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2021

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Resuming School During the COVID-19 Pandemic

For the 2021-2022 school year, schools are working to improve the learning experience for children while continuing to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19. Different schools are approaching this challenge in very different ways, depending on the incidence of disease in the community, the availability of well-ventilated space for in-person classes, and many other factors. In their planning, most schools are considering the different needs of older and younger children and children with special learning needs. They are considering, too, the health risks to teachers and staff and to children with underlying medical conditions. Most schools understand that children are members of households, some of which include older adults who are at heightened risk of serious illness from COVID-19, should a child bring the virus home from school.

In general, schools are considering a combination of:

- a return to in-person schooling
- a continuation of remote learning
- a hybrid of the two

As you prepare for the new school year, find out what options your child's school will be offering and what steps are being taken to make the experience as safe and conducive to learning as possible.

Steps schools are taking to make in-person classes safer

- **Monitoring the incidence of COVID-19 in the community.** The more active cases of COVID-19 there are in the community, the greater the risk that a child or adult will bring the virus into the classroom. One metric for monitoring this is the number of new cases detected daily per 100,000 population (3 to 5 is considered borderline for the safety of group gatherings—lower is safer and higher is less safe).
- **Ventilation.** When classes are held outdoors, the natural flow of air disperses aerosols and reduces the risk of virus spread. When classes are held indoors, virus spread can be reduced by opening windows and using fans or by increasing the flow of fresh air into the room with mechanical ventilation. Filters can be used with mechanical ventilation systems to trap virus particles.
- **Physical distancing.** Desks should be spaced at least 6 feet apart and the flow of foot traffic at entrances and in hallways should be controlled to ensure 6-foot spacing. Some schools are exploring the use of alternative spaces to allow for adequate physical distancing.
- **Face coverings.** Adults and all but the youngest students should be required to wear face masks during the school day to reduce the exhalation of aerosols. Appropriately sized masks should be provided to anyone who arrives at school without one. Schools can implement “mask breaks” when children are outdoors or in a well-ventilated space and sufficiently distanced from each other. Parents should help students get used to the feel of wearing masks for extended periods of time prior to going to school.
- **Cleaning and disinfecting.** Surfaces touched by multiple people should be cleaned frequently. These include bathrooms, door handles, drinking fountains, playground equipment, and bus seats.
- **Handwashing.** Students and adults should wash hands frequently or apply hand sanitizer. Schools should consider installing handwashing and sanitizer stations. Foot-operated sinks are being installed by some schools.
- **Ensuring the availability of a school nurse.** Not all schools had a school nurse before the pandemic. In this environment, it's even more important that your child's school have a nurse on-site when children are present.

- **Limiting student interactions.** Some schools are grouping students into small “pods” or “bubbles.” Students in a pod learn, eat, and have recess together, and have no interactions with students outside of their groups. Instead of having students move between classes for different subjects, the teachers should move to the students. These measures can greatly limit the opportunities for spread of the virus.
- **Transportation and staggered schedules.** Physical distancing, ventilation, and surface disinfection on school buses are as important as they are in school buildings. Some schools are adopting staggered schedules to allow for physical distancing on buses, at school entrances, and in classrooms. Students should be required to wear face coverings on buses. Schools are also looking at alternative transportation options.
- **Physical barriers and traffic guides.** Shields and barriers, such as sneeze guards and clear partitions, can help prevent the spread of viral aerosols when six-foot spacing is not possible. Other tools like vinyl cling arrows on floors and signs on walls can help ensure that staff and children remain appropriately distanced.
- **Health screening.** Daily symptom or temperature checks may be required for all staff and students. Some schools plan to take temperatures at school entrances. Testing for COVID-19 is part of some schools’ plans.
- **Plans for when a student or staff member is diagnosed with COVID-19.** Schools should have clear protocols in the event that a student, teacher, or other staff member is diagnosed with COVID-19. Will the school close temporarily? Will only the affected classroom group be quarantined? Parents should know what to do when their own child has symptoms of or tests positive for COVID-19, and what to expect if someone else in the school is found to have the virus.

If your child is participating in in-school learning, you need to be aware of what steps your child’s school is taking to keep students and teachers safe. Attend parent meetings offered by the school or participate in parent advisory groups to gain insight into how well the school is following those steps.

Behavioral health and emotional support

Children and adults have experienced unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety, and social isolation during the pandemic. Whether operating with in-person classes or remote learning, schools should provide mental health support to any student who needs it and should train teachers to watch for signs of emotional distress. EAS may also offer resources to help you address your child’s emotional health needs as well as your own.

Nutrition

Schools are an important source of reliable nutrition for children with food insecurity at home, and the number of children facing food insecurity has grown with the economic effects of the pandemic. If your child’s school does not provide in-person learning every weekday, it may offer alternative meal programs for children who do not come in to school.

Living with your decisions

The decisions you make around the coming school year may be difficult. For many families, there is no clear right or wrong decision about their child’s schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. It can feel as though the choices are between bad and worse.

Given that reality, your next challenge may be to deal with feelings of worry, guilt, and fear as you move forward with the plan. Those emotions can get in your way. You’ll need the emotional strength to support your child in whatever path you’ve chosen, and the presence of mind to continue to act and prioritize based on your values. Some lessons from a form of behavior therapy called “acceptance therapy” can be helpful.

