



CTA Wellness Presents

# Navigating Back-to-School Challenges

with

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created an entirely new set of back-to-school considerations for parents. We can't change the circumstances, but we can work on how we respond to them. We'll review practical and emotional preparations that can help you and your child approach the school year with resilience.

- Discuss the impact of the pandemic on the back-to-school transition.
- Get specific strategies for classroom, distanced, and hybrid learning.
- Discuss how to recognize and address your child's stress.
- Get tips that can help you and your child navigate with resilience.



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# MANAGING THE TRANSITION

## Navigating Back-to-School Challenges

Change is hard for everyone, but can be especially challenging for children. While there are back-to-school jitters every year, the transition may be more stressful this year. Practical and emotional preparations can help smooth the way.

### Practical preparations

**Talk about what to expect.** What routines will be brand new? What's not changing? Walk them through what will be different (*see examples on right*). It's okay to tell them you don't have all the answers right now, but share your confidence that your family will be able to manage whatever comes your way.

**Shift gradually into school-mode.** 1-2 weeks before school begins, start moving bed and wake times up by about 15 minutes/day until you reach school hours. Re-up on morning routines. Gradually reduce screen time. You might want to reinforce the shift (especially if school is virtual) with an "end of summer" ritual.

**Focus on the positives.** Help them see what they can look forward to. If they'll be returning to the classroom emphasize that they'll see their friends and teachers again. Remind them of the fun activities they'll be able to resume. If re-upping on virtual learning, point out that teachers have had more time to prepare and this may be a better experience compared to when learning went virtual with little warning. Share a sense of excitement and enthusiasm with your child.

**Provide reassurance.** Kids are likely to pick up on the controversies and safety concerns related to returning to school. If your child is returning to a classroom, fears may grow, but not be voiced. Talk about how the school is managing cleaning and distancing. Explain that the administrators, teachers, and the school nurse get information from scientists and doctors who help them understand how to help kids stay safe.

**Revisit healthy hygiene "rules,"** including mask wearing proper handwashing, cough etiquette, and keeping hands off their face. Emphasize that even though some things seem like they are going "back to normal," they still need to be careful. Reassure them that their teacher will help them remember what to do.

### What might be different at school?

If your child is returning to the classroom, review safety measures that will be put in place. Describe how this might impact their school day. Examples may include:

- › Their teacher, other adults, and possibly students may be wearing masks, gloves, or other protective coverings. Nurses may be wearing full PPE coverings that could be scary for a child.
- › There may be regular (non-invasive) temperature checks required – at home or at school.
- › Students may be grouped into "cohorts" and classes may be smaller. PE and recess may have some restrictions.
- › Desks may be widely spaced or separated by clear barriers. Hallways may have directional arrows. Lockers may no longer be in use.
- › Students may eat lunch at their desks or outdoors in small groups, not in the cafeteria.
- › The teachers, rather than students, may be the ones to change rooms for different periods.
- › The hugs that are a norm in lower grades may be off-limits for now.

American Academy of Pediatrics

## Emotional support

**Be prepared for resistance.** Children may have grown to enjoy aspects of staying at home during the pandemic – spending more time with you, more time for hobbies and games, etc. The end to this lifestyle may draw out a variety of feelings – sadness, anger, confusion. Talk about it and your own feelings, but stay upbeat. You may want to stick with some of the routines that have been meaningful to smooth the transition.

**Have realistic expectations.** It takes some time for children to fully acclimate to a new schedule, even if some aspects are a return to an earlier routine. Take their age and temperament into account. You may need to provide regular reminders of what they need to do next. Try to be patient if they forget or make a mistake. Gently redirect them towards the plan you put in place.

**Help them manage and express their reactions.** Know that you might see stress reactions in your children – *box on right*. Depending on their age, they may not always be able to express what they are feeling. Be gently supportive. Remind them that everyone gets a nervous feeling when facing difficult situations. Acknowledge their stressors, but share your confidence that they are strong and will manage the concerns.

**Don't overlook "normal" back-to-school worries.** If your child is changing school levels or starting in a new school, try to "fill in the blanks" as much as you can. Go to the school for a visit if it's possible. Problem-solve together and work on strategies for how to deal with concerns. Talk about friendships and how they might build them. Remind them of their unique talents, and talk about realistic goals for the school year.

**Model the behavior you want to see.** Kids look to adults for cues on how they should think, feel, and react to a situation. Keep calm, confident, and positive. Show them how to use deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques to help calm anxiety. Respond to challenges with flexibility, modeling effective problem-solving. This not only helps show them how to cope with change more effectively, but it helps you, too!

**Be mindful of your child's personality and behavior patterns.** If they have anxious tendencies or existing mental health concerns, you may need to reach out to school personnel ahead of time to discuss your concerns and put a plan in place. If you see changes or reactions to the transition or stress signs that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, contact a mental health professional. Your EAP can help.

### References

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2020). COVID-19 planning considerations: Guidance for school re-entry. Retrieved from <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). Helping children cope with changes resulting from COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/helping-children-cope-with-changes-resulting-from-covid-19>

## Stress signs

### Pre-schoolers

Thumb-sucking, sleep disturbances bedwetting, clinging to parents, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal.

### Elementary-age

Irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.

### Teens

Sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, poor concentration.

