

Resources for learning from home during COVID-19 school closures

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I've often thought that all of us parents are home-schoolers—at least after 3:00 p.m. and on the weekends. But with the coronavirus shuttering schools in many parts of the country—including where I live with my family in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.—it's become a no-joke full-time gig.

Let's be clear: It's highly unlikely that our children will learn as much at home as they would have at school. That's OK; especially if schools are only closed for a few weeks, kids will have plenty of opportunities to make up for lost time. (If they close for the rest of the school year, that's a different story.) And fighting the pandemic and “flattening the curve” is a MUCH bigger priority right now. As esteemed educator Michael Goldstein [wrote on our blog](#) a few days ago, his (totally appropriate) goals for “Daddy School” include:

1. *Something reasonably easy for me, and sort of fun....*
2. *Kids remember it fondly five years from now....*
3. *Kids learn a little....*

And of course, many schools will be trying to keep their students making progress via assignments offered online or with printed packets sent home.

Let's assume, though, that most children will spend a fair amount of time on screens, given that we parents will be trying to work and will only have so much internal fortitude to fend off the endless requests for time on devices. So here are some suggestions for making at least some of that time educational. (This is geared toward parents with elementary school-age children; for younger kids you can't go wrong with [PBS Kids](#) or lots of [read-alouds](#).)

- The best educational YouTube channels
- The best educational videos on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc.
- The best podcasts for kids
- The best free online instructional materials

The best educational YouTube channels

It's true: not *everything* on YouTube geared toward kids is a mindless time-suck! Here are five great channels that are engaging *and* educational.

1. **Liberty's Kids**. One of my biggest beefs with elementary schools today is that they tend to teach so little history—especially of the [patriotic variety](#). So here's a great opportunity for your kids to experience a "history surge" and get a huge, entertaining, and compelling dose of American history during our own historic period. Liberty's Kids first aired on PBS decades ago, and is a fantastic narrative account of the American Revolution, spread over 40 episodes, 23 minutes each. So "assign" four episodes a day and you'll kill an hour and a half for two full school weeks, and your kids will know way more about our founding than they do right now.
2. **Mark Rober**. This former NASA engineer is a rock star YouTuber, with over 10 million subscribers. It's not hard to see why: he comes up with super fun and engaging ways to explore science concepts and engineering challenges—like showing kids how carnival games rip you off, or testing if sharks can taste a drop of blood. A good place to start is his "learn some science" playlist, currently at 26 videos, 10 to 15 minutes each.
3. **Extra Credits Extra History**. Extra Credits started as a channel for gamers, especially those interested in historical war games, but its creators also now make videos about history itself. They are up to over two hundred at last count, each last ten or fifteen minutes, and ranging all across the world and various epochs. Many are focused on military history (understandable given the channel's genesis), with occasional diversions. Their vast offerings allow them to deeply explore topics. They dedicate four episodes, for a total of more than forty minutes, to the Punic Wars, for example. Compelling narration and cute animations combine for addictive viewing for budding history buffs.

4. **Bill Nye the Science Guy**. Why not go old school? This iconic show aired for five seasons in the mid-1990s, so if you think *Friends* and *Seinfeld* still feel fresh, why not give this a shot too? Here's a playlist with 48 full-length, 23-minute videos, covering virtually every major topic in the science curriculum.
5. **Crash Course**. This is the granddaddy of educational YouTube, created by Hank and John Green, aka the **Vlogbrothers**, the latter of whom is already familiar to young readers as the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Fault in Our Stars*. They have built a huge library of videos across most major disciplines, including playlists of forty-eight videos on U.S. history, seventy-two on world history, and fifty on U.S. government and politics. Each episode is generally ten to fifteen minutes long and features John Green talking about the subject, mixed in with some humor and animations. It's geared toward high-schoolers but works for precocious younger kids too.

The best educational TV shows and movies on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc.

Back when we first got our Netflix account—five years or so ago—it became immediately clear that it was a goldmine for educational movies and **TV shows**. Here at the Fordham Institute we decided to launch something we called “Netflix Academy”—that is, until we got a very polite “cease and desist” letter from the company. (I'm not being sarcastic—they were very nice about it!) So we renamed it **Education On-Demand**, and sorted the best stuff we could find by subject and topic. Here are a few of my favorites—plus some great additions that are now available on Disney-Plus's National Geographic stream.

