

Back to School under COVID: Tips for Parents and Caregivers



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

Introduction

The COVID pandemic has been particularly difficult for students and families, as most students have been out of school since lockdown started in spring 2020, but school boards across the country are now planning for a return to school for fall 2020. On one hand, most families (and many students) likely welcome the return back to school. On the other hand, there are many concerns about returning to school under COVID. For some students, the new normal of learning from home has actually been less stressful than attending school.

Deciding on Whether to Return Your Child to School

Many school boards are offering parents the option between 1) returning students physically back to school (ranging from part-time to full-time) versus 2) keeping your child at home and continuing with virtual schooling, vs. 3) a combination of physical return and virtual schooling.

Are you uncertain about which choice to make? The CDC 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 peer and other school activities such as physical activity;
- Child care so that parents can work; 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.
- The level of community spread is high in your area (which increases the risk of COVID).
- Your child has issues such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), learning differences, ADHD, troubles with bullying, gender differences, or other issues that make return to school particularly challenging.

Reasons to consider virtual schooling from home:

- There is someone who can supervise your child at home;

- Your child has access to reliable technology (such as internet) for your child's virtual learning;
- Your child's virtual learning option does give 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.

Returning to School: What Families Can Do

Here are some tips that may help make an easier transition back to school under COVID.

During the summer prior to school

Continue to encourage your child's social connections with peers, which will help your child feel more connected to their peers by the time school starts.

- Ideally this involves face-to-face connections outside, as per COVID physical distancing. Next best would be virtual connections where you can see the other person's face in real time, such as video chat (e.g. Facetime, Skype).
- The least preferred would be email, texting or Instagram, as you cannot see the other person's face for non-verbal messages.
- Alternatively an old fashioned written letter or card is another way to connect.

Continue educational-related and learning routines

- Continue educational related routines like going to the library, reading time, or educational apps or websites. It's hard for children to read or use an educational app when they are distracted by recreational screen time; parents may need to use parental control settings and active limit setting for this to happen.

A few weeks before school starts, 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.

Mention the negatives.	Parent: "On one hand, COVID lockdown has not been easy."
Mention the positives.	"On the other hand, I'm so grateful that we've had a chance to spend a lot more time together."
Ask about routines to continue.	"What new COVID routines would people like to continue during the school year?, e.g. regular family walks after dinner; family dance night, etc."

- Let your children know that there will be a return to school.

Explore any concerns, such as emotional, practical or others.	Parent: "School is starting up again in a few weeks... How do you feel about that?"
Invite self-reflection.	Parent: "For you, what were the good parts about being at home instead of going to school? What were the parts you didn't like?"

- Is your child feeling worried, anxious or stressed?

Reflect back what you are hearing from your child.	Parent: "You're feeling a bit worried...."
Explore in more detail. Try to listen without interrupting.	Parent: "Tell me more..."
Thank your child for taking the courage and trouble to communicate with you.	Parent: "Thank you for letting me know." "I'm glad you're letting me know."
Exploring your child's main concern or worry.	Parent: "What troubles you the most with ___?"

Validate and accept your child's feelings about the situation.

Parent: "I can see why you might be feeling (insert your child's feelings here, e.g. stressed, upset, etc.) about this."

Offer your support.

Parent: "I'm here for you. Let me give you a hug.."

Especially with older children and teens, ask what they want. Offer "support" not "solutions".

Parent: "How can I support you? Want me to just listen? Or do you want my advice?"

