

The Study Buddy's Top Tips for Studying at Home

Submitted by: Ambitious PR

Thursday, 26 March 2020

Key principles of smart exam revision can be applied to teaching students of all ages amid Coronavirus pandemic:

Nathan McGurl, founder of The Study Buddy, is used to sharing advice for helping teenagers successfully tackle exam revision, but with UK secondary and primary schools now shut, he's applying the key Study Buddy principles to help all parents and children with managing their studies at home.

Most parents have never been a teacher or a teaching assistant. All of a sudden, they're faced with the task of not only fulfilling normal daily activities but also keeping on top of their kids' education. Although the majority of schools have been providing plenty of material for parents on the subjects that their children should be focusing on, this is uncharted territory for teachers too. Often, they're only able to provide limited guidance on how to plan and structure the learning experience. Add to that the likelihood of having children from different year groups in the same household, and many parents could be faced with an uphill struggle.

Nathan McGurl, Founder of Study Buddy, commented, "This could be one of the biggest challenges we're all facing at present – now my children's school is closed, how do I support them and structure their day? Not knowing where to start is one of the things that leads to feeling helpless. That can result in feeling really stressed out or simply giving up. A well thought through plan can reduce levels of frustration giving all learners – and parents – a clear sense of purpose. And this can be applied to children of all ages; try blocking out periods of time to focus on reading and writing, but it's also important to schedule in breaks and other activities over the course of the day too.

"Although this is undoubtedly an incredibly tough time, many children will learn skills during this period that will stand them in great stead for later on in life. Whether it's basic forms of time management, the aptitude to learn a little more on their own or right now how to pick themselves up and carry on, these sorts of abilities will help define future successes."

Here, Nathan offers his advice for parents on helping children study at home:

1. Break it down

Sometimes staring into a really big task can seem really overwhelming. When we can't see past the enormity of it all, it can start to feel unachievable. But, there's a simple trick to tackling any big project: look at it like a collection of smaller tasks.

The Study Buddy approach is to break your subjects and the day down into bite-sized chunks instead of looking at them as a whole – so for example, 'Oxbow lakes' is a far more manageable sounding task than 'Geography'.

We recommend breaking subjects down into a set of flash cards which becomes your visual 'to do' pile. For younger students in primary school, you could also use pictures to symbolise different activities,

like a teddy bear reading a book, for reading time. That will help them engage with the process. Once you've broken down the day into smaller tasks, they become much easier to fit around other things you have going on.

2. Set short, achievable goals

The Study Buddy approach recommends working to a weekly cycle, and allocating the bitesize chunks of subjects into the time the child has available. The ideal approach might be to mimic the school day, but you might find a more flexible approach works for you. At the start of each week, decide what is going to be covered and when – ensuring your learner covers a mix of subjects, rather than leaving the ones they feel least confident in or don't like until last. If possible, try to get a blend of academic, creative and active tasks in any one day.

Celebrate little wins as you go – perhaps your child has nailed long multiplication or got river processes down. But most importantly praise the effort and perseverance at working through the process. At the end of each week, review how many units have moved from “to do” into the “done” pile.

An hour is a good amount of time to set aside for a unit – but in reality, it's very difficult to achieve 60 minutes of pure concentration. We advise that in any one hour you allow the learner about 45-50 minutes study time. That gives a bit of time to get up and get a drink. If they feel like they've smashed a unit after the hour is up – great, it can go to the 'done' list. If not, no problem – simply put it back on the 'to do' list to be revisited later.

3. Review and monitor regularly

At the end of each week, spend some time reviewing what is working well and what needs to be adapted. If they didn't achieve everything planned, that's fine. This is no time to be judgemental if things haven't gone exactly as they should have. Anything that wasn't done simply returns to the 'to do' list.

It's important to look for root causes. Is there something that should be changed for next week? Perhaps their energy is low on Wednesdays, in which case don't schedule so much work for then.

4. Allow for down time

Feeling anxious about ensuring your child is learning enough is common, some parents even experience guilt about letting them take breaks from studying. However, getting them to devote every spare hour to working is likely to make the situation worse. Nobody's brain is designed to absorb information for hours on end.

Your child's mental well-being is reliant on having a good balance, so ensure that the study plan factors in time for watching TV or other activities the learner enjoys.

5. Don't compare yourself with others

Everyone will have a slightly different way to approaching learning at home. While it can be helpful to share study tips with other parents, remember to focus on what works for you. Some learners may find that working in the living room near the Xbox is ok, while others may need to be well away from all distractions. Some kids find being tested helps them to consolidate what they've learned, but if this increases their anxiety it may not be the best tactic for them. The important thing to remember is that you and the child are the ones in control!

For more tips on how to home school effectively, visit <https://www.thestudybuddy.com/blog/>

About Nathan McGurl

Nathan McGurl is the founder of The Study Buddy, an approach to exam preparation based around the principles of agile project management.

Originally designed as way to help his teenage son Jake cope with GCSE revision pressure, The Study Buddy is a visual, 'back to basics' task management tool which is designed to reduce anxiety and increase confidence. To learn more, visit <https://www.thestudybuddy.com/>

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