National Association of School Psychologists

Remember your EAP is available 24/7/365.

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# STAY-AT-HOME SCHOOL TIPS

## Navigating Back-to-School Challenges

Using the time before school begins to get prepared for virtual learning can help make it a more manageable experience for you and for your child. As age permits, have your child work with you to design their study area and schedule. This can help build buy-in and ownership of their learning.

### Set up their learning environment

- › Set up a dedicated, well-supplied study area away from noise and distractions as much as possible. Noise-cancelling headphones can help.
- › Confirm you have well-functioning technology. Get and test out all online learning components. Review internet connection/speed and device capabilities – for example, is streaming video supported? Download software or programs required by your child's school. Check your printer and ink, if needed.
- › Know how to get support and guidance from the school, IT director, and your child's teacher(s).

### Create structure with routines

- › Use what you know about your child to create realistic schedules, such as bed/wake/meal/snack times and physical activity. Being physically energized can help them be more focused and ready to learn.
- › Use poster board or a whiteboard to write out the schedule for the week. Incorporate any time-sensitive elements from the teacher. Use images if your child isn't reading yet. Post it in a visible spot.
- › Use a morning meeting to discuss expectations, priorities, and goals for the day. Ask if they understand what they'll be doing and have what they need to do it.
- › Use an end of day debrief to talk about what they were able to accomplish and what they learned. Ask if they ran into problems and how you might make it easier.
- › Use a schedule to create the security of predictability, but remain flexible to keep it from becoming a stressor. Sometimes things fall apart!

### Design a varied day

- › All ages need regular brain breaks. Follow learning sessions with time for physical activity, artwork, or free time to play, get outdoors, relax, and recharge.
- › Help your child connect with friends in safe ways.
- › This isn't the time to worry about screen time. Stay aware and guide the content of what they access online, but computing the hours isn't helpful now.

### Consider your role

- › Be present and available, but expect your child to take ownership of their learning. See yourself more as a coach than an instructor.
- › Focus on their effort, point out progress, and ask open-ended questions to stimulate thoughts.
- › Acknowledge the stressors, but share your confidence that your child can manage them.
- › Infuse "DIY" learning into the day – it "counts!"
- › Encourage and build on your child's strengths and interests to expand their learning.

### Consider your mindset

- › Do not expect or strive for perfection
- › Be patient with yourself and your child
- › Prioritize emotional health for everyone.
- › Remember that this isn't going to be forever.

### Resources for different age groups

K-12 Blueprint: Parent's Guide to Remote Learning

[www.k12blueprint.com/content/parents-guide-remote-learning](http://www.k12blueprint.com/content/parents-guide-remote-learning)

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# NAVIGATION RESOURCES

## Navigating Back-to-School Challenges

Given the worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, you can be assured that you and your family are not alone in dealing with the challenges. Turning to others for ideas and support can make navigating them a little easier.

### Learning in the classroom

#### Healthy Children.org

#### American Academy of Pediatrics

Return to School During COVID-19

[www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Return-to-School-During-COVID-19.aspx](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Return-to-School-During-COVID-19.aspx)

#### UNICEF

What Parents Need to Know About School

Reopening In the Age of Coronavirus

[www.unicef.org/coronavirus/what-will-return-school-during-covid-19-pandemic-look](http://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/what-will-return-school-during-covid-19-pandemic-look)

#### CDC: Coronavirus Disease 2019

Schools and Childcare Programs: Decision-making Tool and Checklists for Families

[www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html)

### Learning from home

#### Healthy Children.org

#### American Academy of Pediatrics

Working and Learning from Home During COVID-19

[www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Working-and-Learning-from-Home-COVID-19.aspx](http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Working-and-Learning-from-Home-COVID-19.aspx)

#### Clarity Innovations: K-12 Blueprint

Remote Learning Resources for Parents

[www.k12blueprint.com/content/remote-learning-resources-parents](http://www.k12blueprint.com/content/remote-learning-resources-parents)

#### Supporting Instruction at Home

Tips for Success (*local source/universal resources*)

[www.hcps.org/2020-2021/supporting-instruction/](http://www.hcps.org/2020-2021/supporting-instruction/)

#### Education Reimagined

Distance Learning Resource Center

<https://education-reimagined.org/distance-learning-resource-center/>

#### TeachThought

22 Remote Learning Tips for Parents

[www.teachthought.com/technology/remote-learning-tips-for-parents/](http://www.teachthought.com/technology/remote-learning-tips-for-parents/)

#### Internet Special Education Resources (ISER)

Distance Learning and Online Classes for

Children and Teens with Special Needs

[www.iser.com/distance-learning.html](http://www.iser.com/distance-learning.html)

### Universal resources

#### Learning Policy Institute

Learning in the Time of COVID-19

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/issue/covid-19-resources#special>

#### Autism Resource Central

Social Stories for Young and Old on Covid 19

[www.autismresourcecentral.org/social-stories-for-young-and-old-on-covid-19/](http://www.autismresourcecentral.org/social-stories-for-young-and-old-on-covid-19/)

#### NYU Langone Health

Mental Health Resources for Families

<https://nyulangone.org/news/covid-19-mental-health-resources-families>

#### Access Health International

A Family Guide to Covid

<http://accessh.org/covidfamilyguide/>

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