- Talk about routines.
 - During a normal summer, most families have less expectations and this has been amplified during COVID -- thus, many kids (and adults) are using more screen time, going to bed late and sleeping in late.
 - "Let's talk about what the routine is going to be when the school year starts up... To help make the change easier, we're going to gradually get back into things, as opposed to all at once."
- Examples of routines to focus on include:
 - Bedtimes / Wakeup times: Set a bedtime (and/or wake up time) and move it closer to what it should be for the school year.
 - Reduce excess recreational screen time: High yield ways to cut back include:
 - Setting a screen curfew, i.e. setting a "downtime" after which point there are no screens, e.g. 8-9 PM for school aged kids ideally, or 8:30-9:30 PM for high school aged kids. (Yes, many teenagers left to their devices are using devices until midnight or later, but unfortunately, this is very disruptive for their sleep.
 - One way to set screen time limits is to use the "Parental Controls Settings" available on most devices. This way, you can set the device to turn off automatically by a certain time, or times on certain apps, etc. In cases where you have an oppositional child or teen, this makes it much easier to set limits than having to physically wrestle the device away.
- Help them with getting used to some of the new COVID routines, such as
 - Wearing a mask in school. Some children will be able to do this more easily, others may have a harder time.
 - Consider the following strategies
- Step-by-step exposure and desensitization strategies
 - Are you buying a mask? Consider giving your child some of the newer child-friendly designs to choose from; or decorate a pre-made mask.
 - Are you making a mask? Allow your child to choose material.
- Creating an exposure hierarchy
 - 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.
 - Putting on a mask for longer periods of time.
 - Teach distraction and calming strategies
 - Distraction strategies include distracting the child with music, videos, video games to help pass the time while wearing a mask.
 - Calming strategies include 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. E.g. Allow video game time (within your limits) while wearing their mask.

Are there still 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.




- COVID restrictions (such as restricting parents from entering the school) may lead your child to feel more isolated.



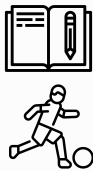




- Examples include: Giving your child a sentimental object that reminds them of you, e.g. a photograph, a special piece of jewelry, etc. Or perhaps a small favorite toy car or stuffie...
- Post a schedule
 - Consider posting a family calendar with the school start date marked down, to help your child(ren) see how many days are left until school starts.
- Ensure that any additional child care, such as before or after school programs are set up. If not, then there are many high school students who might be interested in picking up some childcare and/or babysitting hours.
- Review your work options. Do you have an employer? Review your company's time off policies so you'll have extra options. With COVID, parents may receive that dreaded phone call stating that they may need to pick up their child, get everyone in the family tested for COVID, and stay home until the results are negative. Let your employer know about your situation, as you may need more flexibility during the uncertainty of return to school.

A week or two before school starts

- Visit the (new) school in advance. Practice the route to school. Walk around the outside of the school, and check out the playground. See if it's possible to have a walk inside the school to walk down the halls, find your child's classroom, and the bathrooms.
- Fill out an "about me" page about your child to introduce your child to their teacher. Include information about your child's living arrangements, favourite activities, skills, struggles and coping mechanisms.
- Meet with your child's new teacher ahead of time. If possible, try to introduce your child to their new teacher, even if it's a brief meeting. If possible, take a picture of your child with the teacher, put it on your fridge at your child's eye level so they become a familiar face.
- Have an "end of the summer" celebration, to mark the end of the summer, and welcome the new start of the school year. There might be a special meal, or special sweets like a cake or ice cream. Express gratitude to the summer by saying "thank you for ____." Then say goodbye until the next summer... And welcome the school year. "And now, we will look forward to the school year. Learning new things, seeing old friends, and making new friends..."
- Write down the new COVID school year schedule, for example
 - Consider using the opportunity of a new school year a chance to "reset" any expectations that perhaps became a bit more lax since COVID
 - For example
 - Did you previously have technology only limited to weekend days such as Fri/Saturday?
 - Did you previously have technology limited to a max of 1-2 hrs / day recreational screen time (e.g. video games, social media, surfing)?
 - Consider using this chance to reset those expectations
 - "Hey guys, with COVID, 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..."

Example of a Weekday Schedule -- adapt for your child/youth.

