Tips, Resources and Recommendations during COVID-19

Aga Khan Development Network

Supporting Pre-Primary School Educators to Help Students Learn

Aga Khan Education Services

Aga Khan Academies

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Challenge: Our New Reality

COVID-19 has affected all aspects of our lives. It is clear that self-isolation and physical distancing are the key strategies in 'flattening the curve' of new coronavirus infections. Consequently, pre-schools, nurseries and kindergartens' sites and buildings across the world have been closed.

With little or no preparation, teachers and school leaders have stepped up to the challenge of distance learning with commitment, skill, perseverance, flair often without access to technology. A different mindset and discipline is required to plan and deliver lessons, engage young children and their families, while remaining focused when students are not in front of you. We are seeing good classroom teachers becoming good distance-learning educators very quickly.

Support for Pre-Primary School Educators

We thank and applaud pre-primary school educators for what they are already doing during this difficult period. This resource, prepared by the Aga Khan Development Network, provides 12 tips to assist educators' approach to distance learning for young children and a synthesis of available offline and online resources from reliable sources. It also includes suggested recommendations for programming.

I.General Tips to Engage Young Children

We have gathered 12 tips to help pre-primary school educators think about ways to best support young children continue to learn and develop at home over the coming weeks. We also want to reassure educators that there is no right or wrong answer. You know your context and your students and what will work best for them

1. **Connect with each child:** The personal connection between a teacher and their children is an important part of the learning process. Where possible, use live or pre-recorded videos to see, speak with, and send your children messages. Provide lots of reassurance in your messages. Include messages to other family members too until children are familiar with the best medium for virtually connecting. This will help the children feel more secure, cared for, and will maintain their motivation for learning from home. If video is not possible, call your children over the phone. Engage them in conversation by asking open-ended questions and encourage them to talk about their feelings and experiences. Connections lasting 15 to 30 minutes can make a profound difference.

2. **Facilitate social connections between children:** Connections between children is also very important. Where possible, use video conferencing or other technology so children can see each other. If video services are not possible, facilitate conversations between children by phone. Let children talk about whatever they want. Encourage them to play a game together. It can be a virtual "playdate." Virtual playdates will likely keep young children's attention for 15 to 20 minutes.

3. **Build relationships with families:** Contact your children's family. Ask how the family is doing and what challenges, if any, they are facing. This is a great opportunity to maintain and/or form strong connections with parents and caregivers. It will also support improved parent and caregiver engagement for the new 'normal' after COVID-19. Guides for parents/caregivers, phone calls, WhatsApp groups, virtual parent meetings and webinars are all useful techniques to value and support the role families play in their children's learning. Remember to be sensitive to the pressures that families are facing. Educators have a duty to make sure students and parents/caregivers are not being overloaded or overwhelmed.

4. **Maintain consistency:** Creating a consistent and predictable routine for learning, and setting and communicating the rules of engagement, provides reassurance for young children and helps families know what to expect and how to manage their day. That might mean having regular check-ins with your class at the same day and time every week. Maintain a consistent format for delivering activities and having children share their work. It is unrealistic to try to replicate the pre-school day; and while it is tempting to replace face-to-face lessons with live interactions, they may not be realistic on a regular basis.

5. **Plan Carefully:** Keep in mind that the attention span of young children's learning usually ranges from 10 to 30 minutes. Distance learning will be a new experience for most of your children, so take your time and plan for less, not for more. Check children's and their families' availability and agree on a mutual time to connect that works for you and the family. Ensure that all your students have access to any content you provide. As a result, you might need to use different delivery approaches for different students based on their circumstances. Be aware and attentive to individual student needs, as some students might need more support and more time than others. Children may take longer to complete tasks at home than they would in a classroom environment due to lower motivation or because the student needs to learn how to do something without the support of a teacher. However, some children may be able to complete tasks faster if they are supported by an adult who can provide one-on-one support. Remaining flexible in your plans sends an important message to your children and families to do the same as they continue to navigate the realities of learning while at home.

6. **Be concise and clear:** Young children are dependent on older family members. Therefore, each home learning activity should clearly describe the role that parents/caregivers are expected to play and how they can best support their children. Instructions for an activity should be provided in a clear, concise, and simple way, so children (and their parents) know exactly what they must do, when to do it, why they are doing it, and how to complete the exercise. Resist the temptation to over explain, provide too many examples, or develop 'help sheets'. Consider providing instructions in the mother tongue and even testing some potential activities with one or two families before providing them to the entire class.

