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The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)* publishes groundbreaking and outstanding scholarly and practitioner work on education in emergencies (EiE), defined broadly as quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocation, higher and adult education.

REMOTE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH VIRTUAL TUTORING: AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO SUPPORT CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Family engagement is a reciprocal relationship between educators and families that supports whole child development. In response to the unique contexts and situations created by the COVID-19 pandemic, a faculty member in the School of Education at Hunter College, City University of New York (SOE), and families that had opted in to 100 percent remote instruction for their children conceptualized a remote virtual tutoring model that supplemented and supported asynchronous instruction, learning, and development. The model also gave fieldwork interns in the SOE early childhood program the opportunity to engage in authentic teaching and learning experiences; to plan and implement culturally and linguistically responsive activities; and to assess development, learning, and engagement. In this field note, I discuss the virtual tutoring model and its impact on the participating families, children, and fieldwork interns. I also describe lessons learned during the implementation and provide suggestions for replicating the model.

INTRODUCTION

Families and children were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic at unprecedented levels during the 2020-2021 (September-May) school year. Nearly 93 percent of people in households with school-age children reported that their children engaged in some form of distance learning (McElrath 2020) during the pandemic, which required families to adapt to many changes to support their children's education and development.

Research has shown that families who are active participants in their children's education promote the children's social, emotional, and academic growth (Boonk et al. 2018). Families that opted for 100 percent remote teaching and learning for their young children became increasingly concerned about their children's education, social-emotional development, and approaches to learning. In their email exchanges, families acknowledged to the School of Education faculty member that they needed support to facilitate their young children's lessons and social-emotional development, and they sought to establish a joint effort with education professionals.

One parent expressed concern about the effects a remote learning environment would have on their kindergarten child's development:

> My child is going into kindergarten with no experience interacting with children her age. She is only accustomed to being with adults and getting a lot of attention from older children and relatives. I am very concerned about the lack of interaction and social skills with the remote learning. This is very challenging…trying to work with the remote school and understanding the academics. I am just so worried she is not going to be where she needs to be academically or socially. (Parent communication, August 2020)

The fieldwork interns communicated similar fears about the impact of the remote learning environment on their education. Fieldwork is designed to give students practical, real-world experience so they can observe and develop skills that align research and theory with evidence-based practice. During the 2020-2021 school year, however, fieldwork interns in schools of education (SOE) did not have the opportunity to participate in actual teaching and learning experiences, due to limits on the number of people allowed in school buildings and/or interacting with students in the online teaching environment.

During the pandemic, fieldwork interns expressed concerns that they would not have the opportunity to work with children in a classroom environment:

> I was worried that I would not get the chance to do fieldwork this semester. This is my last semester of fieldwork and I have not had the chance to work in an elementary classroom because of COVID. I want to be prepared for student teaching, but COVID is making things more difficult for in-person teaching. (Personal communication with fieldwork intern, September 2020)

Purpose of the Virtual Tutoring Model

To support families as co-teachers in a remote learning environment and engage fieldwork interns in an authentic teaching and learning experience, an early childhood faculty member from the SOE at Hunter College, and the families of children in kindergarten, first, and second grade conceptualized a virtual tutoring model. The model was designed to provide children with equitable learning opportunities and supplemental online instruction that supported asynchronous, offline assignments and activities aligned with the in-person teaching and learning, and with the hybrid models that were a mix of in-person and online classes.

The virtual tutoring model was designed to replicate the effective cycle of teaching—planning, instruction, and assessment—that mirrors the in-person experiences the fieldwork interns observed and participated in pre-COVID. The fieldwork interns supported the planning of activities focused on children's learning and development; facilitated the lessons in a remote environment; and documented the impact of their instruction on children's learning. The objective of the virtual tutoring model was to connect course content to practical applications in remote settings and to enable families to be co-teachers in the facilitation of the lessons.

Participants

Families

Families of children (n=31) who were in kindergarten, first, or second grade during the 2020-2021 school year participated in the virtual tutoring sessions. Initially, 100 percent of the families opted for 100 percent remote learning for their children. In October, 20 percent of the families shifted to a hybrid model offered by the school district while continuing to participate in the virtual tutoring.

