Virtual Learning & Your Child's Mental Health
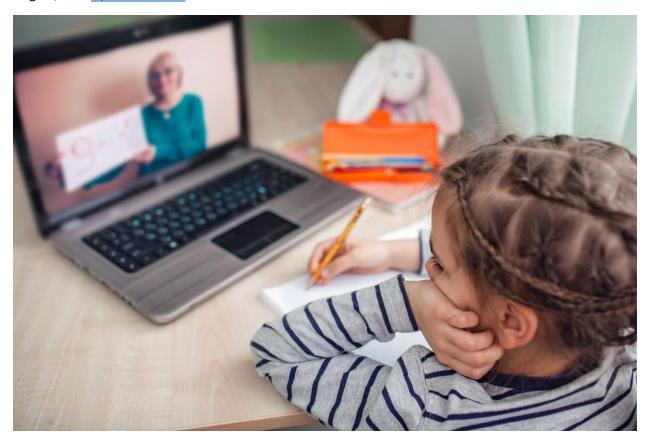
Aug 12, 2020By Devin Collins

A new school year is just around the corner. But this year, not all students will be returning to the classroom. Since spring, kids and teens across the U.S. have been staying home to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many of them finished out the 2019-2020 school year with distanced and virtual learning with the hope that they would see their peers once again in the fall. As local governments and public health authorities continue to debate the reopening of schools, however, many are learning this will not be the case.

The thought of not returning to school may be one met with mixed emotions for many kids. Some may be relieved to be staying safe at home, while others may be dreading the thought of continuing classes online. For many though, the change of plans may be disappointing, stressful, or even anxiety provoking.

"Transitions are typically challenge points, and the return to school in typical times may be difficult for kids," says One Medical's Pediatric Program Medical Director Sara Huberman Carbone, MD. "Adding in the element of a new style of learning plus the unknown of how COVID-19 may further impact education throughout the year may exacerbate the challenges of transitioning from summer back to school."

The impact on children's mental health

Beyond being a place of learning, school is the primary driver of kids' social lives and represents an opportunity for freedom of self-expression. Amid school closures, kids and teens may feel lonely without this regular social interaction. "Children and teens may feel social isolation without being able to see

their classmates and teachers in person," says Huberman Carbone. "Some children may feel down or depressed with the lack of social interaction and extracurricular activities. Older tweens and teens who are in the developmental phase of establishing independence from parents and relying more on peer support may struggle with balancing these relationships while at home." Middle schoolers and teenagers in particular may also be worried about changes in friendship.

Additionally, online classes may present their own unique challenges. Some children and young adults may have anxiety about keeping up with school work or have trouble concentrating with distance learning. Others may feel self-conscious or anxious being front and center on a Zoom or video conference screen. Children and teens who are not neurotypical may feel completely overwhelmed, says One Medical's Elenor MacGregor, DO. "For example, a child with ADHD may struggle with sitting at a computer for long periods of time," says MacGregor. "A child on the autism spectrum may be alarmed by routine changes. Anxious children may feel unable to cope and not know where to start with homework. Kids prone to depression may stop sleeping well, grooming well, or eating well."

How to help your child

Parents across the U.S. are already worried about the impact school closures have had on their children's mental health. In a nationwide Gallup poll in June, nearly 3 in 10 U.S. parents said their child is "already experiencing harm" to their emotional or mental health because of social distancing and closures.

While virtual and distanced learning options may be difficult, there are several ways you can help your child navigate the transition. Here's how you can protect your child's mental health and create a healthy classroom environment at home this school year:

Create a designated workspace

With toys, games, and electronic devices nearby, it can be difficult for children to focus on schoolwork at home. To minimize distractions, designate a quiet part of the house for classwork and homework only. "Creating a space for your child to complete their schoolwork, that has minimal distractions can help with boundaries," says Huberman Carbone. It may be helpful to keep the schoolwork zone physically separate from where your child plays, has down time, or sleeps." If you are in small living quarters, MacGregor suggests using a room divider or creating a space out on a patio. You may even consider allowing your child to move to new areas of the house for each new subject for a change of scenery. It may also help to limit the use of electronic devices until the end of the school day as a normal classroom would. While older kids may need to use a laptop for class, phones and gaming devices should be kept separate to reduce distractions.

