

SCHOOL'S BACK, NOW WHAT?

HOW TO NAVIGATE EDUCATION ON AND OFFLINE DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC



This year's "back-to-school" looks very different for families grappling with the pandemic. While some students will return to in-person learning, many will take their classes online or participate in a hybrid model that mixes virtual education with in-person attendance. Each scenario comes with its own set of challenges, opportunities, and anxieties. With that in mind, **Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development** has brought together an interdisciplinary group of leading educators, researchers, and experts to provide these useful tips for making the most of the 2020-21 school year, however it may unfold.

For a more in-depth exploration of the challenges and possibilities of heading back to school this year, be sure to turn in to the next installment of our weekly **"Ask The Experts"** series on **Wednesday, August 26, at 12pm ET via Zoom**. The seminar will feature an interdisciplinary panel of experts answering your questions and sharing guidance for families working to adjust to the new

normal, engage with their kids, and bridge the distance between students and teachers. **RSVP** [here](#). More tips about at-home learning are available at childrenandscreens.com.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

As schools and districts present their plans for the year, parents are faced with a Sophie's Choice scenario: protect your children's and family's health by continuing with social isolation, or prioritize your children's mental health and in-person learning by returning them to school. In making the decision that is right for your family, psychologist and [InnoPsych, Inc.](#) founder Charmain F. Jackman, PhD, suggests a host of considerations: ask what your child wants; review the COVID-19 data for your state; attend school meetings and ask questions (take good notes); talk to your pediatrician and to other parents. "At the end of the day, it's your choice," she explains. "Trust your gut and give yourself permission to change your decision as new information unfolds."

Parents may feel tempted to exclude their children from conversations about these decisions, says Jackman, but it's important to communicate with them. "Regardless of your child's age, having developmentally appropriate conversations about school options will give you insights into what your kids already know and want," she explains. Jackman recommends starting the talk with broad, open-ended questions (e.g., What have you heard about school?), and asking their opinion as the conversation progresses (e.g. What is your preference for back-to-school?). "Let your kids know that you value their opinion and that you'll keep the conversation going," she adds. "Remember, this will take more than one conversation...so, keep talking."

DON'T WAIT, MEDIATE

"Trapped, sometimes disoriented, and anxious about an unclear future, children now need communication, support, and guidance from educators," says Paul Reville, Founding Director of the [Education Redesign Lab](#). "They need help navigating the turbulent waters in these confusing times. To address the widespread diversity in our student population, we must give each child a navigator, someone to hold her hand and guide her out of the turbulence and into a place where she is seen, known, understood, supported, and provided customized opportunities to learn."

Limiting uncertainty is a great way to reduce anxiety for children. "As your child

returns to school, work with them to create a schedule,” says Lisa Nielsen, Senior Director at the NYC Department of Education’s Office of Digital Inclusion. “Discuss how their day might look, talk about the flexibility of it, and communicate how you’ll revisit your schedule together in the future to see if it’s working or needs to change.” Nielsen also recommends having a backup schedule ready to go in case in-person students have to return to learning remotely.

“Remind your children that it’s safe for them to vent to you,” adds psychologist, author, and teacher Collett Smart. “Limit worry time to a specific part of the day, and gently challenge unhelpful thinking, like the ‘what ifs.’” Smart reminds parents that it’s important not to minimize what their children are feeling, and suggests avoiding excessive reassurance. “Instead,” she says, “focus on highlighting times that they’ve shown courage.”

Back-to-school 2020 is likely to bring unprecedented levels of anxiety for some children (and many parents). Dr. Charmain Jackman suggests giving children the tools and vocabulary to manage their anxiety through mindfulness strategies. “Apps such as *My Life* (all ages), *Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame Street* (younger children), and *Mindful Powers* (tweens) make mindfulness fun and engaging,” she explains. “Practice along with your children, and you’ll learn some skills, too.” In addition to apps, Jackman recommends reading books that help children name and express their emotions. “These tools will last your child a lifetime,” she says, “and will prepare them for the uncertainty of the new school year.”

BRING THE CLASSROOM HOME

According to David McKinnon, PhD, Professor of Neurobiology and Behavior at Stony Brook University, parents should anticipate having to invest more time in their child’s education than they have in the past. “During the shutdown the conversion to remote learning was done in a rushed fashion by people with no or limited experience with remote instruction, he explains. “Things will be better this Fall, but probably not as much better as everyone is hoping. If you have any options, try to find the option with the most live instruction from the teacher and most interaction between students. Whatever happens, anticipate having to invest more time in your child’s education than you have in the past.”

