekers) are denied the [right to get online](https://cov19chronicles.com/2020/12/17/the-right-to-get-online/). This is a huge barrier stopping them supporting their children’s education.

There are two aspects to digital poverty. The first is lack of technological access: lack of internet connection and lack of appropriate hardware devices, i.e. laptops or tablets. I have spoken with many parents who report that they can’t afford to buy a laptop or tablet, so they are using their mobile phone to help their kids with education. But a phone’s functions are not sufficient for many school tasks.

The second aspect is lack of digital literacy: the skills and confidence to use the software on a laptop or tablet. This can be a huge barrier. Someone who is only familiar with a phone finds it very difficult to install and operate the applications and online systems required for home schooling. When limited English language skills are combined with limited digital literacy, it means that even if a family receives a donated laptop, and has an internet connection, they may still need a lot of support to get going.

One refugee family I know had a laptop donated by a local charity so their three kids could access online learning. The family then faced the challenge of learning to operate and navigate the online home-schooling system. The school attempted to help. A virtual meeting was convened between the parents and teachers, but it was no use. The meeting only lasted a couple of minutes due to the absence of interpreters and the language barrier. The meeting was concluded with no actions agreed. The parents and teachers could not communicate to address the issue.

Some local schools have started offering daily catch-up phone calls with students, to help guide them through their homework. This has been beneficial for some migrant and refugee families. These little steps from schools have made a huge difference to the lives of several students.

There have been several good initiatives to help with home schooling, such as the government-backed [Oak National Academy](https://inews.co.uk/news/education/oak-national-academy-lessons-online-school-home-learning-coronavirus-lockdown-schools-closed-420137). Useful home-schooling resources are also collated by [Techradar](https://www.techradar.com/uk/news/free-home-schooling-apps-and-websites#the-best-homeschooling-resources-for-the-uk) and [The Independent](https://www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybest/kids/home-schooling-resources-uk-learning-online-b1782480.html). But taking advantage of these resources requires connection, hardware and skills.

I (Ahmad) recently sent out a [tweet](https://twitter.com/ahmadalrashid99/status/1347168681726500866?s=20) asking for help and support with unwanted/used laptops for refugee families in my local area. The response was overwhelming. Several laptops were donated. I also learned that some organisations such as [ReadyTechGo](https://www.readytechgo.org/) are providing devices to students who are struggling with home schooling due to lack of access to laptops.

[The government also has a scheme](https://inews.co.uk/news/education/free-laptops-students-uk-how-get-children-coronavirus-lockdown-scheme-explained-420240) where children can get a laptop or tablet for their remote learning, through their school or college. However, this has been much [criticised for failing to meet the need](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/laptops-schools-lockdown-government-scheme-b1787283.html). And to address the specific needs of migrant families, and of others facing poverty and lack of digital literacy, schools, colleges and local charities are doing most of the work.

Nadia, a refugee and a support worker for asylum seekers in Swansea, talked to Thanuja reporting on her own experiences and offering some advice for anxious parents:

“I help out supporting asylum seeker families and they are really struggling with home schooling. Especially if you have several kids and don’t have many devices, it’s really hard to manage access and schedule schoolwork – and scheduling time everyday provides an important structure for kids. However, poor connections and the [expense of data and zoom sessions](https://cov19chronicles.com/2020/12/17/the-right-to-get-online/) on top of limited devices and parents working are huge obstacles.

For refugee families like mine it is tough too. For example. when one of our devices broke recently, we were stuck. Swansea Council and local support groups provide some help, but it’s never enough for educational needs.

Our two kids meet their teacher online every morning for one hour. That’s great, but it’s at the same time for all age groups, which makes it difficult to support both. Then the teachers post materials on Sharepoint or send via email. The kids are expected to work through the exercises independently. My older child can follow instructions but the younger one cannot. If I’m working, I can’t sit with her and explain things, so she easily gets bored. I even got told off by my youngest one’s teacher for not giving her enough support.

Each child has their own learning style. My eldest is quite bookish and can get on by herself but the youngest is very extrovert and playful and needs a lot of attention, so we have to adapt the support we give accordingly.

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*Practical lessons for life during lockdown. Recycling plastic for a friend’s project.*

After a hard day’s work online, then you have to sit with your kids and help them with schoolwork, everyone’s tired … But we believe it’s most important that the children are happy and healthy and develop as confident learners. I don’t stress too much about them getting behind. I believe children are resilient and adaptable and they will catch up. I think conveying your stress to your kids can do more harm than letting them find ways of learning independently. After all, it is often said boredom is beneficial for kids and helps them develop autonomous interests.”

We think parental attitudes to learning matter a lot, as do parents’ own past experiences of schooling and styles of learning. How parents were taught may differ substantially from current styles of more informal, collaborative, playful, independent learning. Learning through play and projects may not seem like learning to some parents but that would be to ignore the casual informal or non-formal learning that can go on through everyday life. Making learning fun is the key and integrating it into everyday activities like adding up a shopping bill or weighing ingredients or mixing ingredients. Many of us are very fearful that our kids will get left behind but maybe too much emphasis on this can be discouraging. If you have worries keep in close touch with teachers and communicate effectively to understand their expectations. Schedule time with our kids to support their learning. The BBC provide great learning materials for children – for example, the footballer Marcus Rashford produced a [bite size learning](https://www.google.com/search?q=bbc+bitesize+marcus+rashford&oq=bbc+&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j35i39l2j0i131i433j0i131i433i457j0i402j69i60j69i61.4528j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) You tube video and there’s a lot more out there on [BBC lockdown learning](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize) home-schooling if you look online. It’s not easy but I guess the important message here is - don’t stress too much. Stress is a real barrier to learning. Enjoy time with your kids and take pleasure in learning with them.

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