Rapid evidence assessment
Distance learning

Education Endowment Foundation

This rapid evidence assessment examines the existing research (from 60 systematic reviews and meta-analyses) for approaches that schools could use, or are already using, to support the learning of pupils while schools are closed due to Covid-19.

When implementing strategies to support pupils' remote learning, or supporting parents to do this, key things to consider include:

Key findings and implications

1. **Teaching quality is more important than how lessons are delivered**
   Pupils can learn through remote teaching.

   Ensuring the elements of effective teaching are present – for example clear explanations, scaffolding and feedback – is more important than how or when they are provided. There was no clear difference between teaching in real time ("synchronous teaching") and alternatives ("asynchronous teaching").

   For example, teachers might explain a new idea live or in a pre-recorded video. But what matters most is whether the explanation builds clearly on pupils' prior learning or how pupils' understanding is subsequently assessed.

2. **Ensuring access to technology is key, particularly for disadvantaged pupils**
   Almost all remote learning uses digital technology, typically requiring access to both computers and the internet.

   Many reviews identify lack of technology as a barrier to successful remote instruction. It is important that support is provided to ensure that disadvantaged pupils – who are more likely to face these barriers – have access to technology.

   In addition to providing access to technology, ensuring that teachers and pupils are provided with support and guidance to use specific platforms is essential, particularly if new forms of technology are being implemented.

3. **Peer interactions can provide motivation and improve learning outcomes**
   Multiple reviews highlight the importance of peer interaction during remote learning, as a way to motivate pupils and improve outcomes.

   Across the studies reviewed, a range of strategies to support peer interaction were explored, including peer marking and feedback, sharing models of good work, and opportunities for live discussions of content.

   The value of collaborative approaches was emphasised in many reviews, although notably many studies involved older learners. Different approaches to peer interaction are likely to be better suited to different age groups.

4. **Supporting pupils to work independently can improve learning outcomes**
   Pupils learning at home will often need to work independently. Multiple reviews identify the value of strategies that help pupils work independently with success.

   For example, prompting pupils to reflect on their work or to consider the strategies they will use if they get stuck have been highlighted as valuable.

   Wider evidence related to metacognition and self-regulation suggests that disadvantaged pupils are likely to particularly benefit from explicit support to help them work independently, for example, by providing checklists or daily plans.

5. **Different approaches to remote learning suit different types of content and pupils**
   Approaches to remote learning vary widely and have different strengths and weaknesses. Teachers should be supported to consider which approaches are best suited to the content they are teaching and the age of their pupils.

   For example, games for learning were found to have a high impact on vocabulary learning in foreign languages, but there is less evidence related to their use in other subjects.

   Likewise, using technology to support retrieval practice and self-quizzing can help pupils retain key ideas and knowledge, but is not a replacement for other forms of assessment.

The evidence in this review is drawn from diverse contexts that do not closely parallel the circumstances facing schools responding to Covid-19 in 2020.

Many forms of digital technology could in theory be used to support remote learning, but are typically used in schools and have not been evaluated as remote learning tools.

In all cases, it is important for teachers and school leaders to use their professional judgement in determining the support they provide their pupils and to monitor its impact on learning.

