

10 Tips To Help Busy Parents Deal With Forced School Closures

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If anyone understands the trials, tribulations and even joyful moments of homeschooling, Dr Joyce Samoutou-Wong is that person. Following the recent kindergarten and primary school closures, this Hong Kong born-and-raised mum-of-three shares some tips, after coming to terms with homeschooling in Africa for seven years.

I am a doctor who has been working in a remote Congolese rainforest since 2012. When we arrived here, there was no real schooling or childcare options for our children (*then aged 6, 3 and 1*). We couldn't find a teacher to come home either, so my husband and I had to homeschool. All of this while we built the charity we founded, set up eye centres with nursing programmes and community outreach, and started up churches at weekends. Because of the novel Coronavirus outbreak, **some friends back home in Hong Kong asked us how we dealt with no school, no going out and no help (*while working full-time for so many years*).**

While it might feel like groundhog day with the recent preschool closures, it is possible to make the most of home schooling. That's why I decided to share my **top tips to help all of you busy parents cope with school closures** and make your peace with home learning!

We did not have places like libraries or playgrounds to go to (*and there were many mosquitoes, snakes and scorpions in our yard*), so we had to spend most of our days staying inside a two-bedroom home. We had very limited internet connectivity, electricity and resources. Feeling alone, guilty and overwhelmed, I cried every night for the first year.

“The turning point came when I realised that until I found peace about my role as a parent, no matter how well other things might be going, I would never settle.”

That day, I accepted that until my circumstances miraculously changed, I was “it” and I'd better deal with it. Seven years on, even though I still worry and feel inadequate, homeschooling and being “stuck” at home no longer scare me. I can see that they can, in fact, be blessings in disguise.

Contrary to my fears, our kids feel far from deprived. They are more content, creative, independent and resilient than I.

By God's grace, our oldest is now at a boarding school in the UK on academic and art scholarships (*and to our greatest relief, she seems to be happily adapting to formal schooling!*). Last year, our dream to find a teacher for the kids finally came true. **I never imagined that I would say this, but I miss teaching them (*maybe you will too!*).**

10 Tips For Coping With School Closures And Home Learning



1 School closures: Decide what matters and set a daily schedule

For our family, we decided that as long as the kids had a good attitude, worked hard and made the best use of the day, then that was all that mattered. We also decided that every day they must do six things:

1. Chores
2. Quiet reading (*e-books*)
3. Maths
4. Physical activities (*see more below*)
5. Practice a musical instrument
6. Pray and read the Bible

Anything else that got done was extra. That way, there is less stress (*for all*) and **more freedom to let the children lead and take responsibility for their own learning.**

2 Pretend going out can be fun!

We set up our own theatre in the living room to watch concerts, plays and ballet shows on screen. We also run our own “restaurant”. **The kids practice spelling as they write menus, follow recipe instructions, learn to cook, serve as waiters and do the maths when the bill comes.** They use water bottles as bowling pins since they can’t go to actual bowling alleys. They create their own playground/obstacle course using bedsheets, yarn, cushions and glow-in-the-dark stickers under the table. With a tad of imagination, it is amazing how versatile a limited-size home can become.

3 School is closed? Don't worry! Learning opportunities are everywhere

We don't need to be experts or have teaching degrees to teach. **We just need to be one step ahead of someone else in something to guide them along.** Ask helpers and grandparents to talk to the children about their childhood, travel, job and life experiences, or have them work on an activity together (*this could be a hobby or a domestic skill like ironing!*). If this cannot take place face-to-face, kids can interview their loved ones on video calls and make a keepsake scrapbook about them!

4 Have some structure while

Use a notebook or whiteboard and **write down a list of things to do that day for the kids to tick off.** For younger children, we created two boards:

- One was labelled, "I can do it!"
- And the other, "I did it!"

We printed individual pictures of various activities, e.g. playing the piano and stuck it with blu-tack to the first board at the beginning of the day. When the task was completed, the kids could move the picture to the "I did it" sheet with great pride.

