



How to help your child prepare for a socially-distanced return to school

When school doors re-open in your community, the experience will be a different one for students, teachers, and parents alike. Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, students will also need to learn and adapt to social distancing, mask-wearing, and handwashing guidelines. It's only natural for everyone involved to feel nervous and apprehensive about adjusting to the new normal.

You can help your children prepare for this new normal by talking about how things have changed and what to expect as they return to the classroom. Explain the new rules are in place to help keep them, their friends, teachers, and school staff safe and healthy until a vaccine is available. As you talk, encourage students of all ages to think about the types of different scenarios they can expect and provide guidance on how they can respond to them. Here are a few topics, tips, and conversation starters.

Practice wearing a mask.

Most schools will require students to wear a mask when it's not possible to maintain social distancing. No matter the child's age, wearing a mask for extended periods can be challenging. It's important to acknowledge that mask-wearing can be difficult while still emphasizing the importance.

- Remind children why they need to wear a mask when they're around groups of people. Connect it to times when you've worn a mask at the grocery store or stopped by grandma's house.
- To help young children understand, normalize masks by putting a mask or face covering on a favorite doll or stuffed animal.
- Practice wearing masks at home to help younger kids – and even teens – get used to how it feels.
- Have some fun by setting up a mask-decorating session to help kids create a special back-to-school mask.
- Teenagers may feel invincible and push back on mask-wearing. Listen, validate their feelings, and let them know you understand why they're annoyed. That makes it easier to talk through any misperceptions they may have and reinforce the responsibility of wearing a mask not just for themselves, but also to protect others.

Practice social distancing.

Along with wearing masks, social distancing will be part of the back-to-school experience. This will affect classroom activities, as well as socializing in the halls, in the lunchroom, and after school. Help your child anticipate the changes and talk through why maintaining distance is essential.

- Let your child know that his/her class may be smaller, and there may be smaller groups during recess, lunch, and other breaks.
- Help your child come up with new ways of saying hello to classmates, such as “air high fives” from a distance.
- Remind kids that they won't be able to sit close to their friends or share pencils and other belongings. Acknowledge it will be difficult for everyone, but the situation is temporary. You may also want to provide reassurance by saying something like, “During the time you have been out of school, doctors and researchers have been hard at work all over the world, studying and doing experiments to help us figure out how to stay safe and eventually develop a vaccine to prevent this virus.”
- Reinforce the need for regular handwashing throughout the school day and before and after putting on a mask. Practice, practice, practice at home to ensure kids are taking care and spending enough time on handwashing. Have fun by making up silly songs that equal two run-throughs of the happy birthday song.
- Make sure your kids have opportunities for safe social interactions outside of school. Set up video chats with friends via Zoom and FaceTime so they can talk – mask-free – about their school experiences and how they're feeling.

Along the way, let your children know they're doing a good job. Praise them for doing their part to keep families, classmates, and communities safe.