

Preparing Your Child to Go Back to School In-Person

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For many families, two important events will be happening at about the same time this fall: Kids will be going back to in-person school full-time, and parents will be expected to return, at least part-time, to their offices.

From one perspective, it's just a return to what was normal before the pandemic. But from the point of view of families that have adjusted to remote work and remote or hybrid school, it will be a major break from what's become normal. It will mean new routines, new expectations, new activities and new stresses.

Anxiety about balancing

After more than a year of multi-tasking from home, for better or worse, the prospect of getting everyone out the door in the morning and managing a full range of activities is daunting.

“When we went into lockdown mode, there was a lot of anxiety and worry around how to manage working from home and school at home,” recalls Janine Domingues, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. “And now it’s kind of like the opposite: How are we

going to manage commuting and drop off and everyone's schedule outside home? Now there's anxiety around that."

Parents are out of practice when it comes to commuting and kids are out of practice dealing with full days and a full week of in-person school. The beginning of the school year is always a time of adjustment, with some anxiety, Dr. Domingues adds, but now she thinks that's going to be amplified for a lot of kids, because it'll be a long day for many who have been used to shorter days, intermittent study times, and lighter demands.

One thing Dr. Domingues recommends is not making all the changes at once. If parents have flexibility, she suggests that they start returning to their offices occasionally before school resumes, so kids who are nervous about separating will get used to mom and dad coming and going again.

Social anxiety

One of the sources of anxiety about the fall is that there will be increased social demands on kids who aren't used to being in a full classroom with their peers.

For those who had social anxiety prior to the pandemic, the last year was in some ways a vacation from stress. "Now I foresee a huge adjustment for these kids going back to school, potentially an increase in school refusal in the beginning," says Dr. Domingues. "And that might require caregivers and parents to plan ahead now, whether that means visiting the school now, visiting with teachers and school staff now, or just to put a plan in place for the fall. "

Caroline Mendel, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends increasing kids' social exposure gradually over the summer. "You can start with a play date and then go to a playground and have them with a slightly bigger group of kids. It will eventually be like riding a bike, but you've got to get that practice in."

Behavior challenges

Teachers usually think of the first month of school as an adjustment period, where kids learn classroom routines and get acclimated to behavior expectations, observes Dr. Mendel. She expects that period to reestablish classroom norms will take longer than usual this year.

Some kids with behavior challenges actually did better when they were in a hybrid environment. It could be because of some of the social distancing measures, or just because they were in school less, and there were fewer demands on them. "When they were in school for just a half day, for part of the day, they could then excel in that shorter timeframe," notes Dr. Mendel. During social distancing, she adds, kids usually weren't changing classrooms to transition to different classes — a common trigger for behavior issues. And fewer kids meant less noise and distraction.

“When you cut all that noise out and they’re just in their classroom and they’re not within 6 feet of other kids, it was much more stable of an environment.”

One thing that will help kids readjust to classroom norms is parents and teachers being explicit about behavior expectations. That includes even routine things like kids keeping their hands to themselves or using their indoor voice. Kids will be out of practice, says Dr. Mendel, and “It will take time for that to become part of the repertoire.”

Kids who are demoralized

One of the challenges this fall will be to engage children who have had a negative experience with distance learning and have become demoralized about school. Dr. Mendel says she hears from parents who are worried about the level of engagement they are going to see in the fall, and if their kids are going to be resistant about school.

“It’s not fun to learn the way that they’ve been learning,” she notes. “So, I think there’s a need to focus on rebuilding relationships and community and getting kids to really feel good about being a part of their school again. Helping them build that one-on-one relationship with their teacher. Helping them to feel like a part of the classroom community. And then, the academics will follow.”

Dr. Domingues adds that the interaction with teachers and peers is what keeps many kids engaged in school. “When that’s taken away, it feels like a chore. And we saw that, especially towards the end of the year, kids just being checked out and being burned out. And while they hoped that it would feel different next year, there was some worry, ‘Will I ever like school again?’ ”

It can help to get kids involved in camp and other activities over the summer, she adds, even if it’s not school related. “I think it’s valuable for kids to get the sense of just being a part of a group again or doing something in an organized fashion where you’re following a teacher or a leader. I think it gets you hopeful for what maybe a classroom or a school can be, too.”

Set realistic academic goals

Our experts stressed that academic expectations will have to be adjusted to reflect the reality of where kids are, and to motivate and encourage them, rather than focusing on being behind where they would have been without the pandemic.

“It’s okay to set fourth grade standards for your fifth grader if that’s what they can achieve right now. And then, you can build from there, says Dr. Mendel. “We don’t want to set the bar too high when they’ve had this gap and have them feel badly about themselves and then dislike school even more and really become de-motivated. So, setting those smart goals and then working your way up, I think, is really important.”

Rebuilding social and emotional foundations need to be the initial focus, she adds. “Having that solid foundation of really loving where you’re learning and feeling like you’re a welcome and respected member and having relationships that you can rely on. No learning is going to happen if we’re not starting from that place.”

Dr. Domingues notes that falling behind academically is a big concern among parents. But she reminds them that their child isn’t the only one who’s behind. “We’re all in this together. Everybody had to do this,” she tells parents. “I think the first two or three months of school should be focused on social-emotional wellbeing.

Communicate with teachers

Setting up the lines of communication with the teacher is always important for the start of the year, but this year it’s even more crucial. You want to make sure that you’re letting them know how your child is doing, and they’re letting you know if they have any concerns.

Since there will be so many changes to how classes operate now that students are returning to the classroom full-time, you’ll also want to know the teacher’s expectations and how you can get information to backstop your child. For instance, says Dr. Mendel, “Are they going to be posting their assignments on Google Classroom still? Or is your child going to be writing it down from the board? What are going to be some of the differences from what their life was prior? The more information that you have as a parent, the more that you can set your kid up for success.”

Don’t ignore problems

One reason it’s especially important to have good communication with the teacher is to keep an eye out for problems.

“We want to let kids feel good about school without getting overly anxious about the academics,” notes Dr. Mendel. But you do want to monitor problems and get kids support if they need it.

“Teachers are going to be faced with whole swaths of kids who are behind. They’re going to shift the bell curve,” she adds. “But I also don’t want to see kids who might have a learning disability or who might need more individualized attention get lost in the shuffle. So, parents should still be advocating in the ways that they need to.”

If your child is struggling with behavior or anxiety, Dr. Domingues recommends getting them support as soon as possible, even if you’re thinking it’s understandable, given all the change. “The number one thing with anxiety or problem behavior is the longer it goes, the harder it is to reverse. So, catch it early and reach out for help.”

Parental stress

Finally, our experts note that parents will have their share of anxiety in the fall, too, especially given that children aren't vaccinated. "In addition to the adjustment of going back to school and the job, I think there's still anxiety around the virus, too, and kids getting sick," she notes. "Even normal colds, normal sickness, will be stressful."

The best thing that a parent can do, she adds, is "just checking in with yourself, recognizing your own stress and anxiety, modeling handling that for your child, naming it and taking a step back and trying to use some skills."

She reminds parents who are worried that they've done "back to school" before. "It's a bit amplified, but you've done this before. We all take a break over the summer and then you go back in the fall. We've done many versions of this before."



Caroline Miller is the editorial director of the Child Mind Institute.