In-person or remote learning: How to make the choice for your child

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents may have a choice between in-person and remote learning for their child. How does a parent weigh the benefits to a child of being with other children and learning from a teacher in person against the risks from a disease that scientists are still working to understand?

For some parents, this will be an easy decision. They know in their hearts what is best for their child and their family. For other parents, the decision can be much more difficult.

A 5-step process to help you weigh the risk

As with any decision, breaking the choices down into discrete parts can help you think about them. Emily Oster, an author and economist, offers a five-step process for considering a decision involving risk:

1. **Frame the question**. What are you considering and what is the alternative? Weigh your two or three main choices, not every possibility.
2. **Mitigate risk.** What's the best and safest way to approach each of the options you're considering? What can you do to reduce the risk of COVID-19 from in-person schooling? What can you do to improve the experience of remote learning?

3. **Evaluate the risks.** What are the actual risks of the options you're considering, knowing the steps you can take to minimize those risks?
4. **Evaluate the benefits.** What are the benefits to your child from each of the options? What are the benefits to the family?
5. **Decide.** The decision should be easier for you if you've broken it down in this way.

Considering the benefits and the risks of in-person schooling

If your child is young, the benefits might include social time with other children, the chance to experience life outside the home, the opportunity for hands-on learning with objects they can touch, and the nurturing sense of being with a teacher in person.

- For a child with special learning needs, the benefits might be the physical guidance that a teacher or therapist provides, and the reinforcement of social cues and behavior.
- For an adolescent, the benefits might include the social life at school and the motivation that comes from being with other students who are learning the same subjects.
- In-person learning can have a financial benefit for parents, too, by reducing unbudgeted childcare expenses that can be associated with remote learning.

When evaluating risks, review what is known about COVID-19 and the steps schools are taking to mitigate the risks of spreading the virus. Then, consider the risks most relevant to you.

- What are the risks for your child, given what you know about your school's plans?
- Does your child have any health conditions that would add to the risk?
- Is anyone in your household at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19?
- Do you have confidence in the plan your school has announced, and the steps being taken to minimize the spread to the virus?
- Is the spread of the virus under control in your community, with a low number of new cases?
- Are you confident that other parents and children will follow the school's plan?

Considering the benefits and risks of remote learning

As you think about your options, remote schooling may offer a solution to help protect your child from exposure to COVID-19. For some older children, especially those who are highly motivated to learn, remote learning may also be a more efficient way to absorb information than in-person classes. That depends a lot on the age and personality of your child and on how the school is offering remote learning.

As for risks, remote learning is more difficult to provide successfully to younger children, and it often requires significant parent involvement. Children without internet access can't participate fully. And remote learning doesn't provide the same quality of social interactions that in-person schooling does.

To weigh the benefits and risks of remote schooling, consider:

- the quality of online teaching offered by your child's school,
- how much time you can give to support your child's learning at home,
- how your child may have responded to online learning in the early stages of the pandemic. If your child struggled with online learning in the past, what could you, your child, and your child's teacher do differently in the coming school year to make it a better experience?

For many families, there is no clear right or wrong decision about their child's schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that reality, your next challenge may be to deal with feelings of worry, guilt, and fear as you move forward with the plan. Here, some lessons from a form of behavior therapy called "acceptance therapy" can be helpful.

- **Accept uncertainty.** Recognize that you are making choices based on the information you have and that there are no guarantees.
- **Focus on what you can control.** It's productive to think hard about the logistics of what you can do to support your child's learning and safety. It's unproductive and draining to spend energy worrying about what other people will do.
- **Learn to live with your emotions.** Recognize that you will have strong emotions during this difficult time. Pay attention to them, but don't fight them. If your worries start to overwhelm you, defuse them by exercising, going for a walk, or changing your media habits. It may be helpful to speak with a mental health professional, by phone or online.
- **Have compassion for yourself.** Try not to be self-critical or blame yourself when things don't go as planned. Don't hold yourself or your family to impossible standards.

Source(s)

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