

# Home Learning and the Multicultural Community

## The Highs and Lows: Remote learning as experienced by multicultural communities

The abrupt switch to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was a testing time for parents and children alike. Families reported severe lack of resources and difficulty accessing support. This was especially true preparing for and transitioning into remote learning. Yet, many parents also took the opportunity to reflect on their own family relationships, parenting skills and ability.

Working remotely, physical distancing, lockdowns and school closures raised new parenting challenges for everyone. Due to language barriers and lack of knowledge regarding the Australian education system, parents from refugee and migrant backgrounds faced extra challenges to support their children's education at home. The challenges summarised in this article were captured during a series of informal dialogues with ten families from refugee and migrant communities. The dialogues were conducted following the switch to remote learning during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key themes parents raised were: children's mental health and wellbeing; the pressure in juggling tasks including their own work commitments and household duties; e-safety and other screen complications; how much or how little to support their children's learning at home; and lack of support from schools.

## Parents as teachers

There was concern from parents that their children's education progressed at a slower rate because as parents they were not prepared for supporting education at home. Parents noted increased stress, as they spent most of their time assisting children's learning and couldn't juggle other key priorities (particularly among single parents). They also felt an inability to assist their children with technology.

A young parent in his 30s mentioned, *"The challenge for me was that my children see me as a friend, not in the role of a teacher and that has posed a challenge"*.

A parent with two children in high school noted that they saw changes in their children's behaviour, which they believe were borne out of frustration for the model, which included a lack of engagement or care by the young person. *"I observed a change in my son's behaviour, he became more aggressive. He was also not focusing on his learning. While he was attending a lesson remotely, he was watching a basketball game on another laptop."*

There was a consensus among communities that when it comes to learning, parents believe that school plays a significant role in instilling discipline in children in completing their schoolwork. A father of two children in primary school stated, *“When students attend school, they have a mental preparedness and school readiness. However, while they are learning at home, helping them organise themselves and setting priorities for their learning at home was the most difficult task for me and my wife.”*

Parents mentioned that it was important to make sure that children finalised whatever activity they had started before moving to another activity e.g. if they began painting, they needed to complete that before starting the next task. The key take away for parents was that it was important to teach children routine at early ages.

## A balanced approach

Keeping a balanced approach to home learning was the most difficult task many parents faced. A father aged 53 acknowledged, *“My parenting skills (have) been tested under the COVID-19 lockdown.”* He also mentioned that *“Remote learning is not for children at all, learning has to be interactive.”*

A mother in her 40s stated, *“While our children were learning from home, our focus was looking after their wellbeing rather than their academic achievement or learning. I would say, the past two years under the lockdown were lost school years, as learning at home wasn’t not even remotely close to attending school”.*

Parents agreed that lockdowns brought a seemingly limitless time, which could be a unique opportunity to try out new ideas with their children. They expressed a keen desire to get creative with the kids, which positively affected the whole family and made the days feel productive and enjoyable. They engaged in arts and crafts, cooking, dancing and singing and were open to considering other creative ideas. One parent in his late 50s mentioned, *“My table tennis skill assisted me to engage, motivate and inspire my children during this difficult time”.*

## School Support

Some parents took the opportunity to reflect on their opinions and experiences of enrolling their children into Independent or Government schools. Parents felt a lack of information, guidance, and instructions in different languages other than English on supporting their children’s learning contributed negatively and felt pressure with children meeting deadlines, as they increasingly disengaged during remote learning. They also noted remote learning incurred more costs (e.g., purchasing of printer, increased internet capacity, purchasing other devices, and consumables) and that it was a challenge managing misbehavior, setting routine and enforcing family rules.

One parent had the opportunity to send her children to both Independent and Government schools while children were learning at home. From her experience, the state school her children attended had better one-to-one support for students. While her children were at an Independent school, they received written work and sometimes video activities with instructions which her primary school kids found difficult to follow and understand. These circumstances required her extensive support, putting additional pressure on

her to coordinate her children's learning. She further mentioned that the Independent school had organised a once a week, social gathering activity for students. She stated that "The level of supervision I had to provide was high while my children attended a private school".

Another parent whose children attend an Independent school also said, *"The school isn't that supportive, if students aren't going to school, why are we paying fees? Why can't they support us at least to cover out-of-pocket expenses, such (as) internet payment or obtaining devices?"*

A father noted, *"The other problem with home learning is that teachers are themselves not trained for it"*. A mother who also had a child in primary school stated, *"I (wasn't) able to assist my child to understand or monitor communications and instructions she gets from her teachers and help her organise herself and set priorities. That caused frustrations which has exacerbated issues with our communication and interaction."* Parents and teachers together were not well equipped or prepared to ensure consistency and continuity of learning.

Most participants found it challenging and difficult to support their children's learning at home. For some, however, they said home learning was smooth sailing regardless of whether their children attended an Independent or Government school. One parent mentioned; *"I have three children, one in high school and the other two in primary school. I can say I'm the lucky one, they are very disciplined, they know what they are doing, and they have managed their learning at home successfully."*

## **New skills and understanding**

Some parents observed how their children have efficiently used their time. One of the parents stated, *"As parents began to spend a lot of time at home together with their children, they were able to communicate more and engage with them. Children are adaptive, knowing the situation and pressures, they never bothered us about going on a holiday or driving around."*

Parents with a large family household faced more difficulties in helping them manage their school work and some parents sought the support of their senior children to assist their younger siblings in their learning.

One mother observed, *"Children's ability to utilise technology has increased, sometimes, their ability working under pressure with minimal supervision and support have improved. Furthermore, due to close bonding, siblings' relationships have strengthened."*

Parents also had a unique opportunity to familiarise themselves with the school system by directly observing interactions between teachers and students through remote leaning. They were able to be a 'fly on the wall,' and observe the day-to-day learning in the virtual classroom. Parents also were no longer required to drop off and pick up their children from school, which saved a lot of time.

A father with a child in primary school stated that: *"The key takeaway for me and my wife is that in future, we will aim to provide our children with multidisciplinary learning such as music, yoga, acting etc. not just traditional academia, as that gives them more flexibility and resilience."*

## **Learnings**

All parents are integral contributors to their children's learning. This is true for all communities irrespective of formal education or English language proficiency. It is true during remote learning and also on-site schooling. Family involvement in a child's education can have a significant positive impact on school attendance, improve positive behavior at school, increase homework return rates, and generally result in an improvement of a child's academic progress and achievement.

Remote learning experiences clearly demonstrated the need for further developing parenting skills to assist in engaging and supporting their children's education. It has also demonstrated that parent-child dynamics, in respect to a parent's active participation and support in a child's learning should begin at an early age. The key learning for parents is that it is important to teach children routine and discipline at early ages and in a consistent manner.

Remote learning, for the majority of participants, was not a sustainable option for their children's education but revealed lasting lessons for family engagement with schooling. The above anecdotal evidence demonstrates key gaps and concerns that could be addressed by providing both parents and students with additional supports. Educating parents and families about their role while their child was learning from home was critical. This remains true beyond the era of learning from home. Schools must have clear communication about the role of families in their child's learning, including how to access support with fulfilling this role. Remote learning highlighted that schools can provide supports that build the understanding of the structure and content of curriculums and key academic requirements and levels. This would assist parents and families in supporting their children. Additionally, parents and families may be open to receiving support to assist student engagement, counteract social isolation and mental ill health. This could improve student wellbeing and household dynamics. This kind of social and wellbeing support provided to families may help students to have positive learning experiences in the classroom and at home.