In-Person, Virtual and Everything In Between – Supporting Families and Children Returning to School

Meghan Walls, PsyD
Pediatric Psychologist, Nemours/AI duPont Hospital for Children
Clinical Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Thomas Jefferson University
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What Will We Cover?

- Brief review of how COVID-19 has affected mental health
- How caregivers can deal with the plan for school
- Modeling appropriate coping skills
- Talking to children about return to school plan
- Teaching kids and teens resiliency
- Routines and schedules
- Preparing kids for in-person learning changes
- Preparing kids for virtual learning
- Stress and mental health and how to access resources
- Q&A
COVID-19 and Family Mental Health

• Now seeing higher rates of stressors and mental health issues.
• COVID-19 impact on women who are caregivers (healthcare and mothers) has been significant.
• Our division is currently seeing 120% of compared to last year.
• Increased suicidality
• Increased family stress: lost jobs, lost wages, childcare.

Why might this be?
The Perfect Storm

Lack of sense of purpose

Social isolation

The great “Unknown”

Negative/irrational thoughts are coming true

Inability to engage in usually pleasant activities

Lack of sense of time
How Caregivers Can Deal With a Plan for School

- Digest your district/school’s plan first – before you speak to your child.
- Be accepting of and sit with your own feelings.
- Make a list of questions you have.
- Reach out to your school/child’s teacher.
- If your child has an IEP – ask how those will be met.
- Gather your support system.
- Have a conversation with your employer.
- FMLA for caring for children during pandemic.
Model Appropriate Coping Skills

• Feel your feelings! It’s okay to be frustrated or upset.
• Take time to cope with this.
• Engage in techniques that have been helpful before.
• Exercise, regular sleep schedule, daily schedule.
• Reach out to your own mental health provider.
Why is Modeling Good Coping Important?
What To Say: Talking about Return to School

• For younger kids – review of COVID.
• Ask First, Then Listen
• Give small pieces of honest information.
• Stop for kids/teens to ask more questions.
• Be honest if you don’t know the answer.
• Talk about what you are excited about this year.
• Ask if they’d like to talk about what they feel about the upcoming year.
• Not every kid will be negatively impacted.
• Work on having some tangible details to discuss.
• Use empathetic and validating words.
• Let them be sad/scared/upset.
• Offer to keep the conversation going.
• Teens/older kids – offer to have those conversations via text or through a note if easier than face to face.
• Pick something your child/teen can be positive about during this conversation and make a plan!
Teaching Kids and Teens Resilience
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• One consistent, caring, adult = strongest variable for resilience.
• Be that caregiver.
• Allow emotional responses; label and validate them.
• Teach positive coping skills:
  • Diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery
• Instill confidence during change/hard times.
• Encouragement to “avoid avoidance.”
• Keep socially connected – be creative.
• Encourage a “try again” attitude.
• Help reframe thoughts.
Reframing Thoughts

• Negative thoughts are common – but can lead to anxiety and depression.

• Helping kids “reframe” thoughts can help improve mood.

  **Negative Thought:** School is going to be terrible online.

  **Reframed Thought:** School might be tough online, but I am so glad I get to sleep in later and learn to code this year.

• Flexibility, not perfection.
• Start getting back into normal routines, whether your kids will be virtual or in person.

• Routines help our brains understand how the world functions around us.

• Set alarms in the morning, have a set bedtime at night.

• Consistent mealtimes.

• For younger kids – make it visual!

• For older kids – give them their own planner, calendar, etc.
Preparing for In-Person Learning

• Address your child’s feelings about school.
• If they are fearful, address those worries.
• Talk about the changes your school is implementing.
• Prepare for the changes:
  • Practice mask wearing
  • Talk about social distancing
  • Talk about hand washing/sanitizing
• Frame these practices as “helping keep people safe” or for older kids, helping to mitigate the virus.
• Reach out to your school to answer any questions you have.
Preparing for In-Person Learning

• Address any IEP/504 needs.
• Prepare your kids for the schedule – Will there be specials? Recess?
• Ask about how kids are doing.
• Are there things that are difficult? Does it feel different wearing a mask or not being able to hug your teacher?
• Don’t plant the negativity.
• Keep the conversation going.
Preparing for Virtual Learning

• Address your child’s feelings about school.
• If they are fearful, address those worries.
• Set up learning space your child will use for their schoolwork.
• Lay out schedules for younger kids.
• Have older kids work on their own schedule.
• Set expectations!
• If your child will be home, work in breaks. If in childcare, ask how they are managing breaks from screen time.
• Work with other families/parents for some “together” virtual learning.
Preparing for Virtual Learning

• Address any IEP/504 needs.
• Prepare your kids for the schedule – Will there be specials? Recess?
• Start thinking now about ways to keep connections with peers.
• Work on small social gatherings that keep families safe.
• Focus on the positive – help reframe.
• Keep the conversation going.
Addressing Mental Health Concerns

• This is an adjustment and, for some kids, traumatic.
• Of kids who experience traumatic events, 10% – symptoms 1 year later.
• We don’t know the outcomes yet; it’s too soon.
• Mental health matters – keep checking in.
• If you or your child are having a change in sleeping, eating, irritability/mood, or desire to be engaged with others, it may be time to reach out for help!
• Almost all providers can use telehealth now.
• Ask your pediatrician for referrals.
“There are no easy answers, there’s only living through the questions.”

-Elizabeth George
Meghan Walls, PsyD

Ken Duckworth, MD

Q&A

Meghan Walls, PsyD

Ask the Expert

National Alliance on Mental Illness
FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION


- Back to School Resources for Families and Educators from the Child Mind Institute: [https://childmind.org/backtoschool/](https://childmind.org/backtoschool/)

- Each Mind Matters Resource Center – School Mental Health Activities: [https://emmresourcecenter.org/resources/school-mental-health-activities](https://emmresourcecenter.org/resources/school-mental-health-activities)


- NFFCMH COVID-19 Resources for Parents, Families and Youth: [https://www.ffcmh.org/covid-19-resources-for-parents](https://www.ffcmh.org/covid-19-resources-for-parents)
Remember – you are not alone!

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