7. **Keep it simple:** Now is not the time to build a new complex learning and teaching platform. Familiar and simple activities that can be managed at home without too many resources or assistance is the way to go. Rather than providing many separate activities, perhaps consider giving a few open-ended play ideas, challenges, or games each week that integrate elements of Math or Literacy (patterns, problem solving, reading, writing, comprehension). Learning through play during COVID-19 (and all other times) will be more fun and motivating for children.

8. **Foster independence:** Not all learning needs to be teacher or parent directed. Provide opportunities where children can work independently or with minimal support. Offline activities that are open-ended help children tap into their creativity and discover new ways of engaging in the world around them. As a result, children often engage for longer periods and explore multiple pathways of learning and discovery.

9. **Provide feedback:** Brief but frequent reassurance and acknowledgement of effort, progress and achievement will go a long way to sustaining young children's motivation, engagement and overall learning when they are isolated in their homes. It will give them and their parents/caregivers a sense that their learning is purposeful, taken seriously and that they are on the right track.

10. **Test and check:** Have home learning resources checked by colleagues and families themselves. If they do not like or understand something, offer them an informal, easy way to let you know. Inviting families and colleagues to help you during this era of 'trial and error' builds a community of support for learning and teaching from a distance. Review processes should also include attention to spelling, layout, grammar, and assessment of the intellectual property and accuracy of the content being provided. The quality assurance of distance learning 'kits' or new content is particularly critical. Once resources are sent out, they are like a spaceship – if something was not on board when it was launched, it will be difficult to complete the mission. Test and re-test the functionality of any technology to minimise frustrations and complexity to children and their families. Itis also critical to check with families what is working overall for their children, what is not, and what they need more or less of. Try a survey, a telephone call, or a question on WhatsApp during virtual parent meetings, and then modify your programme accordingly.

11. **Monitor children's engagement:** Not every student will engage in distance learning. Some may lack the necessary support or adult supervision and/or the independent learning skills or source of self-motivation. This is no different to face-to-face classroom experiences where not every student remains engaged. The challenge in distance learning is that disengaged children tend to 'disappear' and can be hard to track down or contact. In response, try to intervene early and make direct contact with families when children do not participate regularly. Consider linking them with another family or child and spend extra time to understand the situation and provide specialised support.

12. Pay attention to safeguarding: Whether children are at pre-school or at home, their safety and yours remains a top priority. Make sure children can complete all offline and on-line activities without harm to themselves or others. It is wise to establish protocols for communication between you and the children, including making sure a family member is present in any one-on-one communications. Thoroughly check the suitability of a website or a link before you recommended it and remind parents of available resources to help children remain safe online.

II. Offline and Online Resources

This section includes a list of **25 suggested online and offline resources/activities** to help pre-primary school educators in developing and delivering distance learning and providing psychosocial support to their children. While there are many online resources available, it can be difficult to sift through and access those that are free, of high quality and appropriate for young children in low-resource contexts. Furthermore, many students do not have reliable internet access or require technology hardware for many of the available resources. Therefore, the resources provided below are separated into three sections that provide pre-primary school educators with:

- 5 Offline/Online Activities for Pre-Primary Educators to Help Children's Learn

- 10 Online Resources for Pre-Primary Educators to Help Support Children's Learn;

- 10 Offline Resources for Pre-Primary Educators to Help Children's Psychosocial Wellbeing.

Five Offline Teaching Activities to Help Children Learn at Home:

1. **Offline family engagement activities:** Choose activities with simple instructions and that require little or no props. Design fun activities and games that promote social connections that are fun for the whole family. For example, turn-taking storytelling games that start with a prompt "Once upon a time there was a …" can be used every week. The same activity can also be done where family members take turns making up a silly story about a random household item (e.g. a fork). These simple games can be shared with families through SMS, WhatsApp or by the phone.