In the classroom, teachers set up norms and expectations at the beginning of the year. Lisa Nielsen recommends parents do the same for the digital realm at

home. "Discuss the norms for your child's classes to gain insights into their learning," she suggests. "This will also help the teacher by reinforcing the expectations of your child."

With the increased reliance on digitally infused education this year, Nielsen adds that maintaining good posture is essential for the physical wellbeing of both parents and students. "Look up, stand up, stretch, and walk around several times a day," she says. "Position the top of your monitor just below eye level and sit up straight, keeping your head level without bending it forward."



GET REAL OFFLINE

Applying what we've learned from one context to another is a key component of learning, but it isn't always easy and it takes a lot of practice. Virginia Tech

Human Development and Family Science Assistant Professor Koeun Choi recommends turning the challenges of online education into an opportunity to practice transfer of learning with your child. “Work with your child to select and apply what they’ve learned from online lessons to different real-life situations,” she suggests. “Use online resources to provide various examples, such as text, pictures, video, and audio. Helping your child make connections to what they learn online, at home, and in school will help them develop important skills to continue learning in the future.”

“Given that so much instruction will be online this year, parents should do everything they can to ensure their kids are active in the real world,” says UCLA Distinguished Professor of Education Pedro Noguera. “Get them outside by promoting physical activity or taking them on field trips to parks or interesting historical sites. Encourage them to develop hobbies, write in journals, and read books (The American Reading Company has an excellent leveled selection, and a particularly good one for Black boys). Talk to your kids about their experiences with online learning and listen closely to what they have to say.”

Structured screen breaks are a crucial part of ensuring wellbeing for both kids *and* adults, adds Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood Executive Director Josh Golin. Golin suggests celebrating [Screen-Free Saturdays](#) as a family. “Kids will complain a lot less about screens going off when they see their caregivers leading by example and available for offline fun,” says Golin. “And a break from the constant noise of the news and social media will help parents recharge for the many challenges of the week ahead.”

GO FOR THE GOALS

A fundamental assumption behind online learning is that students have the skills to set their own goals, develop their own learning strategies, and objectively monitor their performance. “This is not the case,” says Open University UK Associate Professor Dr. Christothea Herodotou, “especially for students that are new to online learning.” Herodotou recommends that teachers and parents make the learning process visible by stating goals, showcasing strategies on how tasks can be solved, encouraging students to reflect on what they don’t understand, and dedicating time to resolving their questions.

According to Sonia Livingstone, PhD, author of *Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears About Technology Shape Children’s Lives*, it’s not the amount of time children engage with screens that matters so much as the

quality of that engagement. "First, consider the context," she explains, "are your kids engaging with a screen to avoid their schoolwork, or to relax because they've completed it? What are your children watching? Do you think it has value? Lastly, consider the social connections: are your children using technology to sustain valued relationships, or not?"

LEND A HAND

It's important to remember that not everyone has access to the same resources. "If you're a parent with the means to provide a safe and high-quality learning environment for your child this fall, please also work to help provide for the many families struggling with housing, illness, and food insecurity on top of their already constrained educational opportunities," says University of Colorado Boulder Professor Kevin Welner. "This crisis is exacerbating inequalities linked to race and class, and our lawmakers need to step up – but so do individuals."

TAKE THE BEST FROM BOTH WORLDS

Parents and children have been through a lot these last six months, and it's important to reflect on everything you've learned. "Take the best from both worlds and live a more caring, sensitive life, where the physical world and technological world complement each other instead of competing for our time," says University of Melbourne Professor of Early Childhood Studies Nicola Yelland. "Look for synergies and be in control." Yelland suggests frequent communication with your children about how they're feeling in both the physical and digital realms, and offering plenty of help to those in need of extra support.

It's safe to say that this school year will be unlike any other, which means it's important for families to be patient, adaptable, and empathetic. Whether your school has returned to in-person education, is shifting fully online, or is somewhere in-between, parents need to make time to communicate honestly and openly with their kids to help ensure that they're getting the most out of their education. While it won't always be easy, it will *always* be worth it.

About Children and Screens

Since its inception in 2013, Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development, has become one of the nation's leading non-profit organizations dedicated to advancing and supporting interdisciplinary scientific research, enhancing human capital in the field, informing and educating the

public, and advocating for sound public policy for child health and wellness.
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