The families that participated in the virtual tutoring sessions lived in a large urban area in the northeastern United States. A family that represented its parent group initiated contact with a faculty member at a large public university and set up an introductory meeting with other families to discuss their concept of virtual tutoring. The families participating in the model continued to recruit more families to participate in the virtual tutoring.

FIELDWORK INTERNS

Fieldwork interns (n=50) studying early childhood education at an SOE participated in the virtual tutoring model. The model was designed to give the students a fieldwork experience at the required grade levels to fulfill state requirements for certification. Prior to their engagement in the virtual tutoring model, the interns had no supervised or mentored experience working with children and families.

CHILDREN

The children (n=33) who participated in the virtual tutoring sessions ranged in age from 4.9 to 6.6 years at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. The children were students from ten schools in a large urban district that included dual language and gifted and talented programs. All of the students were fluent in English, and 10 percent of the families identified their children as struggling learners. Information about the children's and families' demographics (socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc.) were not obtained because the purpose of the tutoring sessions was to give the fieldwork interns the opportunity to plan activities, implement lessons, and assess children's development. The model was an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shutdown of schools, not a research project that required collecting demographic information.

TEACHER OF THE VIRTUAL TUTORING MODEL

A full-time faculty member from the SOE early childhood program taught the virtual tutoring model. She also took on the role of cooperating teacher, and served as a mentor to the interns during the in-person fieldwork. She helped the families and interns plan developmentally appropriate activities that aligned with the scope and sequence of the children's grade-level expectations.

VIRTUAL TUTORING MODEL

PLANNING

The teacher of the virtual tutoring model created lesson plans and associated activities to meet the developmental needs of the children and their families. She developed the activities in collaboration with families, aligning them with developmental approximations and standards for children in kindergarten through grade 2.

The teacher also created a comprehensive lesson plan that was aligned with individual children's development and included the rationale for the lesson; the lesson, language, and vocabulary objectives; and the standards for and assessment of learning and language development. The lesson plan also identified differentiated instruction for struggling and advanced learners, and for learners whose home language was not English. All the lessons addressed how each activity was culturally responsive and supported an antiracist/antibias curriculum.

Instruction

The teacher used the virtual tutoring model to provide opportunities for families to gain experience in lesson implementation, in the use of developmentally appropriate strategies, and, by modeling the activities prior to working with the children, to gain understanding of the cognitive and affective aspects of teaching. The families were encouraged to use resources and materials available in the home to help facilitate the lessons and engage their children.

To support engagement during the small-group session, the children were introduced during the whole-group lesson to the lesson, language, and vocabulary objectives. The families were present to reinforce and supplement students' learning, as was appropriate to their children's level of engagement and development.

The children, families, and fieldwork interns collaborated during the small-group sessions. Depending on their availability, 4-6 families and their children participated in each whole-group session, while 4-6 interns observed the introductory activity. Two to three interns participated in the small-group activity, and one intern conducted a one-on-one lesson while the others documented the child's engagement and development, as well as the facilitation of the lesson.

Assessment

The formative assessments embedded in the virtual tutoring model lesson plans included a pre-assessment, as well as quantitative and qualitative assessments. For the pre-assessment, families and fieldwork interns observed the children's engagement during the whole-group session in order to document their children's development in accordance with the lesson objectives. The purpose of the pre-assessment was to collect information on what the children knew and were able to do prior to the small-group sessions, and to observe how the children engaged in the activity and note their individual learning styles.

The quantitative assessments were aligned with the activity's lesson, language, and vocabulary objectives. These assessments documented what the children were expected to have learned after their engagement in the lesson. Each lesson had realistic goals, and the individual families set high expectations for their children.

The qualitative assessment items were aligned with the children's social-emotional development and approaches to learning. The families were able to observe their children's eagerness and willingness to engage with the fieldwork interns in the virtual learning environment. They were able to determine how trust was established and how the children developed their self-concept and self-regulation skills.

REFLECTION

Each session had a concluding activity designed to help the children view the teaching and learning as a holistic process that involved the entire family. The fieldwork interns provided family engagement activities that aligned with the lesson objectives and extended the children's learning beyond the virtual environment.