2. **Project-based learning:** Choose project-based learning activities that take place over extended periods of time as they can reinforce the concepts of creativity, exploration, problem-solving, and early critical thinking. Projects allow students to integrate elements of many subjects including early Math and Literacy. Most importantly, projects can be fun and increase children's motivation. Pre-primary school educators will need to allocate time with the students to discuss and reflect on what the students have learned from the project. Here are seven ideas you can explore with your students and their families:

a. *Growing a garden*: If families have small gardens or even balconies, you can provide simple instructions for families to engage students in planting, caring for and observing flowers and/or herbs. The instructions should also include questions that promote discovery, critical thinking, and reflection that family members can ask and follow-up on each day/week. Children can measure the plant as it grows, thereby integrating Math, and write about the results to integrate reading and writing skills. When children present the results of their project to their class, they practice oral communication and presentation skills; this can be done by WhatsApp videos, or even over the phone.

b. *Keeping track of the season:* Pre-primary students can be encouraged to keep track of the weather. You can prepare simple instructions for families to create a chart where the students can track the weather daily by checking from their windows or outside of their homes. They can also draw or create homemade crafts to show rain, storms, or sunshine. Creating these visual representations and looking back to discuss different weather conditions promotes reflection, creativity, and oral communication among early learners.

c. **Nutrition/cooking:** Provide simple instructions to families to discuss nutrition. Over a period of two weeks, families can engage their children in making their breakfast, lunch, or dinner and facilitate discussion on the ingredients used while prompting questions such as, what is healthy? Why? How do they know? They can also keep track of what they eat every day and what ingredients were used to make the meals. Children can also help their parents measure the ingredients. For shorter projects, you can also ask students to draw pictures of their meals and present via WhatsApp, SMS, or over a virtual connection platform.

d. *Building project:* You can task your children to build a model of something creative with the materials they can find at home - such as a house, classroom, or even village/city. If you ask each student or family to create a model of a home, you can gather the photos to create a virtual village. Perhaps you can ask students to create a zoo from household items that look like animals. Using photos could be extremely fun to listen to how young children see common objects in their homes in a new perspective. If their parents have a phone, they can take photos of the building project from the start to end so the students can show sequence, and describe and discuss their project with their teacher and others.

e. *Create a restaurant or shop:* Children can use their imagination and create a business with a name, menu and prices. The children can design an advertising board. Children can take turns sharing their ideas with their classmates. This integrates many areas of learning such as, literacy (reading, writing), oral communication, math, nutrition, and the arts.

f. *Create a mailbox with household materials:* Children can build their own mailbox out of household materials and send notes, letters or pictures to teachers and friends. The notes, letters or pictures can be written by the student and then shared as a photo. This will enable connections for students and the teacher, and promote reading and writing skills. Also consider inviting children and family members to send mail to each other.

g. *Recycling project:* A recycling project could be one week, two weeks or even one-month. If families were not already recycling, it would be good to provide them with basic instructions on reducing, reusing and recycling, including separating bottles, cans, organic waste and paper. Children will learn which objects can be recycled and/or reused and how they can reduce waste. If children have access to the internet, they can also watch short videos about recycling with their families. They can also turn discarded household materials into new objects like robots or spaceships. This helps children learn about recycling, but also encourages creativity, problem solving and when they present their work – oral communication.

3. **Guided-discovery learning:** Studies have found that guided discovery learning to be an effective approach to generating positive learning outcomes for children, particularly for fostering durable science learning, mathematics and thinking skills. Provide families with simple instructions to conduct small science experiments at home, like having children close their eyes and guess the taste of foods or using objects available at home to make sounds and creating a unique piece of music together.

4. **Activate creativity and encourage pretend play:** Young children often need help to think creatively before beginning work on an independent task. Ask questions that encourage children to think deeply and share their ideas. This is especially helpful when children are expected to complete a task offline. This type of brainstorming can be done by phone or online. Also encourage children to engage in pretend play with household items. Children can pretend play being a storekeeper, a veterinarian, a car mechanic, etc. Encouraging young children to pretend play during free time may require some initial help from parents in using different household items. But like a pre-school classroom, home-made 'learning and play stations' can be reused again and again during this time at home by children on different days.

5. **Books, songs and stories:** Books, songs and storytelling are great ways to promote the full range of literacy skills, such as listening, paying attention, sequencing, gaining comprehension and mastering vocabulary. Make sure you encourage families to allocate time for reading with children, storytelling or learning and singing new songs. Whether by phone or online, give families some ideas on what stories they can read or what songs they can sing with their children. If families do not have access to books or music, consider sending them samples by WhatsApp, SMS, phone voice messages, or emails.

Ten Online Teaching Resources to Help Children Learn at Home;

1. **Professional support for pre-primary school educators:** The links below offer information and tips on how to modify your work environment and teaching habits to adapt to teaching remotely during COVID-19:

   • **Tips and Resources for Educators during Daycare Closure**

   • **Guides on starting remote teaching**

   • **Tips and Ideas for Remote Teaching**

   • **Educators Community of Practice Link**

2. **Playful activities:** The Lego Foundation has put together five inspirational tips to incorporate the different types of play that support development and learning in any environment which you can use in your instructions to families to help children's learning build and grow over time.
You can access it **here**.

