



**COVID-19 Update  
Back to School  
7/6/2020**

Well, it has certainly been an interesting year! It seems like ages ago that the schools closed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and we all had to get used to remote learning, social distancing, and mask wearing. And now we're looking at the start of a new school year and you are being asked to make a decision about your child's education and how it will be administered.

As you can imagine, we have received many calls asking for advice on what choice is the best idea. As much as we'd love to discuss it with everyone, it's just not possible to do that individually. We have gathered our thoughts and recommendations for you below to help you decide what is best for your child and your family. There truly is no one right answer on this - whether you decide to send your child to school for in-person school or to continue remote learning, there will be some risks and some benefits. Everyone's situation is different; what is right for your family may not be right for another family. Hopefully we can help you weigh the pros and cons. Of course this is based on the information available at the time of this writing - recommendations may change depending on the local spread of the virus.

**What should I consider when making a school decision?**

Deciding whether to send your child back to school should be based on a number of factors.

• **Age**

- Younger children seem to be much less likely to develop severe illness with COVID19 infections. They are more likely to develop a serious post-viral inflammatory illness called Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) but this condition seems to be quite rare.
- While teens are generally less affected by COVID19 than adults, they can develop significant illness if infected.

• **Physical Health**

- The majority of children severely affected by COVID19 have had underlying health problems such as immunosuppression (either primary or due to medication), diabetes, congenital heart disease, obesity, kidney disease, or severe neurological conditions.
- Asthma is the most common chronic medical condition in children. If your child has asthma, it is very important that they be well controlled and take their medication appropriately whether they return to school or not. The CDC does not consider mild asthma to be a significant risk factor for severe COVID19 disease. Of course, all children with asthma should receive an annual flu vaccine in the fall.

• **Emotional Health**

- One of the major considerations for the American Academy of Pediatrics recommending a return to in-person school if possible was over concerns about the emotional health of our children. School is the primary place where young children learn socialization and teens rely heavily on school and friends for structure and emotional support.
- Many kids with pre-existing anxiety have found being home is much less stressful. However, we do have significant concerns that they may experience increasing difficulty returning to full society when the pandemic is over if they continue to stay at home and don't address the anxiety.
- Other children find being at home and isolated from their usual life to be very stressful. We are seeing increasing cases and severity of depression and anxiety since the onset of the pandemic.



- **Educational Health**

- Most kids and parents did not find the remote learning put together by the schools at the beginning of the pandemic to be very satisfactory. Hopefully with the extra time, the experience will be improved. However, remote learning will certainly be different than the school we have known in the past.
- It's generally felt that younger children do much better with in person instruction, either with a teacher or a parent. The younger ones will need much more supervision and help from you if you choose remote learning. Of course, not all parents can be available for that due to work and other concerns. It's also not easy! It's vital that your family really considers whether a parent will have the ability to do effective home schooling.
- Middle school and high school students generally have more ability to work independently but not all of them are up to it. Kids with ADHD or learning issues may need significant supervision. Some kids are just not motivated and the lack of structure may result in poor work. Parents will still need to be very involved in making sure assignments are completed and are properly done.

- **Financial Concerns**

- It's no secret or shame that many families rely on school for childcare so they can work outside the home. Many parents have found that caring for kids and their schooling is also not possible even if they're working from home.
- Remote learning does require computers and internet connections which may put a financial burden on a family. It seems that the school systems are trying to make laptops and wifi hotspots available to their students. Contact your school if this is a concern for you.

- **Family Concerns**

- Obviously, children live within a family. Fortunately, COVID19 has not been terribly harmful to children but this is not true for older adults. As we all know, adults over 65 and those with pre-existing health conditions are at significantly increased risk for severe disease and death. And we also know that grandparents are really bad at staying away from their grandchildren. It's important to consider contacts that your child might infect if they were to contract COVID19 at school.
- Another thing to consider is what your family plan will be if your child were to get sick. Schools will likely follow the Department of Public Health guidelines which mandate that a person with symptoms consistent with a COVID19 infection (which include fever, cough, nasal congestion, sore throat, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain among other symptoms) should not return to school/work for 14 days or until they have a negative COVID19 test. While testing availability has improved, we are nowhere near having an accurate, in-office test that will give immediate results. And if someone in the family contracts COVID19, all family members must stay in isolation for at least 10 days, even if they are asymptomatic.

Obviously this is all a LOT to think about and most of you will need to make a decision very soon. No matter your choice, there will be sacrifices and benefits. We do have some tips on keeping your family physically and emotionally healthy no matter which path you choose.

