

How to Set Up School at Home for Students of All Ages

With remote teaching continuing this fall, parents are working on more permanent spaces for class



Erica Semanoff turned a playroom into a classroom for her children Sean, 12, and Sophia, 10.

PHOTO: BEN SEMANOFF
By Alina Dizik, Sept. 1, 2020 8:52 pm ET

The back-to-school shopping list is a bit more complicated this year, especially for parents who need to re-create a classroom at home.

Parents who quickly cobbled together study stations in the spring are spending time planning out more permanent spaces this fall. Many are adding work zones in the home—sometimes eking out space in hallways or closets—and differentiating furniture setups based on children’s ages and incorporating gadgets that make virtual learning feel like (slightly) less of a drag.

“A lot of our customers have been struggling with, how do you create a workspace for the whole family,” says Alessandra Wood, vice president of style at Modsy, a San Francisco online interior-design service where clients record video of their rooms to get a virtual setup.

Start with a sense of place. Most students will benefit from feeling like they have a place to go, whether it’s a couple of steps to a different section of their own bedroom or a walk down the hall. Getting dressed, brushing teeth and eating breakfast beforehand can make their home classroom feel more official.

Opt for quiet corners with natural light or areas away from foot traffic when deciding on a study spot. Consider using dividers to visually separate space and keep areas around desks as neat as possible. “Visual clutter is something that can cause distraction,” Ms. Wood says. Taking off the door of a closet to create a cozy work space can work in a pinch, she adds.



Interior designer Kathleen Walsh created a study alcove for her 11-year-old daughter.

PHOTO: KATHLEEN WALSH

Keep acoustics in mind. Families are now installing heavier doors or simply adding a seal to the bottom of a door to keep out noise, says Steve Haas, an acoustical consultant in Milford, Conn. Some rooms can benefit from simple fabric-covered screens hung on the walls or carpets to keep sound from reverberating.

Use visual and audible cues to help students stay on task. Place a cubby next to a child's desk so they can retrieve items between periods, display the day's calendar on a bulletin board or use a programmable color-changing light to visually signal that class is in-session, says Matt Wallaert, a behavioral scientist with a background in teaching. "Kids don't have the executive control to be able to control their bodies and their minds," says Mr. Wallaert, who is based in San Diego. "Create things in the environment, where they are focusing on things that help [them] remember."

Have you set up a place at home for your kids to learn, as remote classes begin this fall? Tell us what's worked—and what hasn't—and send us a photo. We'd love to feature your experiences in a future story. Email us at voices@wsj.com and include "home school" in the subject line.

Think creatively when addressing distractions. For instance, children who may not be able to concentrate when learning in their own bedrooms may benefit from using a sibling's desk during the day, Mr. Wallaert suggests. Older children may find it more engaging to listen to a lecture on wireless headphones while taking a walk outside, he says.

If space permits, set up secondary shared work areas, says Kathleen Walsh, a New York interior designer. A kitchen table or entryway can double as a tutoring or homework zone. Beanbags or other comfortable seating can allow children to focus on offline assignments such as reading. Doing some work outside can help. "One common request is building in a change of scenery," she says.

Tailoring the setup based on age helps, too.

Elementary School

In younger grades, project-based learning calls for more than just a screen. Use clear containers so children can find markers, scissors and other craft supplies. Provide a footstool under the desk to help them sit without their feet dangling. In some cases, a tray to carry supplies from one area to the next can help keep little ones focused if they get tired of sitting at a desk.

Consult the children. Tara Blazona's son Tyler, 9, picked out his own accessories including a mouse pad and a gamer's headset with a retractable microphone, which made the setup more exciting to him. "It's all about creating little things that they think are novel," says the 37-year-old public-relations executive from Orinda, Calif.



Tara Blazona allowed son Tyler, 9, to pick out desk accessories including a headset he'll use for virtual learning.
PHOTO: STEPHANIE AMBERG

Middle School

Many tweens will be mortified if their stuffed animals peek through during English class, so keep backgrounds for video calls in mind, says Ms. Walsh. If possible, face computer cameras toward doors, walls or bookcases rather than beds. Some students may want to put a ring light, a circular lamp that minimizes shadows, on their desk to look more polished when they appear on their classmates' computer screens. Based on her own experiences, Ms. Walsh advises that students take a lunch break to eat in the kitchen. Allowing her 4th- and 7th graders to eat meals in their rooms last spring turned out to be "so disgusting," she adds.

Depending on the level of help students require, parents of elementary and middle-school students may also need to reimagine their own setups. Erica Semanoff set up a desk for herself in the playroom-turned-classroom of her two children, Sean, 10 and Sophia, 12, so she can casually keep an eye on them throughout the day. "I can bring my laptop in, and sit there and listen," says Ms. Semanoff, a bridal-jewelry designer in Doylestown, Pa.

High School

Setups for older students begin to look more like those of their parents, says Liza Utter, mother of two high school students, who allows them to work from their rooms with their doors closed. Though she respects their privacy, Ms. Utter doesn't allow them to work in pajamas or from their beds. "I look at this time to teach life skills and good habits," says Ms. Utter, a design-firm founder in Los Angeles.

With longer presentations, audio and video capabilities may also need an upgrade, Mr. Haas adds. An external camera and microphone can be added to a laptop setup and used for projects or presentations.

College

Older learners need more freedom when it comes to choosing their setups, especially because some expected to be out of the house entirely this year. But as long as the students are at home, parents should still set boundaries for how they'll use the space during the school day, says Lynn Burrell, cofounder of Weldon, a parent-coaching provider, which offers guidance from child-development experts.

Prevent workday conflicts by discussing how different areas of the home can and can't be used during the school day, Ms. Burrell says. For instance, designating the family-room couch for reading—not a place to watch television—and only using the dining area as an office can cut down on midday arguments.

New York City, the nation's largest school system, delayed the start of the school year and in-person instruction. WSJ talks to one teacher about how her family is approaching tough back-to-school decisions. Photo: Melody Anastasiou

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