- **Accept uncertainty.** Recognize that you are making choices based on the information you have and that there are no guarantees. We're all living in a world with shades of risk and no absolute protection. Pushing for certainty will only wear you down.
- **Focus on what you can control.** It's productive to think hard about the logistics of what you can do to support your child's learning and safety. It's unproductive and draining to spend energy worrying about what other people will do. Focus on what you can control and accept what you can't.
- **Learn to live with your emotions.** Don't worry about worrying. That just makes things worse. Recognize that you will have strong emotions during this difficult time. Pay attention to them and note them, but don't fight them. If your worries start to overwhelm you, defuse them by exercising, going for a walk, or changing your media habits. You may want to speak with a mental health professional, by phone or online. EAS can be an important resource during this season of uncertainty.
- **Have compassion for yourself.** Try not to be self-critical or blame yourself when things don't go as planned. Don't hold yourself to impossible standards. Just as you make an effort to be kind to others, be kind to yourself. Think about what's going well and congratulate yourself on navigating your family through a difficult time.

Source: Morgan, H. (2020, August 18). Resuming school during COVID-19—A resource guide for parents (Carol Nunez-Hoglen, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options

Boost Your Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

Do you want to feel better about yourself? You can learn how to build self-esteem and raise your self-confidence. Try these tips:

- **Check out new activities.** You'll feel proud for stretching your wings. Does trying something new on your own seem too intimidating? Maybe see if a friend will go along.
- **Be your own BFF.** Make a list of things you love about you. Are you friendly, funny, creative or hard-working, for example?
- **Celebrate your successes.** Try to really enjoy your achievements. Record them in a journal, tell your friends, or hang up pictures or other reminders.
- **Tell your inner critic to be quiet.** If you have a mean thought about yourself, see if you can change it to something positive instead.
- **Don't compare yourself to others.** Someone else may have tons of online friends or a "great" body, but everyone has strengths and weaknesses.
- **Practice being assertive.** Try to express your thoughts, opinions and needs. It feels great to know you can speak up for yourself! (Of course, you want to do this without stomping on other people's feelings.)
- **Find ways to feel like you're contributing.** It feels great to help. You might do chores at home or volunteer in your community.
- **Set realistic goals.** Aim for a goal that you think you can reach. Then make a plan for how to get there. If you pick something very hard, you may get frustrated and quit.

- **Forgive yourself when you fail.** Nobody is perfect. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes. It's good to know you can pick yourself up and keep going!
- **Find true friends.** Hang out with people who make you feel good about yourself. Real friends like you for you.
- **Honor your background.** It can be great to feel proud of who you are and where you come from. Celebrate your heritage and culture.

If you try working on your self-esteem for a while and still don't feel good about yourself, reach out for help. Talk to a trusted friend or family member, doctor or counselor, or another person in whom you can confide. Your confidant may be able to suggest other things you can try, and it may help just to talk about how you're feeling. Also, sometimes low self-esteem can increase your risk for depression and other emotional problems. Speaking to someone you trust is the first step to getting support, and that person may be able to help you get treatment if you need it.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health (OWH), GirlsHealth. (Updated 2015, February 19). Boost your self-esteem and self-confidence. In Your feelings: Being happy. Retrieved October 17, 2017, from <https://www.girlshealth.gov/>

National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month September 2021

Five Action Steps for Helping Someone in Emotional Pain

In 2017, suicide claimed the lives of more than 47,000 people in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).¹ Suicide affects people of all ages, genders, races, and ethnicities.

Suicide is complicated and tragic, but it can be preventable. Knowing the warning signs for suicide and how to get help can help save lives.

Here are five steps you can take to **#BeThe1To** help someone in emotional pain:

- **Ask.** "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" It's not an easy question, but studies show that asking at-risk individuals if they are suicidal does not increase suicides or suicidal thoughts.
- **Keep them safe.** Reducing a suicidal person's access to highly lethal items or places is an important part of suicide prevention. While this is not always easy, asking if the at-risk person has a plan and removing or disabling the lethal means can make a difference.
- **Be there.** Listen carefully and learn what the individual is thinking and feeling. Research suggests acknowledging and talking about suicide may in fact reduce rather than increase suicidal thoughts.
- **Help them connect.** Save the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's number in your phone so it's there when you need it: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You can also help make a connection with a trusted individual like a family member, friend, spiritual adviser, or mental health professional.
- **Stay connected.** Staying in touch after a crisis or after being discharged from care can make a difference. Studies have shown the number of suicide deaths goes down when someone follows up with the at-risk person.

For more information on suicide prevention, visit <https://www.bethe1to.com>.

Reference

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS). (n.d.). Leading causes of death reports, 1981-2017. Retrieved September 17, 2019, from <https://www.cdc.gov>

Source: U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). (Revised 2019). 5 action steps for helping someone in emotional pain (NIMH Pub. No. OM 18-4315). Retrieved September 17, 2019, from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Disaster Financial Assistance

Find out how to get emergency financial help from the government if you've been affected by the coronavirus pandemic or a natural disaster. Get help with food, housing, bills, and more. Learn about stimulus checks, and read what's included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Disaster Financial Assistance for Workers and Small Business Owners

If you've been affected by the coronavirus, learn how to qualify for unemployment benefits and paid leave. Get financial help if you own a small business.

<https://www.usa.gov/disaster-help-workers-businesses>

Disaster Financial Assistance with Food, Housing, and Bills

During the coronavirus pandemic, you may qualify for additional help with food and bills. Get mortgage and rental relief. Learn how the CARES Act can help your family.

<https://www.usa.gov/disaster-help-food-housing-bills>

Financial Assistance Within Designated Natural Disaster Areas

The president can declare an area a natural disaster and allow financial individual assistance. Get disaster help with food, bills, unemployment, tax relief, and more.

<https://www.usa.gov/disaster-area-help>

Source: USA.gov. (Revised 2020). Disaster financial assistance. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <https://www.usa.gov>