



# What Early Childhood Educators Have Learned from Months of Distance Learning

Engagement Strategies for Educators and School Directors

Shariee Calderone



## TIME TO REFLECT AND LEARN

Whether this is your fourth week, or your eighth week (and counting) implementing distance learning, we hope the following reflections and suggestions we've heard from early childhood educators all over the country inspire you, and help ground your school's practice in the components that matter most now for children and their families – relationships, empathy, and joy.

# One Size Does NOT Fit All When It Comes to Families

In your excitement for providing families with resources and zoom sessions, don't forget that each family is experiencing things differently. Some families will want everything you can provide them while others may be fatigued and overwhelmed.

- Listen to the unique needs of each family during this time
- Offer multiple ways to engage and reaffirm that there's no correct way to be involved
- Connect families with similar experiences



# Remain Curious About Children's Play Behaviors and Questions

Children learn no matter where they are and what they are doing. We want the most vibrant and healthy environments for them that we can offer but all environments and all play gives us a window into children's thinking and evolving understandings.

- Encourage children's input and questions
- Observe children through photos, video and parent comments
- Let children vote and select and record their answers and interests



# Support Teachers in Finding Their Unique Style and Joy

Recognize the loss teachers are experiencing and help them work to their strengths. Some will thrive experimenting with new technology tools such as animators, whiteboards, and creative video apps. Others will find joy in more personal ways such as:

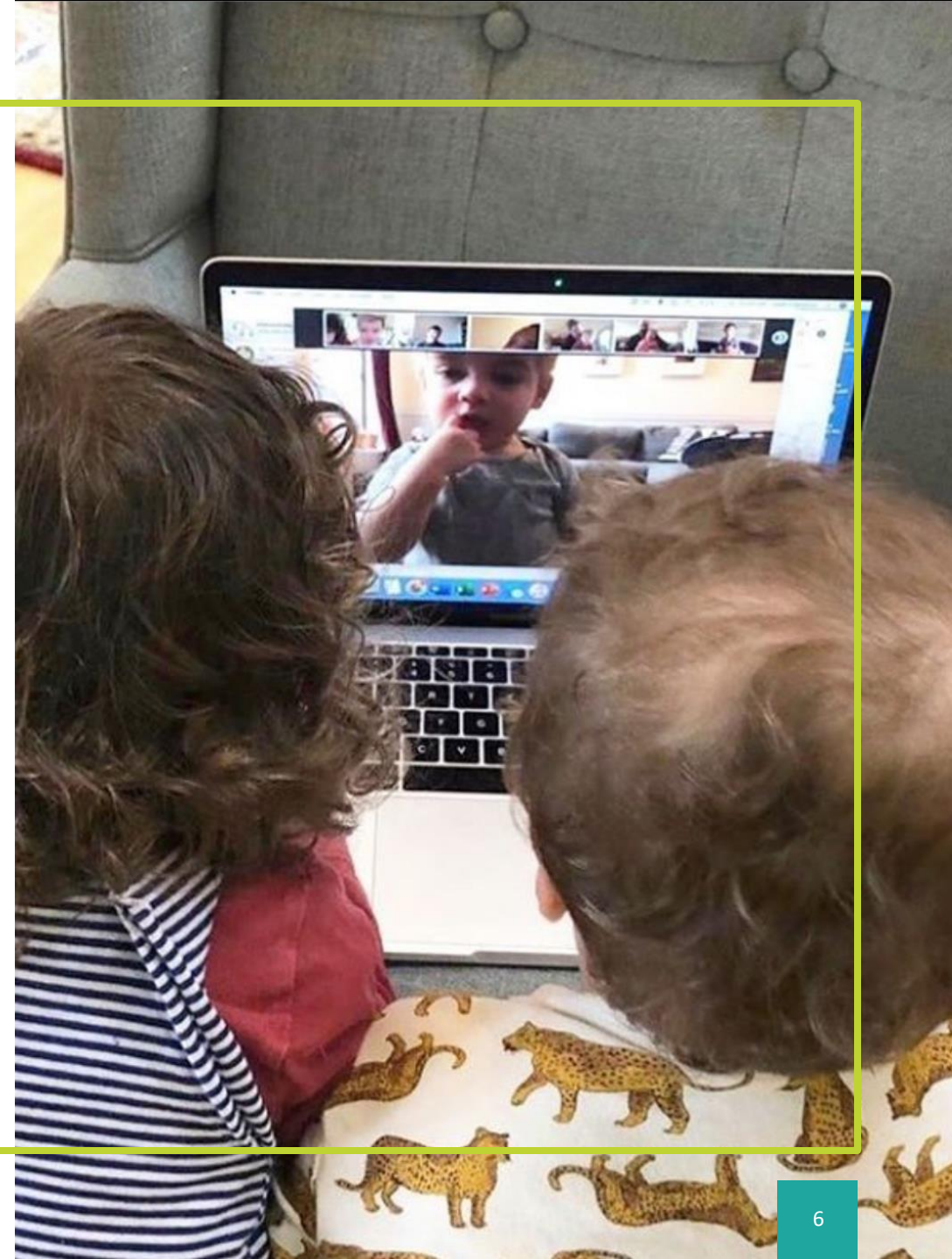
- Writing personalized notes
- Calling or video chatting with parents
- Organizing parking lot gatherings or parties
- Driving by students' houses with signs or photos



