

Preparing your child for classroom learning

Author: Nyasha Ziwewe . March 2021

Families have hope that daily life, including school, will return to normal thanks to covid 19 vaccines. Most children will most likely not be able to get vaccines this school year. The good news is that reopening schools for in-person learning do not appear to have a significant impact on the virus's spread in the community. But it depends on whether schools can follow COVID-19 public health guidelines. All schools should strive to have students attend school in person, as this is the best way for them to learn. This entails collaborating with public health officials to bring the virus's spread in the community under control. When a school can reopen for in-person learning, layered safety measures can help keep students, teachers, and staff safe.

Parents are facing a new back-to-school to-do list as some districts reopen for in-person learning. This involves teaching kids how to minimize their risk of contracting the coronavirus, adjust to new routines, deal with uncomfortable and potentially dangerous social interactions, and cope with fears and anxiety.

So, in addition to paper and pencils, parents are packing hand sanitiser and face masks in their children's backpacks. According to Adam J. Ratner, director of the Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases and paediatrician at Hassenfeld Children's Hospital at NYU Langone, teaching children to be responsible for their safety is the most important way parents can prepare their children for returning to school. He believes that children need assistance in navigating situations at school that may endanger their health and safety. "Run through scenarios like, 'What should you do if you arrive at the playground and there are no masks on the kids?' Explain to them how they can ask their friends to wear masks or seek out a teacher in an appropriate manner," says Dr Ratner. "Parents must arm their children with knowledge," Dr Ratner says. "These are difficult conversations to have, but it's critical to reinforce these strategies in the least frightening way possible."

Below are a few tips for parents to get their kids ready for face to face learning.

Start talking

Your child may be concerned about the virus, the limitations that have been imposed, or their education and school. It's critical to recognize that this is a trying time. It's critical to convey to them that returning to school is a major concern and that you recognize this. Communicate with them in a manner that is considerate of their needs. Don't barge in or impose yourself on them; instead, gently begin a conversation with them so that they understand you are with them if they need to discuss something concerning their safety.

Managing Your Child's Anxiety

Even in the absence of a pandemic, the return to school can trigger anxiety in children and adolescents.

Academic performance declines, eating habits change, inability to fall asleep until very late at night, struggle to wake up, excessive feelings of guilt and restlessness, avoiding friends, and mood swings are all signs of anxiety.

With the pandemic, some children will be afraid to go to school, be around friends, or even be outside at all especially if they don't have a parent to reassure them. "Anxiety and adjusting emotionally to the new norm are becoming more prevalent," says Dr Diaz. "However, fear and anxiety should not be the primary deterrents to a child returning to school."

Coping Strategies

Acknowledge that it's normal to feel anxious about going back to school – try sharing an example of a time you've felt anxious about going into a new situation. When you're stressed, you should use coping methods like talking to friends or family, exercising regularly, or using breathing techniques. If you're at ease, you should share your concerns and emotions about the current situation, as well as the coping strategies you're employing to deal with them.

Encourage them to stay in the moment and not plan too far ahead of time. Too much forethought can be exhausting. Concentrate on what they can control (handwashing, masks, preparing for their return, such as packing their bag) rather than what they can't (what might happen with the pandemic in several months).

Make yourself available as much as you can

Children may want to come and debrief, but not at the time you anticipate. Make time for different types of conversations, such as going for a walk or baking together, there may be less pressure in these situations than when sitting face-to-face. Keep in touch with them regularly. Don't assume they're fine just because they appear to be.

Look at the positives

Talk with your kid about what they've enjoyed during the pandemic and what they're looking forward to, such as their favourite store reopening, seeing friends in the park, or getting ice cream from their favourite café.

Establish a routine

Many children will struggle to adjust to a new routine after months of distant learning and a summer break from school. Families may also find it difficult to adapt and align their schedules, particularly with many school districts combining online and in-person learning. "Kids do best when they know what to expect," says Yamalis Diaz, PhD, a child and adolescent psychologist at NYU Langone's Child Study Center.

She suggests making a calendar that shows which days are for online learning and which are for in-person learning, as well as what will happen on each of those days. “This helps kids stay on track throughout the day and achieve their objectives. When schedules are too open-ended, children experience instability and become more anxious or disruptive,” she says.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Jennifer L. Lighter, MD, associate professor in the Department of Pediatrics and pediatric epidemiologist at Hassenfeld Children's Hospital, suggests that parents can help their children prepare for school by reinforcing good habits at home. Dr Lighter recommends teaching your child to wash their hands before leaving and returning home, as well as before and after meals, using the toilet, and sneezing or blowing their nose, hand sanitiser after touching regularly touched surfaces like bannisters and doorknobs is an example of a habit that can be carried over to the school.

Above all, assist your child in becoming accustomed to wearing a mask. Dr Lighter advises, "Practice putting it on every time you leave the house." “Teach your child how to stretch out the mask so that it covers his or her entire face, from the tip of the nose to the bottom of the chin.”

Encourage Safe Socializing

Dr Lighter believes that staying in touch with friends, both virtually and in-person, is critical. It's also difficult to control, as any parent of a teenager can attest. As a result, parents should consider establishing boundaries for their children by encouraging them to stick to a specific group of children. “Talk to their parents about committing to only being with those friends if a child has a group of friends,” Dr Lighter advises. “The social aspect of childhood is extremely important, but it must be accomplished safely.”

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Getting outside is also good for your kid’s mental and physical health, as well as a better way to socialize. Encourage your child to be active as much as possible. Consider walking or biking to school instead of driving or taking public transportation if the distance is manageable. In the evenings, if the weather permits, go for a family walk.

See Your Doctor Regularly

If you suspect your child has been exposed to COVID-19 or is displaying symptoms, consult your paediatrician about COVID-19 testing. They can assist with diagnosis and treatment, as well as ensuring the health of the entire family. Get a flu vaccination as well. “It’s especially important this year to get vaccinated against the flu,” Dr Lighter says. “Since influenza and COVID-19 have similar symptoms, vaccination reduces the risk of infection, the need for missed school days, and symptom confusion, leaving you wondering if you have the flu, COVID-19, or something else.” Maintaining regular doctor’s visits is important for your child’s health, as well as that of the entire family, so keep up with well-child visits and all of your child’s immunizations.

In these difficult times, remember that there is no right or wrong way to return to school. Finally, if you or your child is concerned about returning to in-person learning, gather all of the information you can, trust your instincts, and make a decision that feels right for your situation.

Nyasha D Ziwewe is a Business Consultant and Systems developer at Industrial Psychology Consultants. Email: nyasha@ipccconsultants.com. Mobile 0783462251. LinkedIn: [Nyasha D Ziwewe](#)

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