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CLASSROOMS AND CONFERENCES. WHAT CAN HOME-SCHOOLING TEACH US ABOUT VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT?

During the most recent nationwide lockdown in the UK, many of us have resumed our duties as parent-teachers, invigilating our kids as they SFH (school from home).

Every day is quite literally a school day – for kids *and* their parents. If this is your current situation too, we'll wager that you've never felt more in awe of the teaching profession (huge shoutout to all you classroom heroes). As parents, it feels like we're redefining the word 'juggling' right now. Let's just say it: Home-schooling is *hard*.

But, while we've been singing jolly songs with our little ones and (trying to) explain algebra to our adolescents, as events professionals, we've also found some pleasing parallels between remote classrooms and virtual conferences. So, whether your kids are four or 14, there's a lot you can learn from their lessons to help you ace your own virtual conference tests. So, sharpen your pencils and sit up straight (yes, including you at the back), as we ask the class: **What can home-schooling teach us about virtual engagement?**

1. Preparation is everything

Let's start with some tough talk: Technology can screw you over. It doesn't always work when you want it to, and you often need multiple platforms, plug-ins and passwords. It can take time, so testing your tech beforehand will avoid that awkward "computer says no" moment, in virtual classrooms and virtual events. Another prep step? We bet your kids' schools don't cut corners in their comms – and nor should you in your virtual events. Reduce the perennial platform pain by sending out super clear joining instructions – and why not give your delegates some pre-event homework to get them engaged before they even log on?

2. Start with your story – and stay on topic

Whether you're engaging small kids at home, or big kids at work, stories help your audience to find context and meaning, they make the experience more memorable and they're proven to make the learning (and your key business messages) sticky.

Just as your kids have Egyptian-themed topics that get pulled through every class from mathematics to music and art, your virtual events need a similar red thread: To connect your messaging, to stitch your story together and to allow it to play out from beginning to end. Something beautiful that we read recently: Context is the air that the content breathes. You may also be tempted to jam the kitchen sink into your virtual event while you have a captive audience, but online attention spans are shorter, so less is always more. Which brings us on to...

3. Snack-sized variety

The average adult's attention span has reduced by 33% in the last 20 years. If you've thought of something else while reading this, we've got roughly eight seconds before we lose you again. *Fluffy puppies!* There, you're back. When most of your life takes place on a screen, the content has to be bite-sized and of course, A-grade engaging.

We always tell our clients "variety is the spice of virtual". The reason that teachers mix up the method is to keep your kids interested and to capture their imagination. Want to be the best in class? Use theatrics, art, games, music, videos and other elements of surprise to bring your content to life for your audience. And while we're on the subject of snacks (which are in constant demand in our households), don't let hunger pangs distract your audience. Why not send them event-themed care packs full of thoughtful goodies and brain-fuelling treats?



4. Show, don't tell – and stay social

Here's a rule that works for your executives *and* your kids: Involving your audience will always increase engagement. In a virtual classroom, just as in a virtual conference, *showing* beats *telling*, *eliciting* beats *spoon feeding* and *stepping away from the screen* is just as important as watching it. Sometimes, the best learning happens not in the classroom, but in the playground. Sometimes you learn more from a coffee with your colleague than from the keynote speaker. Social time in smaller groups is crucial to staying engaged in the virtual world – for both your kids and your delegates.

Think about it: When a teacher (conference speaker) sets up a new topic (strategy presentation), the best practice is to introduce it quickly, before handing over to the class to activate their learning (collaborate in breakout rooms). Short, sharp speeches followed by interactive workshops, discussions and team challenges is a much more engaging mix than a plenary podium parade. Got lots of speakers with lots to say? Why not pre-record them as TED-style talks for your audience to access on-demand?



5. Give them (and yourself) a break

Whether your audience is top of the class or top of the org chart, breaks are vital for virtual engagement. You know how your kids can slowly go from sitting up straight to sluggish and slumpy in just a few minutes? Your virtual attendees are no different. Give them golden time to rest, digest and process. Give them a ten-minute task that involves getting fresh air (not screen glare). Engage them with food or recipes or refreshments – and make sure you maximise those moments for movement and wellness. Breaks not only give your audience a chance to *reflect* on their learning, they can also help to *activate* it.

Our whole lives have shifted online, from doctors' appointments and grocery shopping to even haircut tutorials and schooling. Businesses have had to pivot their entire operations and engagement strategies to virtual communications. This. Is. Hard. So, let's give ourselves some grace.

We're all hoping that the school gates can fling open again so we can all just focus on one full-time job at a time. And, of course, we're counting down the days (and vaccine doses) until we can get back to doing what we love most – bringing people together to share in-person experiences. Until we meet again, if your virtual events are scoring anything less than 10 out of 10, get in touch with us for some extra tutoring. We're here to help!

Got any more? We'd love to hear your thoughts on home-schooling and its parallels with virtual events. Oh, and if anyone knows how to explain algebra, we'd take some tips on that too...