

# Staying Healthy and Growing Through COVID

As a parent, you want your child to grow and flourish — and school can be one of the best tools to make that happen. In the time of COVID, however, you have to tackle another need: keeping your child healthy. You'd love to sign up for the growth opportunities of school, while holding back the pandemic. With good information, and cooperation between parents and schools, it's possible.

## Health

Anyone can get COVID, but transmission and severity change with age. In particular, the World Health Organization notes that children under 10 spread the disease less easily than older people, and usually develop milder symptoms. This means parents and schools of early and elementary students can use different tools to handle COVID, when compared to those of middle and high school students. Also, regardless of age, any health toolkit needs to keep in mind the special needs of students, so that it works for everyone. It should also involve the parents, teachers, and staff that make schools work.

### Early and Elementary School

Children under 10 have a lower risk of spreading COVID, and tend to get milder cases of the disease. This is fortunate, since young kids get the most from the social time and support provided by in-person classes. Schools can offer in-person classes to early and elementary school kids more readily than they can to older students. That said, it's still key to take extra steps to stay safe.

Ask schools about in-person options for younger students. Remember, though, that low risk is not no risk. The Center for Disease Control recommends kids wear masks in school, and keep socially distant (about six feet apart) when they can. Try pairing these pandemic lessons with related life lessons. You wear warm clothes when it's cold. You keep a respectful distance from your neighbor in line. Wearing a mask and keeping social distance can be taught like these familiar topics.

### Middle and High School

Children 10 or older can spread COVID like adults, and should take adult precautions. However, they can also be more independent and resilient to change than younger students. This makes them better suited to virtual classes, or a hybrid between virtual and in-person, so you want your older child's school to approach COVID with these virtual options in hand.

Ask schools about virtual plans, as well as in-person safety measures. According to the World Health Organization, if COVID spreads in a community, schools tend to mirror that unless health policies are solid. If COVID gets bad in your area, switch to your school's virtual plan.

## **Special Needs**

A health tool that's simple for one person can be a huge pain for another. If you have (or know) a child with special needs, talk to the school about how they can make their health tools inclusive — or look for schools that are already doing that work. Small steps can make a big difference.

Ask about clear masks that show facial cues used in American Sign Language. A movement disability may make social distancing hard, but if your kid buddies up with someone who helps them get around, you can treat that as a unit, minimizing risk. Let children with autism — who may find masks uncomfortable, due to increased sensitivity to touch — choose among mask fabrics and styles to find their favorite.

## **Parents and School Staff**

Parents, teachers, and staff play a huge role in making school work. That said, as adults, they suffer more COVID risk by being involved with in-person school. It's crucial to approach in-person interaction with other adults with caution, to keep everyone safe.

You may need to meet with other adults to keep your kid's education on track, but be responsible! A short, masked, outdoor chat with a teacher is one thing. A crowded PTA meeting is another. Also, don't be afraid to go virtual if COVID flares up in your community.

## **Growth**

School is an important part of a child's growth. As well as teaching them new ideas, it offers food, exercise, fun, and friendship. These benefits are part of the reason many worry about moving away from in-person schooling. COVID brings health risk into the picture, though, and demands a more flexible outlook. Parents and schools need to work together to make in-person school safe, virtual school effective, and hybrids between the two as seamless as possible.

### **In-person**

In-person school offers several benefits for a child's growth. School lunches provide healthy food, and activities like recess or gym provide exercise. The school day also offers time off from childcare for parents. These benefits come with a higher risk of COVID, however, especially in middle and high school, so they need to be balanced with extra health measures.

Ask schools about social distancing, both in class and during meals and activities. Check that there are mask policies. Make sure schools have a plan for community outbreaks, since cases in schools rise with the surroundings. Finally, if your child shows potential symptoms of COVID, such as cough or shortness of breath, do your part to keep school safe. Keep them home,

schedule a test, and contact the school nurse. Testing sites can be found at <https://floridahealthcovid19.gov/testing-sites/>.

### **Virtual:**

Virtual school lowers COVID risk, but comes with drawbacks. Food and exercise don't show up by default. Teachers need to work hard to create even a limited social setting. Learning becomes vulnerable to spotty internet or old devices. Virtual classes may require a watchful parent to keep children engaged. These drawbacks aren't unbeatable, but they do demand creative solutions.

To keep healthy and easy lunches on the table, ask about food pickup. If a school was prepared to provide lunches in person, it's likely it could provide them by drive-through. Ask about social time in class, and break time for exercise. Talk to parents of your kid's friends or classmates about forming a small, closed group for socializing, exercise, and shared childcare. If failing internet or tech impedes learning, talk to the school about lower-tech alternatives, like lesson summaries or prerecorded videos.

### **Hybrid:**

Schools may mix in-person and virtual classes to get some benefits of each. Even if the whole school isn't doing it, you'll likely see this hybrid setup show up on an individual student scale. If your kid gets COVID, or has to stay home while testing for it, you'll need to be ready to go virtual when other students are not.

When you switch between in-person and virtual modes at a hybrid school, keep the pros and cons of each in mind. Don't go to in-person classes without a mask. Don't forget to provide food, exercise, and social time during a virtual school day. If your school is all in-person, check that they have plans for temporary virtual students. Check your own plans, too. Knowing what to expect won't solve every problem, but it can smooth the transition.

### **Homeschool:**

Homeschooling is another option for navigating the pandemic, due to its leanings toward virtual learning and smaller in-person groups. It carries its own challenges, though, so it's best to approach it with open eyes. See our article on homeschooling later in the issue to learn more.