

Education in the time of COVID

Behavioral Therapy Tips to Ease the Transition Back to School

Every school year presents some new challenges for students, but the 2020-2021 school year breaks all the rules!

Here are a few tips to prepare your family.



The start of the school year is always a time of big changes, as students transition from the freedom of summer to the structure and expectations of classes. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of education on many levels and introduced a slew of new challenges.

If your child already struggles with school, this year may be extra hard. But even for students who enjoy school and adapt easily, the particular challenges presented by education in the time of a pandemic may

cause anxiety, stress, and depression.

How can I help?

Start with you.

Make sure the adults in the home are on the same page. Present an approachable, calm front for your children, even if you are nervous yourself. Parents and caregivers are facing new and intense stress themselves, so make sure you're taking care of you, too!



Be honest about your concerns, but avoid worrying out loud in front of the kids - they will pick up on your fears but lack the cognitive-emotional development to process both your emotions and theirs.

Find out what the opening requirements are for your local district, and investigate all your options. Some schools are giving parents the choice to opt-out of in-person classes in favor of online schooling. Choose what will work best for your family.

Practice early and often.

Children thrive on rituals and routines. This is especially true of children who are highly sensitive, have learning disorders, are on the autism spectrum, have sensory processing disorders, or are in primary and elementary schools.



Introduce sleep/wake routines 4-6 weeks before school starts. Move bedtime and morning wake-ups as close to the school-year times as possible.



If your child has problems with bedtime, the Child Mind Institute offers this helpful primer: <https://childmind.org/article/encouraging-good-sleep-habits>. And if it's less than 2 weeks till school begins, don't worry! Start now.

Remember: progress, not perfection!

Other tools for success.

As school gets closer, create a visual calendar for younger kids, or those with special needs. The blog, A Day in Our Shoes, offers great resources for creating visual calendars for primary and secondary students: <https://adayinourshoes.com/free-printable-visual-schedules-for-home-and-daily-routines/>.

Visual calendars help children know what they should do in the morning, such as eating breakfast, or

getting dressed. This allows them to be task-oriented and somewhat self-motivated as parents try to get everyone out the door.

Teenagers could benefit from a shared family digital calendar on their phones/tablets, or a good old-fashioned date book.

Some districts are changing their school supplies lists in light of the pandemic, and some are providing new technology to students. Check your school's website or call your administration office for the most up-to-date lists before you do your school shopping

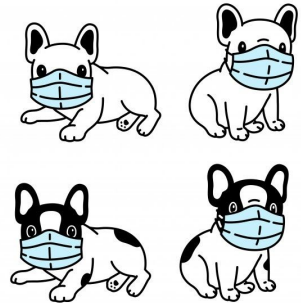
The pandemic has changed the rules.

COVID-19 has added several layers of complexity to the back-to-school routine.

In addition to the usual steps to prep for school, families must now deal with masks, extra sanitation, physical distancing, blended learning, online learning, staggered start dates, and

more that we don't even see coming.

Children will need your help in preparing for so much disruption to their important routines.



Masks. Using the principles of exposure therapy, you can help your child learn to tolerate wearing a mask.

Depending on how resistant your child is, start 2-4 weeks before they have to return to in-class learning. Begin by showing the child some of the masks they will be wearing, and give an age-appropriate explanation for why they will wear one, i.e. to protect themselves, their friends, and their teachers from getting sick.

If your kiddo is particularly nervous, let them practice putting the mask on a favorite doll or stuffed animal first. A couple days later, have the child try the mask on themselves.

The goal now is not to “wear” the mask yet, just practice putting it on. Allow your child the autonomy to decide how long to wear it at this point.

They may be comfortable wearing it for a few minutes or just a few seconds - that’s fine! Let them take it off when they’re ready.

After you have introduced the mask and your child has tried it on, have them practice wearing their mask for longer and longer periods of time every other day or so. Make it a fun time - play a board game, read stories, bake, play with toys - anything that will distract your child while they practice wearing their mask, until they can wear it for a couple hours at a time.



Don’t force the mask-wearing! Use positive reinforcement and distraction, and if your child gets tired of it, encourage them to try just two minutes

longer then let them take it off. They need to have a positive association with wearing their masks.

While this practice-makes-perfect approach should work for a wide variety of children, pre-teens and teens will likely adjust more easily than younger kids. Children with extra sensitivity may need more time and short, frequent practice sessions to master the skill of mask-wearing.



Other COVID school-skills

Prepare your child for proper hand-washing, physical distancing, and routines to reduce the chance of virus transmission.

Teach your children the best way to wash their hands; soap, water, and thorough scrubbing for twenty seconds is the most effective way to break down and wash away the virus.

There are many great videos on YouTube that demonstrate hand washing for all ages.



Minimize what your child will carry back and forth to school with them, and ensure that bookbags, lunch containers, and other supplies can be washed in soap and water.

When packing lunches, consider using easy-to-open containers to prevent staff from having to open packages for your child. This minimizes moving from table to table and risking cross-contaminating students.

What about online schooling?

Remote learning and safety lockdowns upended the lives of millions of families this past spring, so many parents and guardians are nervous about how they will be able

to juggle work and guide their students through remote learning at the same time, should this happen again.

One option is to form small, carefully-chosen “pods” of friends and family to support you.

The people in your pod should agree to follow evidence-based practices for reducing virus transmission to keep the whole pod safe: monitor their health, wear masks in public, limit interaction with others outside the pod, and use curbside pick-up for groceries and medications.

The people in your pod can then trade help with childcare, schooling, and errands. For example, if you and a friend work different hours, you can stagger whose house is hosting your collective children.

If your pod is made mainly of family, one or two family members may provide childcare and educational support in exchange for someone else handling the shopping.

Think creatively and look for like-minded allies

among family, friends, neighbors and co-workers. This system is not 100%



without risk, but it can help alleviate some burdens and meet socio-emotional needs among your family and friends.

Schools have also had time to better prepare for shutdowns and disruption compared to March, so the quality of remote learning will be better going forward as well.

Mental health matters.

Change is hard. This fall will present many challenges to students, families, faculty and staff. The best approach is patience all-around!

Everyone is dealing with uncertainty over what the school year will bring. Prepare yourself and your

family as well as you can, then focus on the important business of moving forward together.

For help managing anxiety, depression, and stress in the family, see our flyer at www.growingwell.life entitled, Managing ‘QUEWS’ During Times of Change; Tips for handling Questions, Uncertainty, Emotions, Worry and Stress when life gets really crazy.

Hopefully this newsletter has given you a place to start in making a transition into the fall. If you feel that your child or adolescent’s behavior or mood is unusual or severe, please contact a pediatrician or licensed therapist for help. Most are still offering telehealth for safety, and those services are covered by insurance or sliding fees.

This school year can still present fun, exciting opportunities for students. The right preparations and a good attitude can make all the difference. Be well!