Establish a routine

COVID-19 has drastically changed many kids' lives. Many are no longer going into a classroom, seeing their friends, or participating in regular extracurricular activities. With all the changes going on in the world, it's important to help your kids find some semblance of normalcy. Studies show that following a routine can help regulate mood and help ward off depression. "Creating a routine and structure for your child can help give them a sense of security," says Huberman Carbone. "Kids may respond well to mimicking the normal school routine, for example getting up at the same time daily, having a lunch and

snack packed, and time for physical activity and play." In addition to set wake up and shower times, this also means regular, scheduled breaks or recesses. You may consider setting timers or alarms like a school bell to guide your child's day. It's also important for your child to stop classwork at the same time everyday. "Just because your child is now working at home, does not mean it should suddenly become their entire life," says MacGregor. "It will be there tomorrow."

Keep them connected

Social interaction plays an important role in the development of your child's interpersonal skills, as well as his or her emotional well-being. With school closures and social distancing in place, many kids may be feeling lonely, anxious, or depressed without being able to see their friends. Thanks to technology, however, there are plenty of ways your child can stay connected to friends and family during this time. Schedule a virtual playdate, video chat, or phone call. "Make virtual playdates with family and friends meaningful," says MacGregor. "Try cooking together, playing instruments together, plant a garden together, or have grandparents read bedtime stories, all virtually!" It's important to note that younger children may feel awkward or shy on the phone or in front of a camera screen. "Young kids may have challenges with social interactions over screens, so setting up an activity such as a game or art project that friends can virtually work on together might help." If your child is older and able to adhere to safety protocols, you can also help them set a social distance gathering with friends.

Talk it out

One of the most important things you can do to help your child navigate this transition is just be available. Your willingness to talk and listen will help your child feel comfortable opening up to you with their questions and concerns. Huberman Carbone suggests asking open ended questions like "What are you feeling about going back to school?" or "Is there anything that you're concerned about with going back to school?" to get your child talking. When holding these conversations, it is important to set aside your own stress as kids often pick up on their parents' anxiety through both verbal and physical cues. Speaking calmly and maintaining a cool composure will help assuage their fears. It can also help to reassure your child of their strengths. "In a time of uncertainty, remind your child that they have been adaptable for months and highlight their successes," says Huberman Carbone. "It can also help to show solidarity and acknowledge that these are tough challenges."

Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness and meditation aren't just for adults. Research shows that practicing mindfulness can reduce anxiety and boost happiness for children at each developmental stage. If your child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed, there are a variety of ways you can help them feel more rooted in the present. For younger children, MacGregor recommends blowing bubbles in either milk or bubble mix or listening to a chime and seeing how long it takes to fade. You can help young children get in touch with their body and senses by telling them to pretend they are walking on thin ice. Apps like Sesame Street's [Breath, Think, Do](), [GoNoodle]() and [Cosmic Kids Yoga]() offer movement and breathing exercises for kids. Older kids can try a body scan like this [one](). You can also encourage them to start a gratitude journal and write out three things they are grateful for each day.

Play

While coronavirus is serious, your kids shouldn't spend all of their time worried and stressed about the pandemic. Make sure you leave time for your kids to play, have fun, and just enjoy being kids. For some, that means getting outdoors and going on a hike or swimming. For others, it's building a fort indoors and playing board games. Be sure to designate media-free time where electronics are put away. This is a great time to do things together as a family and reconnect as well.

Practice healthy habits

Sleep, nutrition, and exercise are more important than ever right now. While it's easy to let your typical healthy routines slide during this time, a good night's sleep, a nutritious diet, and regular physical activity can boost your child's mood, productivity, energy, and general outlook on life. Though it may be tempting to let your kids stay up later or sleep in since they don't have to leave the house for school, be sure they follow a regular sleep schedule and have set wake up times. As for exercise, there are plenty of both indoor and outdoor options to keep your kids active. Get your family moving inside with a family dance party, online yoga classes, or interactive video games. If you want to take your kids outdoors, going for a walk, bike ride, or scootering around your block are great ways to burn some energy. Just be sure to maintain social distancing and keep your child at least 6 feet away from others.

Everyone, including kids, is adapting to the pandemic in their own ways. If you're still concerned about your child's mental health, we recommend reaching out to your child's provider for support.