5 Penalties for slacking off

In our family, “golden time” is 30 minutes of screen time at the end of the day... **If they complete all the tasks on time!** If they choose to mess around, dilly-dally or bicker with their siblings during school hours, the amount of time they waste is deducted from their daily “golden time” allowance.

6 Recruit your children

Kids can help correct their younger siblings’ maths, explain facts and concepts, and teach musical instrument lessons (*to some extent*). This teaches **responsibility, helps them feel empowered**, and checks whether they truly understand something. Plus it frees you up with some precious minutes!

Another thing is to make them your own mini-helpers, obviously depending on the nature of your work and their ages. Our kids love **helping us with our office admin, book keeping and proofreading**. In fact, they are my best PAs!

7 Schedule video calls

They will miss their friends, so **try to organise Skype sessions or even call parties**. Our kids wrote letters (*English curriculum in disguise*) and sent pictures/comics (*art curriculum*) to their pals.

8 School closures: Have protected hours

Set aside time when you will turn off your phone and **your children know that they will have your undivided attention**.

Equally, set aside clearly-marked time when your children learn to wait and not disturb you as you work.

9 Kids adapt!

In fact, they will do this faster and better than you will. If we keep feeling guilty, thinking and acting as if we are the only ones who can guide them during this time of transition, we will deprive them of the confidence and opportunity to learn to figure things out for themselves.

Yes, our kids will take some time to adjust and may feel bored and lost at times, but if you take a closer look, **they are probably coping with school closures better than you expected**. Also, the newly-created space will allow them to imagine and create a unique and exciting way to enjoy relationships, learning and being.

10 It is more blessed to give!

Just like adults, **kids thrive when there is a purpose to their learning and activities**. Kids love making gifts and things to sell to fundraise for things they care about. For example, our son drew his own Lego instructions, picked the relevant pieces and packaged them in Ziploc bags.

Another super 5-year-old boy we know recycled toilet rolls into personalised car miniatures and raised a whopping \$43,000 for [our charity programme for kids](#). If you'd like to know more about what some children have done and are capable of, watch this [TedX video](#).

Some Other Homeschooling Ideas To Help Deal With School Closures

- For “PE”, try **exercise and dance DVDs or Wii sports game consoles**, if you have one. Or **online workouts**. They can be done even if space is limited. You can even join the kids for your own workout!
- Read aloud books that you have always wanted to read (*again*)! Short on time? Try **audiobooks and full-cast dramatised versions** such as the **BBC Children’s Classics**.
- See if music teachers and other tutors are willing to teach online.
- Watch documentaries and have the kids narrate the plot back at the dinner table. **They will love telling the adults obscure and fascinating facts**. Amongst our favourites are shows on cooking, natural history (**David Attenborough**) and travel (**Michael Palin**).
- Many board games are educational and great fun.
- Have the kids produce a variety/talent show after a good week of practice. **They can recite poems, perform their own play, magic tricks, gymnastics and dance routines**. If you have an only child, capture his or her performance on video and share it with family and friends.
- This is the perfect opportunity for children to pursue their own topic of interest. **They can write and illustrate their own book or magazine, or create an exhibition** with existing materials around the house.
- There are many current affairs websites for kids. **Let them research, use pictures and video and present their own news show**. If your child has to do this solo, they can even merge reports coming in from a friend to create their own newsreel.
- And here is the best idea yet – **have the kids come up and delight you with their own ideas!**

Editor’s note: This article was originally published in February 2020 and updated in January 2022.



About Dr Joyce Samoutou-Wong

After graduating from Diocesan Girls' School, United World College and Edinburgh Medical School, Joyce left a cosmopolitan life to practise medicine in Gabon. In 2012, she and husband Henri founded the charity New Sight in the Republic of Congo while homeschooling three children. The charity established two eye centres and is now building a hospital. Joyce is a TEDx speaker on empathy and creativity of children.