DISCUSSION

IMPLEMENTATION

The lesson activities were designed to support learning as was appropriate to the children's development. The implementation of the activities followed an outline that included the anticipatory set of the prepared lesson and activity, step-by-step directions for student engagement, and a concluding activity.

FAMILIES

The families participated as co-teachers in the virtual tutoring sessions. They supported the facilitation of activities that engaged the children in an active, multimodal learning experience. This included asking and answering questions that supported their children's engagement in the activity, and using materials and resources that helped children make connections beyond the virtual tutoring environment.

CHILDREN

The children were able to make their own interdisciplinary connections during the tutoring sessions because their families were an integral part of the planning and implementation process. The children and families were guided in how to use materials and objects that were readily available in the home. The families and fieldwork interns were able to elicit and build on children's responses during the implementation because they were engaged in an interactive, multimodal learning environment, which deepened their understanding of the lesson and content-specific objectives.

ASSESSMENT

FAMILIES

During the lesson planning and implementation, families were given various opportunities to provide information on their children's development, and they were an essential part of the assessment process. For families able to provide more comprehensive information on their children's development, the individualized goals were based on the family members' observations and discussions with their children's remote teacher.

FIELDWORK INTERNS

To promote children's learning and development, the fieldwork interns created pre-assessment, qualitative, and quantitative assessments that aligned with the lesson objectives. During the planning process, they collaborated with the families on developing strategies to document their children's individual learning strengths and needs. The interns also created family engagement activities to extend the lessons beyond the virtual tutoring sessions.

CHILDREN

Observation and documentation of the children's participation in the virtual tutoring activities were an essential part of the assessment process. During the whole-group introductory lessons, the children were encouraged to discuss their prior knowledge of the content and skills and how it connected to their personal and cultural experiences. The interns documented the children's engagement and interactions on the pre-assessment checklist.

Lessons Learned

Content of Lessons

The virtual tutoring sessions provided supplemental learning for the children in literacy, reading, and mathematics. The families expressed their gratitude for the additional support and guidance the virtual tutoring sessions provided for their children. All of the families (n=31) indicated that the tutoring helped their child meet grade-level expectations:

> Both in math and reading concepts, the tutoring sessions were either spot on to what was being learned in the remote classroom or were a couple of steps ahead. My son is bright and he took to all of it, especially when it was something new or more difficult than his remote school lessons. (Parent in focus group, May 2021)

While the parents expressed an alignment to the lessons, activities, and skills their children were engaged in during the synchronous class sessions, the scope and sequence of the tutoring lessons were generalized to grade-level expectations. During the planning sessions, most parents agreed with the lesson objectives and were aware of the alignment with what was occurring in the remote learning environment, and thus they did not ask for specific skill development or activities for their children. However, some parents identified areas in which their children needed additional support. The families appeared to trust the SOE faculty member to develop lessons and activities that would support their children's learning and development. During the planning sessions they seemed reluctant to incorporate any additional information in the lessons, such as activities that would supplement and enhance skill development.

The teacher of the virtual tutoring model had limited, if any, communication with the remote teacher. Except for one kindergarten teacher, the remote teachers did not respond to an email sent to them that described the virtual tutoring model. The teacher who did respond asked if additional students could join the virtual tutoring, and she included information about the model in a monthly newsletter for the kindergarten classroom, which resulted in two families joining the program. However, there was no further communication with this teacher or any other remote teacher during the 2020-2021 school year.

The lack of communication between the remote teachers and the teacher of the virtual tutoring model resulted in the latter relying on the information provided by the families. This limited the ability to conduct an in-depth, comprehensive assessment of the children's strengths or to discover areas where they needed additional support, which created challenges for the SOE faculty member.

Challenge: The virtual tutoring model included one teacher who created and facilitated the lessons for all three grade levels. The planning included the families and fieldwork interns, but the teacher was the only experienced educator. As part of the coursework, the teacher had to incorporate modeling and mentoring into the lesson, while also being responsible for providing appropriate engagement activities in a remote learning environment. This included the differentiation and individualization of lesson and activities.

Suggestion: The one teacher for the virtual tutoring model had many responsibilities related to planning and implementing activities during the tutoring sessions. Clearly, more resources are needed to replicate the model and prevent the teacher from burning out. Including special education and bilingual education teachers would provide additional experience and expertise.