# Focus on Children's Social and Emotional Health

Children missing their friends will get the most out of virtual settings when ample time is provided for the relationships and social interactions they crave. Adjust or expand your content and curricular goals to meet the new needs children have.

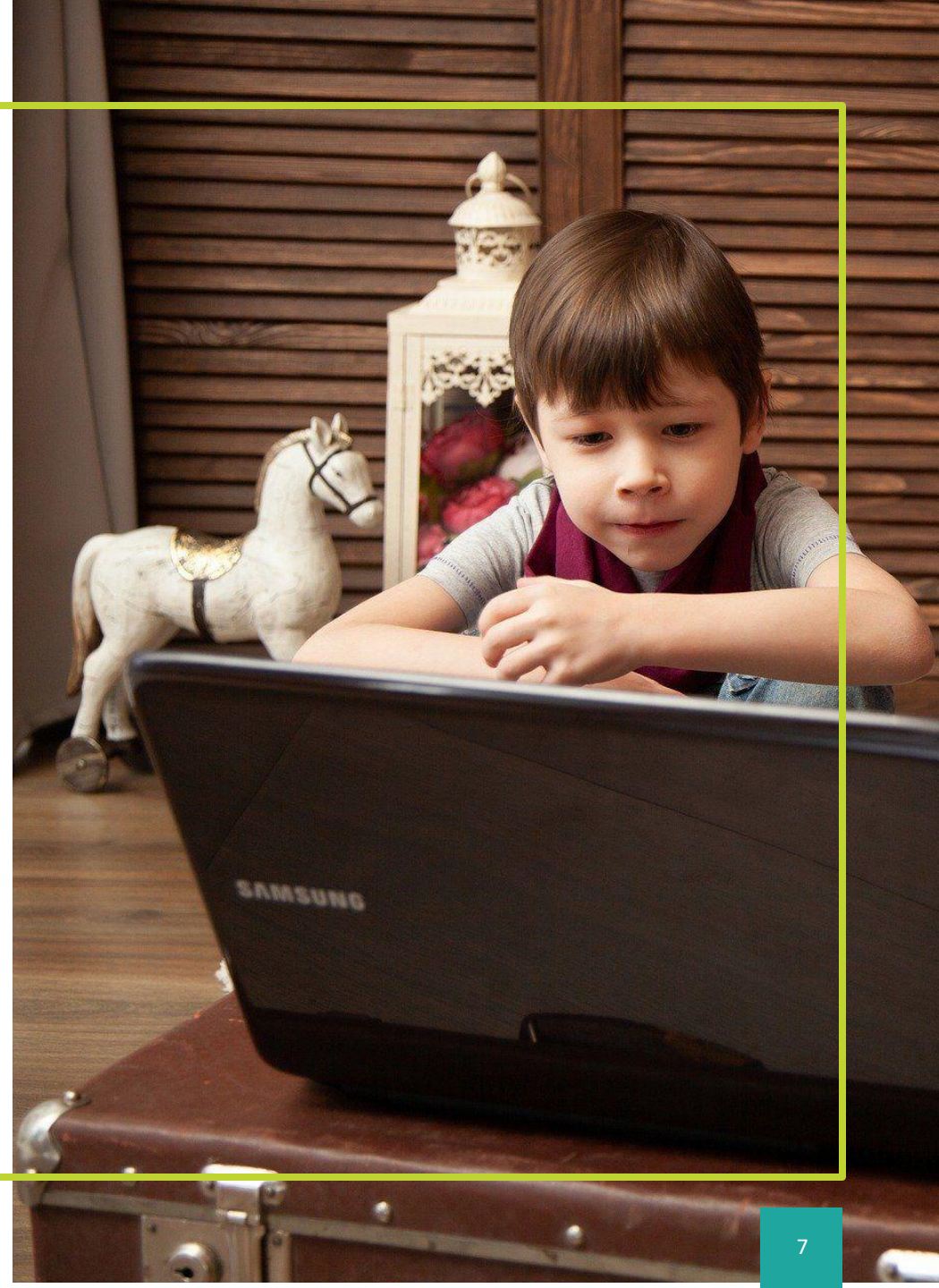
- Eat lunch together or offer smaller groups
- Let children express "care" for classmates
- Help students develop language to express themselves
- Provide opportunities for children to exercise choice and voice



