

COVID-19 Back to School

Considerations and tips for parents, caregivers and teachers



With September quickly approaching, back-to-school preparation previously signaled a time of renewal and change, exciting students as they prepared for the highly anticipated school year. In 2020, that excitement has been coupled with anxiety and in some instances fear for students, parents and teachers given the new realities of COVID-19 and our collective attempts to limit the spread and risk of infection, while addressing the needs of continued education in safe and productive environments.

As school boards across the country prepare for a return to in-person instruction at elementary, high school and post-secondary levels, a number of safety protocols are being reviewed with some measures yet to be finalized. Although physical distancing and face masks are being recommended for students, teachers and support staff, regional and provincial considerations and variances exist.

For some, wearing a mask may be strange or even a little scary. How to help kids wear a mask.¹

- Help kids get used to masks. Give children time to practice wearing their masks. Teach them how to put them on and take them off.
- Encourage kids to decorate their mask. This may invoke a sense of ownership and control over the situation. A personal touch can help make it more of a normal part of their routine, and make it more likely they'll want to wear their mask. Avoid stitching to maintain mask integrity.

- Make them together. If you make masks or cloth face coverings at home, let older kids help you.
- Help make it fun. With younger kids, introduce a sense of play. Kids can pretend to be a doctor or nurse while wearing their masks.
- Have a few masks handy while kids play. This lets them use their imagination about how to use them during playtime. It also helps make masks a more normal part of their everyday world. You can ask children to put a mask on a stuffed animal, and then ask follow-up questions about why the stuffed animal is wearing the mask. Depending on their response, you can clear up any confusion and offer reassurance.

Throughout the country different boards have adopted varying policies with respect to attendance and in-person schooling including, full-time in-person attendance, fully remote or online classes, and a blended approach combining multiple adaptations of both in-person and remote or online learning. These options combined with the initial apprehension of sending children back to school, our ability to assume the role of primary educator, the complexities of scheduling and professional obligations make an already difficult decision more challenging.

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Benefits and risks of in-person schooling

Benefits:

- For younger children, the opportunity for social interaction and development, and life experience beyond the home
- For adolescents, social interaction and peer motivation
- For parents, financial relief with the removal of unexpected childcare expenses

Risks:

- Potential medical risks for children and families with pre-existing conditions
- Are you confident of the plans and procedures put in place by your school board

Benefits and risks of remote/online schooling

Benefits:

- Reduced exposure to COVID-19
- Dependent upon personality and age, some may more easily understand learning concepts and objectives

Risks:

- Requires significant parental involvement with younger children
- Reduced social interaction

In preparation for the 2020/2021 school year, boards are working to enhance both the in-person and online learning experience, while adopting and modifying protocols to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19. Each approach may differ slightly based on the prevalence of infection within the community, the availability of well-ventilated space for in-person classes, the ability to lower class sizes, and the unique requirements to support younger, older and children with special learning needs. Education planners must also consider the needs of teachers and all support staff within these facilities.

As an alternative to traditional learning, the concept of Learning Pods, are growing in popularity. A learning pod is comprised of a group of parents who share time and pool resources to offer home-schooling or to supplemental online/remote learning. Pods may be customized to meet a collective need or preference with some offering online instruction, while others offer in-person instruction. The pod may hire teachers or tutors or teaching responsibilities may

be shared among the parents. If you're considering a learning pod solution, it's imperative you understand the financial and time commitments as well as having realistic expectations for the learning experience.