Challenge: The participating families were from different schools that implemented a variety of curricula. This presented challenges because the scope and sequence and pacing guides varied greatly by school. As the remote teachers were learning to teach effectively in a remote environment, they appeared to have a variety of teaching and facilitation styles. Some parents expressed frustration with the remote teachers because they felt their children were more engaged during the virtual tutoring sessions. Figure 1 depicts the families' perception of their children's engagement during the virtual tutoring session.

Figure 1: Perception of Engagement during Virtual Tutoring Sessions
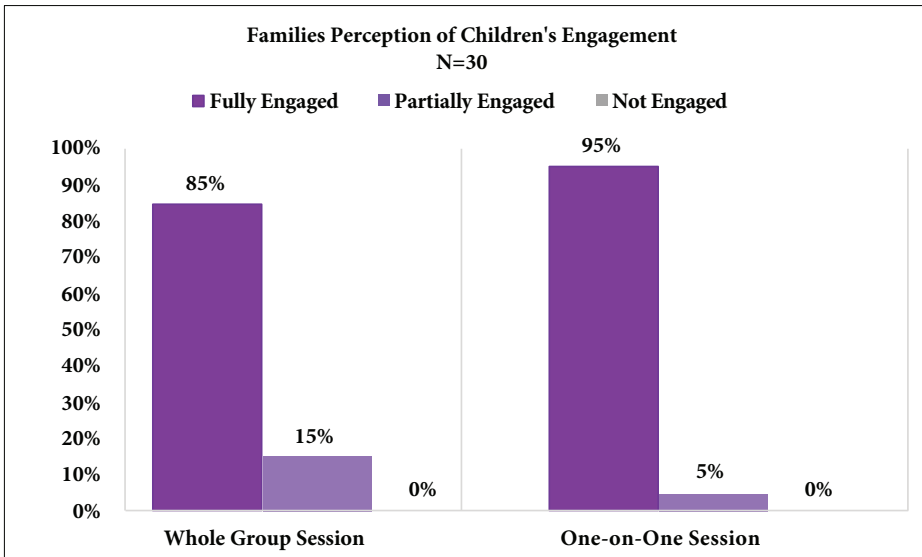
Suggestion: Communicate regularly with the school leadership to determine the curriculum and materials used to support the content and skill development for each grade level. Also ask to observe instruction in the classroom to make sure the language, vocabulary, and expectations for the topics and lesson content align. This would provide consistency during the lesson implementation and create higher expectations for the children's development, as they would be receiving supplemental instruction consistent with what they were learning in their schools.

Fieldwork Interns

The fieldwork interns indicated that they were grateful to have the opportunity to engage with families and children in authentic and meaningful ways. They expressed sincere gratitude for being able to gain experience with the planning and facilitation of activities for the three grade levels that were required for teacher certification. The interns also appreciated the opportunity to observe an experienced teacher and receive feedback on their own teaching and facilitation of learning:

> I like how we did not have to plan the activities and could add to the lesson. This was less stressful and helped me to understand the objectives much better. (Fieldwork intern in focus group, May 2021)

Planning and working with families was beneficial to my own learning. This was an experience that I did not expect and a wonderful opportunity. (Fieldwork intern in focus group, May 2021)

Videotaping the activities and completing the assessment charts helped me to understand how and what the students were learning. Being able to discuss this during reflection was eye opening and I learned from my classmates. (Fieldwork intern in focus group, May 2021)

While the fieldwork interns described how the virtual tutoring sessions supported their learning and development, they also discussed that they did not feel wholly prepared for the student teaching experience.

Challenge: The fieldwork interns did not facilitate the whole-group lessons that introduced the families and children to the lesson content. The interns were novice learners and the short period between planning and implementation did not give teacher of the virtual tutoring model enough time to prepare them to facilitate the lessons.

Suggestion: The virtual tutoring lesson could be implemented in two-week rotations with the same objectives. In week one, the teacher would facilitate the introductory lesson and model the activity. The fieldwork interns would observe and document the best practices from the lesson facilitation. They also would be able to formulate questions to ask of the cooperating teacher to help them understand the lesson facilitation. During the reflection conference, the fieldwork interns would be able to ask clarifying questions to help them prepare for their own facilitation of the lesson during week two. The observation of week one activities and the reflection discussion would give the fieldwork interns the time they need to prepare for the week two lesson. This would give them experience in planning and facilitating whole-group lessons.