# Extend School Content and Activities to Home

When the learning shifts to digital spaces and packets are being sent home, teachers needed to think more creatively so the home environment can remain a strong component in the children's learning experiences.

- What materials do the children have access to in the kitchen, pantry, garage, yard?
- Invite children to see their home through new eyes (shapes, sizes, textures, colors)
- Can the children's work be reflected in one or more areas of the home



# Keep (or Establish New) Rhythms and Rituals

In times of uncertainty and change, rituals can help children navigate their day. Predictable patterns and repeated activities will help children feel less stress and more comforted.

- Begin and end each class in ways that children can anticipate
- Help students play a role by providing them with the materials they need (or allowing for a wide variety of easily found substitutions)
- Verbalize what's happening now and what's going to happen next





# Without School Walls You Can Think Outside the Box

Today's digital formats open the door to think more creatively about resources you can access locally and beyond. Schools should see themselves less fixed in time and space and take advantage of additional expertise.

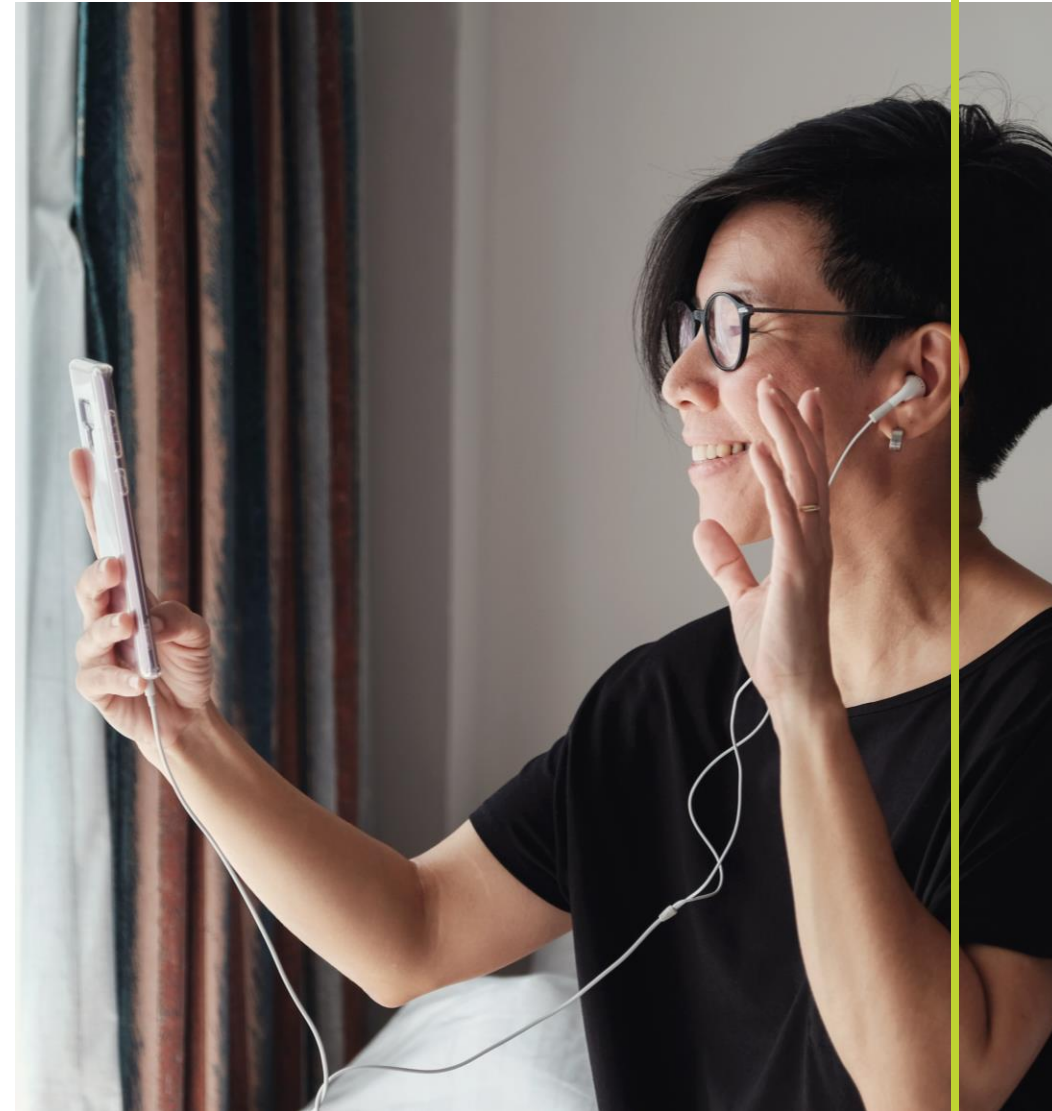
- Can you forge short term relationships with other schools for events?
- Are there educational professionals from museums, bookstores, or nature centers that can help plan a unique experience for your students or families?



