CHEO

BACK TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19: TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Back to school during COVID-19-19

The end of summer and going back to school can be challenging in the best of times. Now that we are returning back to school under COVID-19, it can be even harder. The good news is that there are many things that you can do to support your children and youth with going back to school during COVID-19.

Deciding whether to send your child back to school

School boards across the country are now planning for a return to school for fall 2020. Many school boards are offering parents the option between:

- returning students physically back to school (ranging from part-time to full-time)
- keeping your child at home and continuing with virtual schooling
- a combination of physical return and virtual schooling

Are you uncertain about which choice to make? The Centres for Disease Control has a Back to School Decision Making Tool to help you weigh the risks and benefits of each option.

Reasons to attend school include:

- Your child learns best when physically at school.
- Your child benefits from seeing peers and other school activities, such as gym arts and music.
- School allows parents to work and provides access to meal programs and other services.

Reasons to avoid physical return to school:

- Your child (or someone living at home such as a parent or sibling) has an underlying condition (or age) that increases the risk for severe illness from COVID-19.
- The level of community spread is high in your area (which increases the risk of COVID-19).

Reasons to consider virtual schooling from home:

- Your child has someone that can supervise them at home.
- Your child has access to reliable technology (such as internet) for your child's virtual learning.
- Your child's virtual learning option gives opportunities for real-time interactions with the teachers (e.g., have live instruction).
- Your child's maturity and learning style are sufficient for virtual learning.

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Other considerations

Does your child have special needs such as ADHD, autism, mood disorders, anxiety or other issues? Does your child have other issues such as bullying, or other school stressors? It is recommended that schools work with parents and healthcare providers to ensure that adequate supports will be in place in the classroom to help with special needs. Every child and situation is unique.

Back to school tips

Here are some tips that may be helpful as the school year starts, whether or not your child will be returning to school physically or virtually.

Social connections

- Continue to encourage your child or youth to stay social with their friends and peers. This will help them feel more connected by the time they get back to school. Ideally this involves face-to-face connections outside, as per COVID-19 physical distancing.

- If they can't meet face-to-face, try a video call or even write a letter to a friend.

Routines

- Gradually get back into school year structure and routines. Bring up the topic that summer is coming to an end and that school will be restarting.

- Talk about routines. You might say: "Hey guys, with COVID-19, you've had a lot more screen time than usual, but now that school is starting up again, we're going to get back into our old routine... "

- Set a bedtime (and/or wake up time) and move it closer to what it should be for the school year.

- Set a screen curfew (a "downtime" after which point there are no screens). For example 8-9 p.m. for school-aged kids and 8:30-9:30 p.m. for high-school aged kids.

- Consider posting a family calendar with the school start date marked down, to help your family see how many days are left until school starts.

- Ask about routines to continue. "What new COVID-19 routines would people like to continue during the school year? For example, regular family walks after dinner; family dance night, etc.

- Write down the new COVID-19 school-year schedule, for example:
  7:00 a.m. - Wake up
  8:00 a.m. - Leave for school
  8:40 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. - School
  3:45 p.m. - Arrive home, wash hands
  3:45-5:00 p.m. - Homework time
  5-6:00 p.m. - Family dinner
  6-8:00 p.m. - Free time (non-educational electronics only allowed on Fridays and Saturdays)
  8:30 p.m. - Screen time finished, bedtime routine
  10:00 p.m. - Lights out

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Normalize mask-wearing

Some children will be able to wear masks easily but others may have a harder time. Consider the following exposure and desensitization strategies

- Are you buying a mask? Try giving your child some of the newer child-friendly designs to choose from or get them to help decorate a pre-made mask.

- Are you making a mask? Let your child to choose material.

- Create an exposure hierarchy to understand your child's fears. From least scary to most scary it might be: seeing others wear a mask, seeing a mask, touching a mask, putting on a mask for short periods of time and putting on a mask for longer periods of time.

- Teach distraction strategies like distracting with music, videos, video games to help pass the time while wearing a mask.

- Practice calming strategies like deep breathing, going outside, going for a walk, etc.

- Consider motivating kids to get used to wearing a mask by pairing it with something they enjoy, like allowing video game time (within your limits) while wearing their mask.

Does your child or youth still have struggles with mask wearing, despite your best efforts? Consider seeing your health-care provider to see if there might be other options, including seeing if your child may have a valid medical exemption.

Help your child continue to cope

- Stay connected to your kids. Kids do best when they feel loved by their caregivers, which happens when you spend quality time with them and listen, validate and empathize with their feelings (as opposed to seeing adults as being angry, upset, and emotionally unavailable to them).

- Model healthy coping. Kids do best when they learn healthy ways to cope with adversity, such as following public health recommendations with masks and physical distancing (as opposed to unhealthy strategies such as focusing on negatives and blaming).

- Attach positive meaning to the pandemic. Kids do best when they can have a positive meaning of a situation. You might say: "On one hand, this pandemic has not been easy. On the other hand, we've been able to have a lot more fun times together. And learn new things such as how to cut each other's hair!"

Ease your child's worries

Does your child seem to have excessive fears and anxiety about COVID-19? COVID-19 restrictions (such as restricting parents from entering the school) may lead your child to feel more isolated.

- Ask about their fears, and try to reassure or problem solve. Ask: "What worries you the most?"

- Validate and accept your child's feelings about the situation. You might say: " "I can see why you might be feeling (insert your child's feelings here) about this."

- Give your child a sense of control.

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- Explore in more detail. Try to listen without interrupting. Say: " "Tell me more…"
- Try giving your child a sentimental object that reminds them of you, e.g. a photograph, a special piece of jewelry, etc. Or perhaps a small favorite toy car or stuffie.

The first week back to school

- Leave earlier than usual. Whether you are driving, or simply dropping off your kids at the bus stop, this will give you more flex time
- Consider working a shorter day on the first day back, so that you can pick them up earlier on the first day back, until they get used to the new routine.
- Establish a goodbye ritual. When its time to say goodbye to your child, give them a final hug, kiss, say goodbye, and talk about when you'll see them next. Don't just say "Goodbye!", but bridge the separation by talking about when you will see them next.
- Have you dropped off your child? Try to take some time just for yourself, whether it's going for a walk, to the coffee shop, having tea with a friend, or just going home to nap. Breathe a sigh of relief and savor this time.
- Check in with your children about how the day went. If your child isn't ready to talk, then ask them later when they are ready. You might ask: "How did your day go?" "How did it go with wearing your mask and keeping away from people and all that?" "What was hard, what was easy?"
- If they are sad, validate the sadness: "I can see you are feeling sad and it's ok to cry. I'm going to miss you too." Offer comfort like a hug or offering a tissue. Crying is good because it helps the brain

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