In week two, the fieldwork intern would have the opportunity to remediate, reinforce, and build on the children's knowledge from week one and conduct the whole-group lesson. This would also give the interns more assessment data to use to document the children's developmental progress.

Challenge: The fieldwork interns worked with children in a one-on-one setting. While the families and children appreciated the individual teaching and learning, the fieldwork interns expressed concern about their lack of experience with small-group facilitation.

Suggestion: Families and children could be divided into homogenous groups according to the children's developmental levels. This would give the fieldwork interns the opportunity to work with more than one student during the small-group lesson. The data from the quantitative and qualitative assessments would be used to categorize the children into the groups. This also would support the children's social-emotional development because they would have the opportunity to interact with other children, collaborate during lessons and activities, and develop skills in problem-solving and taking turns.

Challenges

The virtual tutoring model was designed to give early childhood education fieldwork interns the opportunity to have an authentic teaching and learning experience while interacting with children and families. While the interns viewed this as a successful, meaningful experience, they noted that not engaging with children in a physical classroom was a limitation of the pre-student-teaching experience. The virtual experience limited their opportunity to observe and document children's social-emotional development, approaches to learning, and collaboration with peers.

The children did not have the opportunity to use manipulatives and hands-on materials that are typically available in the physical classroom. The fieldwork interns were unable to observe and document children's physical development (e.g., eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills), and thus had to rely on families to self-identify any areas they were concerned about.

The limited amount of time spent on activities, skills, and concepts was a concern raised by both the fieldwork interns and the families. Each virtual tutoring session lasted 30-40 minutes; 10-15 minutes were allotted to the introductory whole-group lesson, 10-15 minutes for the small-group lesson, and 5 minutes for the reflection discussion. The interns indicated that the time spent in the virtual tutoring model was not equivalent to the amount of time they would have spent during an in-person fieldwork experience. Although the families appreciated their children's exposure to the skills and content offered during the virtual tutoring sessions, a few families said they felt the sessions were rushed.

The fieldwork interns were challenged by the pacing and flow of the activities during the lesson implementation, which resulted in their not completing the activities as designed. During the review of the videotaped small-group lessons and the post-observation reflection, they indicated that they needed more time to establish a rapport with the children and to become familiar with the language and expectations of the activities.

ONLINE ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORTED STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

The online activities that supported student and family engagement, enhanced the fieldwork interns' planning, facilitation, and assessment skills, and were easily transferred into the home environment appeared to be the most successful in meeting lesson objectives and grade-level expectations. These included:

1. Activities that were

    a. Interdisciplinary—combined more than one content and/or developmental area

    b. Supported multiple modalities—incorporated the various methods students use to interact and engage in activities

    c. Culturally responsive to the participating families—used the families' home, cultural, and community assets to support and enhance the activities

2. Recorded videos of online games that supported the pacing and flow of the activities and also differentiated and individualized instruction

3. PowerPoint presentations and Google slides that supported the scope and sequence of the lesson objectives and the developmental organization of the activities

CONCLUSION

In order to be responsive to the unique contexts and situations created by the COVID-19 pandemic and to support whole-child development, family engagement must be a reciprocal relationship between educators and families. Including families as coteachers requires true partnerships and the building of mutual

trust and respect. To ensure that every student has the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities that support development and learning opportunities regardless of the teaching modality, true partnerships must exist. Family engagement helps extend teaching beyond the virtual and in-person learning environment, creates a more positive experience for children, and helps children build confidence and competence.

With the virtual tutoring model, family engagement was described as any adult who participated in the planning of the lesson, supported the students during the whole- and small-group remote sessions, and communicated with the cooperating teacher and faculty member throughout the school year. Figure 2 presents the breakdown of the adults that participated in the virtual tutoring model.

