

# UPDATE

August 2021

## Preparing for “Back-To-School”...Like Never Before!

In the past, the phrase “back to school” would conjure up a variety of thoughts and feelings for kids and parents alike. For some, it was a happy time as a student might say, “I get to see all my friends,” and relieved parents might remark, “These guys need to get back to a routine and a schedule.” For others, it may have been “I am nervous about my new teacher and classmates” or “I am worried about my child going into middle school.”

The typical anxiety of returning to school with changes in teachers, more difficult classes, changing classrooms, starting at a new building and obtaining school supplies, will almost certainly be exacerbated by our COVID experience. “Back to School - Version 2021” will provoke those same concerns and fears as well as raise a host of new and unique questions thanks to our pandemic experience. Some students will be thrilled to return to their friends and the richness of the classroom experience after the lengthy absence, some will be very anxious about leaving their family and their home after 15 months of remote learning, and some may struggle with the fear of a rise in COVID cases or more potential school closures, getting physically close to classmates and teachers, or touching surfaces. Many will likely experience a sampling of all of the above. There may be questions from children (parents, teachers, and administrators as well) about the possibility of switching back to remote learning or a hybrid model, masking, social distancing, sports, theater, clubs, and other extracurricular activities. All of these questions and concerns are valid, which leads to some suggestions about how parents should handle and prepare for the upcoming academic year. We need to attend to our children’s emotional well-being as well as helping them prepare for the practical demands that come with this new school year.

**Strike a Balance** - It is critical that we validate our children’s concerns and fears. After all, we may experience similar anxiety and we do not have all the answers about COVID, the science behind it, what the school will do if..., etc. Remain calm, consistent, and positive. Validate their concerns, while simultaneously remaining positive about their ability to handle the challenges of returning to school. You can model confidence and flexibility by managing your own anxiety, which will be evident in your ability to meet the demands of being a parent, a member of the workforce, and/or a remote learning instructor to your child over the course of the last school year.

**Prepare and Practice** - Do the usual - Shop for clothes and new supplies as you normally would. Then maybe try the “not so usual” or the “new normal.” This might include preparing a home space that could be used as a remote

learning site/homework workspace (the “just in case” scenario); taking some drives past the school and talking about the building, the playground, the athletic fields/courts; do some reading together and maybe a couple of math worksheets over the summer; check out your home Wi-Fi together (and troubleshoot with the older children in case you get disconnected while working remotely); practice separation time – allow your child to be away from you for a while if you think this may be an issue (especially if you have been hunkered down together for last 15 months); and talk to them about COVID guidelines. Enjoy an unmasked summer if you can and have fun with friends and family, but as the parent, be prepared for a change if necessary – a change to something that is already familiar to all of us – remote learning/ hybrid model, masks, distancing, and sanitizing.

**Ask For Help** - As parents, it is important that we remain grounded and seek support from a trusted partner, friend, group, counselor, or anyone who meets that need for us. Parenting is difficult enough, but COVID has brought the stress of trying to “do what’s right” to a whole new level. There are students who loved the remote learning situation as they avoided peer drama and bullying, enjoyed the relaxation of working from the comforts of home, felt less pressure as expectations may not have been as high, and taking exams at home minimized the test anxiety inherent in classroom environment. There are students who enjoyed being at home with their parents or guardians (or older siblings) as they felt secure being in the constant presence of family and safe as they were protected from COVID in their own little “pod.” These students will likely struggle in their transition back to school. Preparation, open conversations, early intervention, and encouragement are important – but don’t let the anxiety and the “what if” dominate your discussions or your preparation for the upcoming school year. Model positivity and resilience. You know your child best; listen closely, observe, and recognize any changes in his behavior or her functioning. Stay connected to them as much as you can. Ask questions. Advocate for your child or if they are old enough encourage them to advocate for themselves in school. But, there may be situations or times that we are not able to handle the situation on our own. Don’t hesitate to ask a teacher, a guidance counselor, school administrator, pediatrician, or therapist for assistance. While COVID has led to many new and novel situations for us and our children, separation anxiety, school phobia, learning challenges, stress created by school work and classroom demands, problems with transitions, and social difficulties are not new. There is help out there for all of us.