### **What if we decide to do Remote Learning?**

Your school system will provide you with the educational tools. Now you have to use them effectively and try to compensate for what the school can't do.

One of the major benefits to a regular school day is the structure that is imposed. While remote learning may involve live online classes, much of it is likely to be more free form. Kids need structure and the



parent will have to be the bad guy. Most kids (and adults) have had wildly increased screen time in the past months. While this is understandable, we all know it's not sustainable and parents will need to set some limits there. We also strongly believe that teenagers should not be permitted to stay up into the wee hours and sleep until noon for prolonged time periods. It results in disordered sleep and eating schedules, insufficient supervision, and way too much isolation. If you decide to do remote learning, make schedule and routine a part of the plan from the onset.

As you know, your child will also need social interactions with their peers. If you are choosing remote learning because of infection concerns it obviously does not make sense for them to stay home from school and then freely interact with other kids. That just increases the risk for everyone. Again, if you decide to do distance learning, make a plan for how to see friends and family early on.

Another aspect of in person school is that multiple people observe your child on a daily basis. Problems such as depression and anxiety are often brought to a parent's attention by teachers or peers. You will need to be even more watchful for problems given the increased stress. If your child is becoming increasingly more isolated, irritable, apathetic, or anxious, it's important to seek help. Teenagers are especially vulnerable as they depend greatly on their friends for support and advice.

On the flip side, remote learning will certainly give parents more insight on their child's education, not to mention the increased family time. It may also give your child more time to pursue other interests and increase their independence.

### **What if we decide to do in-person school?**

Obviously, the educational part of school will be much more familiar. But that doesn't mean things aren't going to be very different. Most school systems at this time have not put out much information on how they plan to limit spread of the virus other than increased cleaning. However, possibilities include limited contact with kids outside their own class (especially in elementary school), increased spacing between students in class, no lockers, and meals eaten in their classrooms. It will not be business as usual and many kids may find they don't have contact with many of their friends. Set expectations with your kids early so they know what to expect as much as possible.

If schools are going to be able to stay open, it is vital that the coronavirus not circulate within the school. As we've heard over and over, this comes down to physical distancing, hygiene, and masking. If your child is going to attend in-person school, it is your responsibility to make sure that they are following the rules to the best of their ability.

#### **• Physical Distancing**

- Continue to remind your child about the need for keeping a six foot distance whenever possible. This may be impossible for young children but middle school and high school students can certainly comply.

#### **• Hygiene**

- Go over times for hand washing/hand sanitizing - before meals, after using the restroom, after touching common surfaces, and before touching one's face. If possible, send your older child to school with a supply of hand sanitizer.
- Discourage kids from putting non-food items in their mouths.
- Discourage food sharing as well as sharing of school supplies.



- **Masking**

- At this time, the Marietta school system is the only one of our surrounding school systems that is planning to require masks although they all recommend them. This could change if the state government mandates masking.
- However, masking is the single most effective thing your child can do to help prevent spread of COVID19. There is only so far apart they can be in a school building and we all know how kids touch everything. There aren't enough cleaning wipes in the world. But masking is easy if annoying. They are quite effective in preventing the spread of COVID19 (along with the flu and many other respiratory illnesses), protecting the other children, teachers, and staff, and in allowing the school to remain open.
- While it may difficult for young children to wear a mask all day, tweens and teens are perfectly capable of wearing a surgical or cloth mask for an extended period. Medical professionals are wearing very close fitting N-95 masks for 12 hour shifts while saving lives; your child can wear one in math class.
- Yes, there are children who cannot wear a mask. Anyone who can not remove a mask on their own should not wear one. Neuroatypical kids may just not be able to tolerate one. Masks are perfectly safe for children with asthma, anxiety, migraines, and pretty much any other medical condition. Remember, neurosurgeons wear them for hours and operate on brains; don't worry about the oxygen level.
- If your child is resistant to wearing a mask and you have decided to have them return to in person school, start now getting them used to wearing a mask. Try different versions to find what's the most comfortable and have them wear it for increasing lengths of time each day and while doing different activities. They can do it.
- **Please understand that Cobb Pediatrics will not write a note exempting a child from wearing a mask at school except for very specific medical reasons. We have a responsibility to all the children in the community as well as to the teachers and staff that are charged with their education.**

We are living in extraordinary times. We can get our children through it if we all work together. These children are our future - we need to help them stay physically healthy, mentally strong, and socially connected. We need to prioritize their education in whatever way is possible. We want them to know there is a strong community of healthcare providers, educators, and parents behind them and supporting them.