3. **Simple activities that promote holistic development:** The VROOM app is a mobile app designed for parents and professionals who are engaging with young children during their first five years of life. The app is open-source and provides more than 1000 simple activities that caregivers and professionals can do with household items. Activities are easy to understand and supported by pictures. Each activity highlights what children are learning and how it promotes brain development in a simple language. You can download **here**.

4. **PBS Learning Media:** Resources are available for pre-primary school educators that can be shared in online learning environments. Go to the link below to select the subject (English, Math, Science, etc.) and then type of media available (Video, Interactive lesson, Lesson plan, Image, etc.). Visit **here** to explore resources that are more relevant.

5. **Communicate with families through media:** The Remind App offers a seamless way to provide educators with activities, feedback loops and manageable communication channels to use with students and their families. It enables teachers to connect with students by sending them reminders like links, files for activities, photos, and recorded voice clips. For young students, the teacher can use the parents' emails and the parent will receive an invitation email to download a relevant application so that they can receive and send messages. Explore more possibilities with the app **here**.

6. **Build a classroom community:** The Dojo App connects teachers with students and parents to build classroom communities of practice. Students can share their work with others, send voice messages to their peers, and access videos recorded by their teachers. Dojo is also a great tool to check in with parents to share information and/or schedule online class meetings. Find out more information about the Dojo app and its various uses before and during COVID-19 **here**.

7. **Open-source online books:** A digital library that promotes early-grade literacy by offering digital storybooks and other reading materials is available in multiple languages **here**.

8. **A Guide to Distance Learning by Altitude Learning:** Provides simple guidelines for educators on how to create a learning plan and daily structure to engage with learners. The resource also includes suggestions about virtual tips and tricks for educators to use with learners across different grade levels while at home. Access the guide **here**.

9. **Mobile reading applications:** The following mobile reading applications provide a selection of reading content that is curated by experts in early childhood development and education:

   • **African Storybook** - Open access to picture storybooks in 189 African languages.

   • **Global Digital Library** – Digital storybooks and other reading materials easily accessible from mobile phones or computers. Available in 43 languages.

   • **StoryWeaver** – Digital repository of multilingual stories for children.

   • **Worldreader** – Digital books and stories accessible from mobile devices and functionality to support reading instruction. Available in 52 languages.

   • **Vooks** - Animated illustrations, read-a-long text and narrated story. Whether being used as part of the lesson or to wind class down. Vooks is a fun and versatile tool for the classroom.

10. **Bedtime Math:** Daily and fun word problems relevant for children of all ages. Pre-primary teachers can take these problems or make their own. You can access these **here**.

Ten Offline Resources to Help Children's Psychosocial Wellbeing:
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1. **Small Group Interactions:** Organise video or phone calls with small groups of children where you can talk about their day, how they spend their time, and other questions they may have about non-academic issues. Sometimes you can just play a game with children. Providing text messages or WhatsApp pictures can help foster interactive games without the Internet such as look 'n find (also known as I-Spy) or making up a funny story where each child gets a turn to add to the storyline on the WhatsApp chat. Try to be aware of social or emotional stress from your children and connect them with your designated supervisor for follow-up with families as needed.

2. **Learning about Emotions and Feelings:** Through storybooks, educators, parents and caregivers can talk about the emotions and feelings of characters in the story and point out behaviours that are helpful and caring. Provide parents with tips on questions they can ask to help children get in touch with their emotions during story time and how to support children who may be anxious or afraid. Asking simple questions such as, 'What about the story makes you happy?' 'When are some other times during the day you feel happy? Why?' can be useful to help connect the story to the children's daily life and allow them to explore emotions and feelings through a more concrete pathway of inquiry.

3. **Physical Exercise:** Include examples of physical exercises as part of the learning routine /package for your students and encourage families to provide children with opportunities to exercise at least twice daily. This could be dancing to a favourite fast tempo song or creating their own fitness routine. Focus on activities that don't need additional resources and remember to exercise different parts of the body - twisting, stretching, curling, jumping, lifting, pulling, etc.

