

## **COVID-19 Statement Regarding Return to School**

The days of a traditional August are filled with kids, parents and teachers anticipating the new academic year with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. As fall approaches this year, much is uncertain about how and under what circumstances children will return to school. To the extent that practical information regarding what actions to take is available, this information serves to keep everybody safer, and perhaps to counter some of the sense of helplessness that so many feel. Nevertheless, the profusion of factors involved makes it hard to know the best ways to support parents and children this fall as the school year begins. What follows is a return to basics, a framework regarding some of what we know about the dynamic development of children and parent-child relationships.

School is an important arena within which a child encounters, and in optimal situations, masters, important developmental challenges. A familiarity with the dynamic aspects of these challenges can help parents and children navigate at this time when traditional school routines are so upended. Each stage of development is associated with particular dynamic challenges for the child and the parent:

The Preschool Child is working on being apart from his/her parent for an extended period of the school day. Some degree of anxiety around separation is expected and growth-promoting. A child this age can enjoy becoming a “big kid” even as the wish to be little continues to exert a strong pull. Relationships at school with teachers and peers provide a positive and welcome respite for parents and children given the complex and passionate relationship of the child with his/her parents at this age.

The preschool child’s general sense of safety largely rests upon a parent’s sense that things will be okay. Understandably, parents are anxious and fearful during this pandemic. Further, disruptions in typical and needed daily routines exacerbate separation conflicts. If a child stays home, he/she can regress and parents can find that their child seems less self-assured and more clingy. Alternatively, a preschool child attending school heavily relies on a parent’s communication that s/he and the child are safe, and feelings of safety are in short supply for many parents, understandably! Both options present dilemmas. It is worth keeping in mind that the child’s anxiety at this stage will have little to do with Covid-19. Rather, it will be associated with anxieties regarding separation and loss. Reassurances should focus on these concerns rather than concerns about the virus.

The School Age/Latency Child is well-suited to school in a developmental sense. The rules and structure of the classroom, the potential for esteem-

building via accomplishment and the potential for admiration outside the family (e.g., in academic, athletic or social pursuits) work harmoniously for a happy child - at least in an ideal world. The latency-age child tends toward obsessionality to contain her/his more unruly impulses, and this feature is likely to be intensified in the current context, whether s/he goes to school or not. Things are not what they “should be,” and this raises a child’s anxiety. The parent overseeing the schooling of a child this age can encounter obstinacy and anger, causing her/him to wonder “how does the teacher manage to do it?” Guilt and embarrassment about such unacceptable and “babyish” displays make things even more difficult as the latency-age child judges infractions harshly in black and white.

These children are attuned to the current situation. They are aware that going to school magnifies the danger of infecting (even killing) parents, grandparents and teachers. Some may worry about their own physical safety. In this way omnipotent fantasies and real-world possibilities present particular challenges for the latency-age child. The parent of a child this age can best help her/his child in a few ways. First, by providing straightforward responses to questions about the virus that respect the child’s need for information but that don’t overwhelm her/him with details. Second, by offering comments that recognize how normal it is to have a variety of feelings about the virus and its impact on the day to day aspects of her/his life, including anger and worry. Finally, by thinking of ways to empathize with how difficult things are at this time. The latency-age child can be a powerful self-critic. Empathy will be more effective than piling on judgements that the child already has leveled against herself/himself.

The Adolescent plight during the pandemic is easily envisioned. Any parent who doesn’t get that is soon going to hear it from the adolescent. A central challenge during this stage is developing a more independent sense of self. School provides an important arena for this process. Relationships are extremely important as the teen affiliates with individuals and groups outside the family and explores his/her maturing sexuality.

As the adolescent separates from the internal parent in his/her mind, he/she is more prone to feeling lonely and disconnected - feelings exacerbated by the narrowing of his/her outside life during the pandemic. Groups of teens engaging in activities now considered dangerous (walking close together and unmasked through school halls or socializing at parties) reflect omnipotent defenses during a time of uncertainty and vulnerability - a familiar adolescent response to such feelings. Teens and parents who have made progress in separating may find themselves painfully engaged in conflicts that render actual danger hard to distinguish from feelings of anxiety and loss associated with a teen moving on. Parents and teens also can feel guilty and anxious about aggressive fantasies given the potential for real-life danger via contagion (child to parent) or parental resignation in the face of the adolescent’s

behavior. The parent of a teen can help by empathizing with the teen's wish to make decisions himself/herself, or to trust peers more than parents. Also, providing news articles with clear, credible information about the virus can serve to ally the parent with her/his teen's capacity to think more logically and to separate factual information from the more complicated and conflictual parent-child arena.

These descriptions are offered as an attempt to address some of the dynamic concerns associated with the new school picture - in person or remote - for children and parents at different developmental stages. Obviously, many important factors are absent regarding individual history and life circumstances. So much remains in flux and parents are trying to sort things out on a day-by-day basis. Nevertheless, as child psychoanalysts we know that a dynamic, developmental lens can assist in helping parents navigate in this very difficult time as we all come to recognize that the return to school will be very different in this time of Covid-19.

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