Here are a few ways in which schools are responding to COVID-19:

- **Masks or face coverings**
Many jurisdictions have mandated the use of protective face covering for adults and students, with minor exceptions for primary school students and those with pre-existing medical conditions
- **Handwashing**
Students and adults should wash hands frequently or apply hand sanitizer, some schools have installed foot-operated sanitization stations
- **Physical distancing**
Desks and/or work stations should be spaced at least six feet apart and the flow of foot traffic at entrances and in hallways should be controlled to ensure adequate distancing
- **Ventilation**
For indoor classes, the risk of spread can be reduced by opening windows and by increasing the flow of fresh air into the room with mechanical ventilation
- **Cleaning and disinfecting**
Common and high use surfaces should be cleaned frequently, including bathrooms, door handles, drinking fountains, and playground equipment
- **Limiting student interactions**
Some schools may group students into small pods where students learn and break together with no or limited interaction with other students. Additionally, students remain in a dedicated space where teachers move to the students for different subjects
- **Transportation and staggered schedules**
The implementation of physical distancing, ventilation, and seat disinfection for school, and the adoption of staggered schedules to limit interactions

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Each family is unique

For many families, there is no clear decision about their child's schooling during the pandemic. The decisions they make around the coming school year will be difficult. Given the new realities, parents may face feeling of worry, guilt, and potentially fear as they contemplate options. What are the medical risks for both child and the family unit? Many parents feel overwhelmed by these questions, however it's important to note, many of us have lived through challenging and traumatic times becoming stronger and more resilient as we define and manage the priorities in our lives. Remember, we all react differently to stressful situations. Given our diverse backgrounds and the communities we live in, our beliefs and behaviours may vary.

How to stay productive and motivated:

- **Mental health and wellness:** If you start to feel overwhelmed or isolated, remain active and engaged with your personal and professional support networks. Take mental health breaks, take care of your body, take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate when possible and ensure you're getting plenty of sleep.
- **Eating and hydration:** Try to maintain healthy eating patterns and stay hydrated. Avoid high sugar snacks and beverages to avoid swings in mood and energy levels.
- **Create or continue your routines:** Maintain your daily routine in preparation for your workday, establish a wake-up time and a routine to support a normal working day.
- **Think about natural light:** Helping to maintain a positive outlook, natural light plays an important role.

Returning to school may not feel like it previously has. However, regardless of policies and format, it will require everyone's support to ensure our schools remain healthy, safe and equitable for students, teachers, staff and families.



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Back to school checklist: Beyond binders, books and backpacks

Here are a few items for the checklist that may surprise you:³

- Reminder to ensure student forms both medical and non-medical are completed and received
- Ensure students are aware of required technology where applicable, including laptops, printers, and internet access where possible

- Recommend students create a safety kit including masks, sanitizer, gloves and other precautionary items

- Create and maintain a class contact list for parent and homework support, and

Please use the following links for details on your return to school policies and guidelines.

Province	More information on school re-entry
Alberta	https://www.alberta.ca/k-to-12-school-re-entry-2020-21-school-year.aspx
British Columbia	https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/covid-19-return-to-school
Manitoba	https://news.gov.mb.ca/news/index.html?item=48837
New Brunswick	https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/news/news_release.2020.06.0344.html
Newfoundland	https://www.gov.nl.ca/releases/2020/eecd/0706n01/
Nova Scotia	https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/education/
Ontario	https://www.ontario.ca/page/guide-reopening-ontarios-schools
Prince Edward Island	https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/topic/back-school
Quebec	https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/back-to-school-plan-fall-covid-19/
Saskatchewan	https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2020/august/04/safe-school-plan
Nunavut	https://gov.nu.ca/education/information/2020-21-opening-plan-nunavut-schools
Northwest Territories	https://www.gov.nt.ca/en/newsroom/gnwt-releases-reopening-schools-safely-plan-2020-2021-school-year
Yukon	https://yukon.ca/en/health-and-wellness/covid-19-information/education-and-school-supports-covid-19/planning-2020-21#school-operations-in-the-2020%E2%80%9221-school-year

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Throughout these exceptional circumstances, we may find ourselves facing moments of inexperience and doubt. Remember, trust yourself and call upon your training or seek assistance when needed.

We're here to help

References

1. Kids Health. Coronavirus (COVID-19): Helping Kids Get Used to Masks (2020) Available from: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/coronavirus-masks.html>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Manage Anxiety & Stress (2020) Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Back to School Planning: Checklists to Guide Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers (2020) Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/parent-checklist.html>