4. **Family routines are important:** Encourage families to keep a routine. Extend empathy and understanding to family members and acknowledge that it may be difficult to keep a strict routine. Work with families and encourage them to keep routines for certain aspects of the day the best that they can during this stressful time. Whether it is always having breakfast together or sharing story time every afternoon, children will respond well socially and emotionally to a sequence of experiences that they can anticipate.

5. **Handwashing is important:** Promote proper handwashing techniques as a general health and safety recommendation either as a reminder when speaking to families or through a series of learning experiences. There are songs and stories promoting handwashing in different languages that you can use to share with families and your students. **Sing along with The Wiggles** or **follow this dance** to make learning fun.

6. **Encourage children to read:** Reading or storytelling can take children into an imaginary world where they can identify with characters from stories and the emotions and feelings of the characters.

7. **Share developmentally appropriate and accurate information about COVID-19:** Many children are dealing with stress at home in response to the impact of COVID-19. To minimize stress, remain sensitive about what information is shared and how you share it. Focus on communicating good health behaviours such as covering coughs and sneezes with the elbow and washing hands. See more on age appropriate discussions **here**, and information on how to avoid the risk of infection **here**.

8. **Mindful teaching:** Model a calm, safe learning experience through your tone of voice when communicating with children over the phone or via voice messages. Invite children to work through challenges and encourage them to take breaks when it feels overwhelming. Be mindful that family circumstances may have changed since you last saw them and interact with compassion. Model sharing - when you want children to share feelings, start by sharing your own.

9. **Supporting Connections:** Let your children know you are thinking about them. A personal message via phone may help a child stay connected to you and their learning goals. Incorporate personal interests of children to encourage a response. Streamline communication and reduce volume of information sent to children or family members.

10. **Lead a Mindful/Meditation Session:** This can be a simple 10-minute session with children and family members. Have the children sit up straight, close their eyes and imagine that they are in a field of flowers. Have them smell the flowers deeply or imagine they are blowing out a candle at their birthday party, as these are simple ways to get children to breathe deeply.

Recommendations:
Support to Programmes

This section includes a set of recommendations for organisations, school systems and programmes working and supporting pre-primary school educators:

1. **Align with Government Priorities:** If your country's Ministry of Education has issued guidance or resources to support pre-primary educators, follow that guidance and only use the ideas and resources from this resource packet that you think will complement the government and other partners' efforts in your context.

2. **Translate Available Resources:** Adapt and translate the above recommendations for pre-primary educators to use with families and young children by ensuring that the language is culturally and contextually appropriate and relevant in your context.

3. **Context Matters:** Review the recommended synthesis of available resources and only include the resources that are contextually relevant and appropriate for your context, being aware that some of the available resources require reliable Internet.

4. **Identify Local Strategies that Work:** Include any other pre-primary educators' resources that are already available and working in your country's context. Collect strategies from local agencies, government partners or other reliable sources, including local pre-primary educators.

5. **Disseminate in Your Context:** Consider conducting webinars that can be recorded to disseminate these tips, recommendations and resources, especially in the languages that are mostly used by the pre-primary educators in your context. The recorded webinar (or parts of it) could then be distributed via WhatsApp, Facebook or other low-cost media channels.

6. **Use Radio and TV for Sharing Messages:** If the Internet is not reliable in your country for educators in your context, consider disseminating some of these tips or resources through local radio or TV stations. Collaborating with the government in disseminating these resources via radio and/or TV can also be a good way to show the government our commitment to responding to the COVID-19 crisis and support their strategic response.

7. **Leverage Existing Social Networks:** Connect with your local education departments to disseminate resources to remote areas. If your programmes have existing education communities of practice among pre-primary school educators that use texting, WhatsApp or other social media, these networks can be great ways to disseminate tips and resources for the educators.

8. **Connect with educators:** Follow up with teachers on resources that they've successfully used. Provide opportunities for teachers to share their successes, focusing on the impact on students. Peer recommendations are powerful to encourage others to use and/or follow through with using resources.

9. **Less is more:** Encourage teachers to choose a few strategies and a few online resources at a time. Encourage spending enough time for a fair assessment of whether a resource is working well for their students. In this assessment they should be able to articulate how they know something is/is not working and how they've adjusted their teaching to support their decision.

10. **For large school systems:** Create an online drive that organises all materials for remote teaching and learning. Record a video to highlight useful resources. Organise regular connects (webinars, WhatsApp, Facebook, surveys) to get feedback from teachers about resources in the drive so the platform can remain an active and useful resource for teachers.