1. **The Magic School Bus** (Netflix). Sure, scientific knowledge is constantly evolving, but Mrs. Frizzle never gets old. Like Bill Nye the Science Guy, this is another mid-1990s children's show about science; that must have been some sort of Golden Age. And it brought real star power, as the title character was played by Lily Tomlin. I can't vouch for the recent Netflix reboot, *The Magic School Bus Rides Again*, but the original is a fantastic introduction to key scientific concepts for the early-elementary school set.
2. **Walking with Dinosaurs** (YouTube TV). My family loved, loved, LOVED this BBC TV series. It's amazing that it hails from the late 1990s, given how good the CGI is. It looks and feels just like any other great nature documentary from the BBC—complete with the Kenneth Branagh narration—but, let me remind you, DINOSAURS ARE EXTINCT. Check out the companion *Walking with Beasts*, *Walking with Cavemen*, and *Walking with Monsters* too.
3. **National Geographic Ancient Civilizations** (Amazon Prime). I would wager that your kids know next to nothing about the ancient world, unless they attend a **Core Knowledge** school. But this series will

get them up to speed, covering ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and the Americas, among others.

4. **Jane** (Netflix, Hulu, Disney-Plus). A wonderful documentary about the life of Jane Goodall, the pioneering woman whose decades-long study of chimpanzees gave us critical information about our cousins, and ourselves. Some themes might go over the heads of younger viewers (i.e., her reflections on gender bias) but everyone will enjoy the images of the baby chimps and their parents.
5. **Our Planet** (Netflix). I would recommend some of the classic BBC nature documentaries—like *Blue Planet*, *Our Planet*, and *Frozen Planet*—but as far as I can tell, you have to pay for them, even if you've got subscriptions to all of the streaming sites. So go for this Netflix series instead. With eight episodes, at fifty minutes each, you'll cover all the basic ecosystems on earth. Biology? Check!

The best podcasts for kids

The explosion in podcasting is such a great development—it's screen time without the screens! And given that we're all going to be doing way more dishes and cleaning than usual—given that we'll be cooking at home three meals a day, and cooped up 24/7—these are great shows to listen to together while doing chores.

(Check out [Common Sense Media](#) for lots more suggestions.)

1. **History Chicks**. This is my family's favorite. Each of their 150 hour-long episodes tells the story of a famous woman from history—and some women who aren't famous but should be. It's hosted and produced by Beckett Graham and Susan Vollenweider, two Midwestern moms who adore history and don't think it should be "dusty"—and love to talk and talk and talk. (Another great option in this genre, geared directly at kids, is [Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls](#).)
2. **Wow in the World**. This show from NPR, hosted by Mindy Thomas and Guy Raz, explores fun and fascinating topics in the world of science and technology. There are dozens of episodes at about a half an hour each.
3. **Tumble**. Another award-winning science podcast, co-hosted by a journalist and a teacher, with a big focus on interviewing scientists themselves.
4. **Freakonomics**. Steven Dubner, the co-author of the *Freakonomics* books, examines the "hidden side of everything," from science to sports to politics and more. It's a show for adults but totally appropriate (and captivating) for older kids too.

The best free online instructional materials

Kudos to the educational publishers who [answered the call](#) to make their materials available for free during this Covid-19 crisis. To be sure, getting your kids to use these resources is going to be harder than turning on a movie, TV show, or podcast. But especially if the school closures drag on, activities like these are going to be essential to keep students learning.

1. **Zearn**. This highly-regarded math site builds off of the Common Core-aligned Eureka Math program to make online math lessons compelling and effective. They've put together a great set of resources for the coronavirus crisis, including webinars for parents to help them (and their kids) get started.
2. **Amplify**. This ed tech company is working at making its online instructional materials available for free for parents. Check back soon for more information.
3. **GreatMinds**. The publisher of Eureka Math, Wit and Wisdom, and PhD Science, will roll out a wide range of free instructional materials, including videos of teacher-led lessons and virtual access to resources such as the Library of Congress and the National Gallery of Art, for students nationwide starting Wednesday, March 18.

Other great materials are available from [Core Knowledge](#), [EL Education](#), [Khan Academy](#), and [ST Math](#). Check out an even longer list, from the NewSchools Venture Fund, [here](#).

Stay safe. Have fun. Learn a little. And good luck!

Michael J. Petrilli is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. As an education policy wonk and a parent of school-aged kids, he's long been obsessed with the notion that [screen time](#) can be [educationally nutritious](#). Finding good stuff on [streaming sites](#), [TV](#), [YouTube](#), [etc.](#) has become a minor hobby of his. If you have additional suggestions for educational resources please send them to us at [educationgadfly \[at\] fordhaminstitute \[dot\] org](mailto:educationgadfly@fordhaminstitute.org).

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