7 AM		Wakeup
8 AM		Leave for school (e.g. school bus, drive to school, walk to school)
840 AM - 3:30 PM		School

3:30 PM		Return home
3:45 PM		Arrive home Wash hands whenever coming from outside
3:45- 5 PM		Homework time, then Free time (non-electronic)
5-6 PM		Family Dinner
6-8 PM		Free time (non-electronic) Screen time allowed on Fridays / Saturdays
8:30 PM		Screen time finished Bedtime routine
10 PM		Lights out by 10 PM

The night before the first day of school

- Get the backpacks ready with any supplies.
- Prepare lunches for the next day and put them in the fridge.
- Set the breakfast table.
- Go to bed early yourself. You will feel better, calmer and better able to help your child with school if you are well rested.

The first day (and week) of 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.
- 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.

- Is your child feeling sad and upset?
 - 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, e.g. give your child a hug, and kleenex. Crying is good -- it helps the brain cope with loss.
 - Talk about the reunion: "I'll be thinking of you all day. I'll see you after school. I can't wait to hear about how your day went!"
- 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.
- 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.

The First Week Back

- Try to plan ahead, so that you have enough time to focus on your child and the return to school.
- Get groceries and meals planned in advance. Consider planning meals ahead of time for the first day (or week of school), so that you have less stress about meals. This might include buying groceries in advance; or perhaps just having more take out meals that week.

At the end of the school day

- 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.

Parent: "How did your day go?" "How'd it go with wearing your mask and keeping away from people and all that?"
 "What was hard?"
 "What was easy?"

- Was it hard for them?

If so, offer support.

- Parent: "I'm so sorry it was ____ (insert your child's words here). What was hard?"
- Parent: Validate "I can see it made you feel ____ (insert your child's words)."
- Express gratitude. "Even though it wasn't easy, I am happy that you tried anyways. Thank you for that."
- Offer support: "I'm here for you. How can I help?"

Key Resiliency Tips

Continue to support your children's resiliency with key strategies such as:

- Keeping connected to them. Kids do best when they feel loved by their caregivers, which happens when you spend quality time with them, and can listen, validate and empathize with their feelings (as opposed to seeing adults as being angry, upset, and emotionally unavailable to them).
- Modelling 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).
- Positive meaning. Kids do best when they can have a positive meaning of a situation. Caregivers can help in this way: "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!"

Is Your Child Having a Lot of COVID Worries or struggles?

Does your child seem to have excessive fears and anxiety about COVID?

- Ask about their fears, and try to reassure or problem-solve.

Parent: "What is your worst fear?" (e.g. about getting sick and dying?) or "Tell me what's been tough..."

- Is your child young and generally healthy?
- Give your child a sense of control.

Parent: "You are lucky to be young, because even if you caught it, chances are you'd just get over it. You might not even know that you had it."

Parent: "The good news is that there are things we can do, and then we don't have to worry as much. We can 1) wear a mask when in public; 2) keep distance from other people, and 3) wash our hands when coming back home."

My Child is Still Struggling -- What Now?

You might consider:

- Let the school know that your child is struggling and ask them what they recommend;
- Speak to your primary care provider such as your family physician;
- Contact a children's mental centre;
- Contact your workplace's Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP).

For More Information

Looking for more information about parenting during COVID?

CHEO link: <https://www.cheo.on.ca/en/resources-and-support/resources/P6219E.pdf>

eMentalHealth.ca Link: <https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=62307>

Looking for more information about supporting your child's mental wellness during COVID?

CHEO Pandemic Parenting Playbook

<https://cheo.echoontario.ca/parent-caregiver-sessions/>

Looking for more information about managing screen time during COVID?

[Link to handout on COVID Screen Time] -- PENDING

References

School Decision-Making Tool for Parents, Caregivers and Guardians. Created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this tool helps families weigh the risks and benefits of staying at home versus attending school. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/decision-tool.htm>

About this Article

Written by the health professionals at CHEO, many of whom are parents themselves. No conflicts of interest or competing interests declared. All icons courtesy of www.flaticon.com.

Please feel free to CONTACT US and give us comments and suggestions on how to improve this article.

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