# Think Intergenerationally and Embrace Parent and Grandparent Contributions

We've quickly become a DIY society taking on more tasks at home like cutting hair and sewing masks. You can strengthen YOUR community by inviting others to share their unique talents, such as:

- Creating video montages, leading storytimes, or making puppets for the children
- Recording short how-to videos demonstrating how to plant, cook or bake a dish, or build a bird house.
- Presenting during a parent night on a topic they're very familiar with



# Spend Time Supporting Relationships with Parents

With stress on families at a high, parents may need to connect with their child's teachers more often. By scheduling short weekly check-ins you can strengthen these relationships and learn more about their concerns and interests. Use this time to:

- Listen and validate their concerns
- Express your appreciation for their input
- Highlight their child's strengths
- Connect them to relevant resources
- Remind them that this will pass and their children are strong and resilient



# Reflection Questions

- Which areas are you excelling in already?
- Which areas do you feel can be explored more?
- What emotions are the children expressing? What behaviors are you observing?
- How are you listening to parents?
- Are there elders or grandparents in your community who you can reach out to?
- Can you identify a need right now that someone in the community can help you with?
- Are you hearing or observing different things from children, parents, and staff?



# Resources:

- [Jewish educators will be on the front lines of the recovery](#), by David Bryfman (Jewish Education Project CEO), Forward.
- See our previous blog on this topic, [Jewish Early Childhood Centers Expand the Meaning of School-Home Connections](#)
- [Getting Through the Next Eight Weeks: Ten Tips for Tired Teachers](#), by Maya Bernstein, eJewish Philanthropy.
- [Thank you, Teachers! You are HERO Makers!](#) is a lovely teacher appreciation video.
- [A Return to Domesticity: Education in and of the home](#), by Malka Fleishman, Director of Knowledge Ideas for The Jewish Education Project, The Jewish Education Project Blog.

Post inspired by Maya Bernstein's recent article in eJewish Philanthropy, [Getting Through the Next 8 Weeks: 10 Tips for Tired Teachers](#). If you have any questions or would like to share examples or stories from your school, please don't hesitate to contact us or post directly to our [In-SITE-ful Journeys FB group](#). Written by Shariee Calderone, Sr. Communal Education Consultant, The Jewish Education Project.