Figure 2: Family Engagement and Participation during
the Virtual Tutoring Model
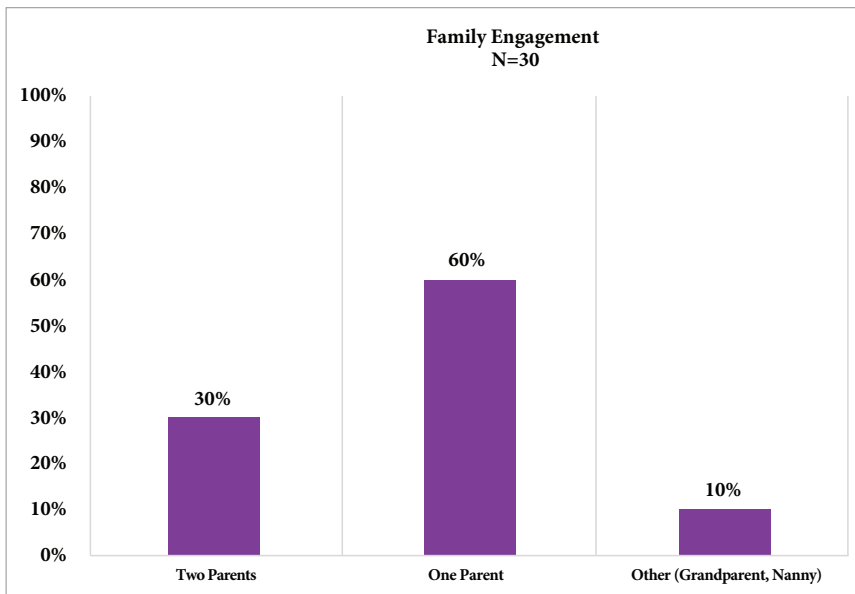
Although the demographics and ethnicity of the participating students and families were not formally collected for the virtual tutoring model, Figure 3 presents observational data on the diverse population that engaged in the remote tutoring sessions. This figure is included to acknowledge and emphasize that diverse cultural perspectives can inspire creativity and innovation that relates to culturally responsive pedagogy and an antiracist/antibias curriculum.

Figure 3: Ethnicity of Participating Families (observational data only)
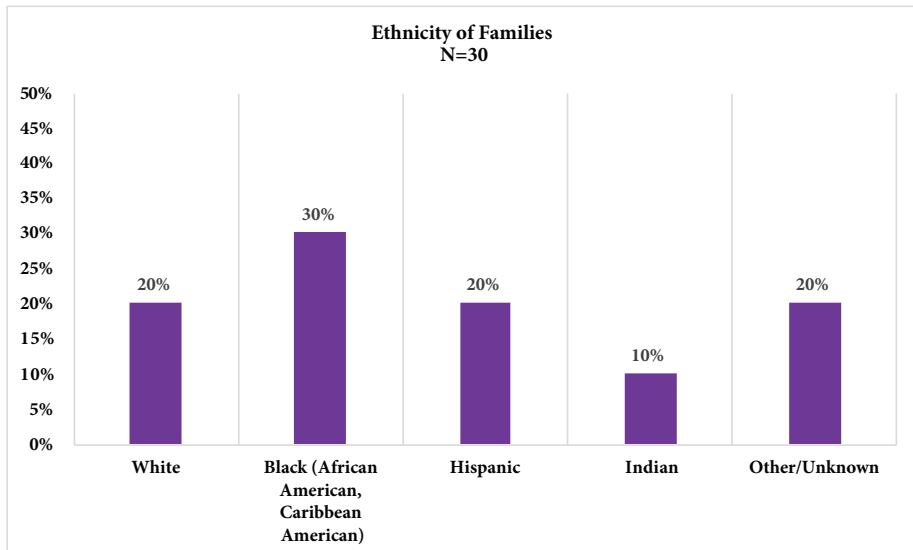
Fieldwork is an integral part of the coursework in a teacher preparation program. Providing fieldwork interns with an authentic teaching and learning experience that incorporates family engagement will support them as they prepare for student teaching and a career in the teaching profession. Meaningful and productive fieldwork experiences will improve teacher candidates' learning and promote effective teaching that will maximize student learning.

The virtual tutoring model implements a family- and student-centered approach to remote instruction. Engaging families as coteachers in the teaching and learning process increases their children's interactions and engagement with the lessons and activities and promotes meaningful learning experiences that can help mitigate the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young children's learning and development. It can also be used as a model for virtual teaching and in future emergency situations where educators, families, and children engage in a remote learning environment.

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