Three Ideas For Teaching Critical Thinking At Home During (And After) The Coronavirus Pandemic

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Learning at home during the coronavirus pandemic presents a perfect opportunity to end our STEM ... [+] GETTY

The coronavirus pandemic has put a dramatic pause on life as we know it. Recommendations for social distancing have forced school closures impacting millions of children. These unprecedented times put school systems in the unfamiliar position of figuring out how to provide distance learning opportunities for all students. At the same time, many parents and families find themselves in the surprising role of home-schooling their children, relying on a hodgepodge of e-learning apps many educational companies are generously offering for free.

With all we currently know about the negative consequences of children having too much screen time, families are stuck in a bind, especially working families. How can parents balance their children's educational needs and limit screen time while also managing their own schedule of working remotely?

The solution to this challenge may also be the same solution to a growing challenge in K-12 education that few are concerned about: our STEM obsession. STEM, shorthand for science, technology, engineering and math (also referred to as STEAM with the added initial for the ARTS), is a rapidly growing focus of our education system. The potential for high-paying jobs that do not require a 4-year degree and lucrative career opportunities for 4-year degrees in STEM fields have led to a steep decline in college students pursuing degrees in the liberal arts.

This STEM obsession is hurting us. Look no further than the current coronavirus pandemic to understand why. Without question, a health crisis of this magnitude requires significant technical expertise in STEM fields. But, being an infectious disease specialist does not qualify you to convince a skeptical public to dramatically change their lifestyle. Experts at coding, electrical engineering, or high-tech manufacturing are not necessarily equipped to handle the types of thoughtful planning school systems leaders are engaged in to ensure no child goes hungry while schools are closed.

We are thumbing our noses at the humanities at a time when we need to understand what it means to be human more than ever. If we are truly concerned about ensuring young people are ready to thrive in a workforce altered by automation, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence, STEM skills are not enough. Students must also learn to think critically. They need the creative, contextual, and cognitive skills that cannot be replaced by machines. These so-called "soft skills" (which are probably the hardest to teach) are the difference-makers that separate us from the robots, and what we truly need to make our students irreplaceable leaders in the workforce of tomorrow.

Fortunately, parents and families are uniquely qualified to teach critical thinking at home without relying on excessive screen time. Here are three easy-to-do ideas that will allow them to build crucial 21st century skills without being glued to a tablet for hours.

1. Teach Something

High school students have tons of useful information to share with the world. Kindergarten students probably have even more. So why not ask your children to think about something they do well and try teaching? Speaking to be understood, explaining processes and procedures clearly, and communicating effectively are extremely valuable skills employers are desperate for. Is your 6 year old amazing at jumping rope? Have your child think about the best way to explain how to jump rope to someone who has never done it before. Is your 16 year old an expert in making a messy bedroom look presentable in five minutes? There's another lesson. Effective teaching requires empathy - the ability to put yourself in the shoes of someone else and think about how they will be able to best understand what you are explaining- a powerful tool for emotional intelligence that there is no algorithm for. The final product can be a one-minute instructional video (a surprisingly challenging constraint), your child teaching it in person to a sibling or relative, or via video chat. Either way, this is a powerful, but practical way to keep children engaged in critical thinking while learning at home.

2. Create Something

What do Dell, YouTube, AirBnB, LinkedIn, and Pinterest all have in common? These are all giant tech companies founded by someone who did not have a tech background. Your child can become the world's next disruptive CEO by using this time to create a solution to a pressing

challenge. Developing this skill set can start small. When school is open, is your family racing out of your home daily to make in school in time? Have your child determine the root cause to your unwieldy morning routine and hack a solution that addresses this root cause. Live close to a nursing home or around elderly or immuno-compromised neighbors who health officials strongly advise remain isolated during this crisis? Have your child think about solutions to help these people stay connected and feel appreciated during a stressful time. Tech will undoubtedly be a part of your child's solutions. But instead of looking at e-learning resources that focus heavily on "what" and "who to," creating moves your child into the world of "why" and "what if."

3. Learn How to Learn Something (About Running A Household)

Alvin Toffler famously noted that "the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, it will be those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn." If your children will be at home for an indefinite period of time, this can be a perfect time to have them learn about what running a household entails. From minor repairs, cooking, grocery shopping, budgeting, and paying bills, having children independently navigate their way around common household tasks are just not helpful for future "adulting." This will also give children meaningful practice in learning how to learn, an essential 21st century skill.

Activities requiring your children to teach, create, and learn how to learn will help you expose your children to lots of opportunities to think critically while they are at home during the coronavirus pandemic. But there is no reason this should stop once schools reopen. There is never a wrong time to challenge children to gain the tools they need to be ready to excel in our rapidly changing world. So even when schools across the country are back to normal, you would be well-served to continue exposing your children to frequent opportunities for critical thinking.