

# **School's Out: A Parents' Guide for Meeting the Challenge During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

As schools across the nation close to stop the spread of 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19), millions of children are obliged to remain at home. During this time, it is helpful for parents to consider their child's needs for structure, education, exercise, social contact, appropriate leisure time, and calm, rational explanations about the situation, says Richard Gallagher, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone.

Dr. Gallagher, along with Helen L. Egger, MD, the Arnold Simon Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, chair of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and director of NYU Langone's Child Study Center, offers suggestions for parents to help make the most of their child's time off from school, while keeping in mind child development and children's reactions to stressful and changing situations.

## **A Need for Structure**

Children may consider this time to be similar to long school breaks or summer vacation, but it is not exactly the same. “Unlike summer vacation, this break is sudden and unplanned, and the time away from school has not been specified,” says Dr. Gallagher. “This can be difficult for children to understand. In general, people don’t do well when they are unsure about the future, even in an area as simple as the schedule.”

Set a schedule for the weekdays and weekends. Children and teens do their best if there are plans for each day, especially the weekdays when they would have been in school, Dr. Gallagher says.

### **Set Regular Bedtimes and Wake-Ups**

After perhaps the first few days, have your child or teen follow the usual school day–weekend day sleep schedule. It is best to have a regular wake-up time and bedtime that is the same as the schedule you set when they are attending school, since it can be hard to get back on track, especially if kids get into a late-to-bed, late-to-rise schedule.

### **Establish a School Day Educational Schedule**

“A free-for-all, loose schedule is nice for snow days or other short breaks, but can lead to boredom and a difficult time getting back into the educational routine if it lasts,” Dr. Gallagher says. “Find out how your children’s schools plan to keep students engaged and active, and follow the suggested schedule.”

Parents can consider starting with a morning meeting and schedule list, since this is what most teachers do to start the day. Have a list of the subjects and activities for the day, and create 30- to 45-minute blocks of time to work on the subjects that your child takes.

For elementary school children, a sample morning could include math, followed by a walking break or playing catch for about 10 minutes; social studies—including current events—using online resources; a set of jumping jacks and a race around the house for another break; and then science.

Take a break for lunch and have your child help make it, while building in lessons using the internet or library books exploring the following questions:

- Where does the food come from? For example, how is bread made from farm to bakery?
- What transportation is required to get the food to the store and home?
- What workers are involved in the supply chain?
- What government agencies are responsible to assure food safety?
- What science is used to make advances in food quality? For example, you can explain the early work of Gregor Mendel.

Math and science can be also incorporated into cooking and meal prep. Questions to pose to your child may include the following:

- What happens to vegetables when they are heated?
- Why do we cook meat? Does cooking help reduce germs?
- How much more is 360 degrees than 120 degrees?
- At what temperature does water boil?
- If you have a non-digital thermometer, what is the substance inside made of?

After lunch, recess can be in session, followed by a round of language arts, reading, and writing practice. To conclude the school day, consider assigning brief homework, such as reviewing one of the activities from the day.

Parents could also set up safe playdates, Dr. Gallagher says, or consider some joint lessons with classmates that are healthy. Determining how many children can get together should be an informed conversation with the other parents, your doctor, and any updated guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

### **Taking Education Online**

While schools are shuttered, many schools are moving their lessons online by providing virtual instruction or assignments. “Make sure your child keeps up with the assignments and can engage in any virtual instruction,” Dr. Egger says.

If your child’s school is not providing these options, turn to sources from reputable home-school organizations and websites, as many of

these organizations provide lessons and materials for every grade level.

Educational publisher Scholastic has also curated a [free digital learning hub](#) designed to support virtual learning plans for children in prekindergarten to grade 9. Library associations can also provide guidance on books—both fiction and nonfiction—for different age levels.

### **Exercise and Social Contact**

“By keeping active each day, everyone will be calmer and will sleep better,” Dr. Gallagher says. “Get involved by taking walks and playing games with your kids, such as tag, hide-and-seek, Red Rover, and Simon Says,” Dr. Gallagher says. “Relay races, bike rides, and hikes are great, too.” Hikes can also be used to teach about nature, plants, animals, and birds.

As for sports, “You can get together a small group of healthy kids to play some games,” he adds. “It doesn’t have to be fancy—kickball is enjoyed by all ages.”

Follow guidelines on the safe size of group contacts that people can have, relying on the

CDC or your local office of public health for guidance. Getting friends together in small groups can provide fun and ease tension, Dr. Gallagher says. “Social contact is very important for children. Youth that are connected to other children are happier, less anxious, and have more fun.”

Even when isolated, parents can help kids stay connected to others with modern technology, within reasonable limits, Dr. Gallagher adds. Encourage appropriate and reasonable use of phones, tablets, and computers for making the connections. Parents should follow wise guidance on use, including broad monitoring of content and the tone of communications that have been or are occurring.

“You do not need to know the details of each interaction, but you should have a sense of the themes and the persons that your child is contacting, even teens,” Dr. Egger says. “While out of school, children may be seen as potential targets for cyber predators, so encourage your children to be open about the messages that they receive and persons that are making contact attempts.”

## **Leisure Time Considerations**

Let your kids have a varied leisure time diet of television, books, and other media. Some of the content can be serious and uplifting, and a smaller portion of it can be silly or even junky.

Make certain that a good portion of leisure time activity is active, both mentally and physically. “Passive observation and watching of content is fine within limits, but don’t let your child’s mind go numb by consuming content that does not require thought,” Dr. Gallagher says. “Teachers and school provide kids with more than six hours of mental exercise. Try to match that.”

Passive and sedentary entertainment can also be a problem. It can lead to a reduction in physical health and fitness and contribute to unwanted weight gain. “Remember, at school, children and teen are at least walking around the building,” Dr. Gallagher adds.

## **Reducing Anxiety in the Face of Real-Life Concerns**

It’s best for parents to provide rational explanations about COVID-19 and help maintain an appropriate calm, experts say. To help

manage anxiety in children of all ages, make certain to provide accurate information from reliable sources.

“Recognize that even young kids overhear conversations and news reports,” Dr. Gallagher says. “Children say that they find local news that they do not understand to be more frightening than scary fairy tales or even horror movies. Because of this, it’s important for parents to ask their kids if they have questions or concerns about the situation and to work hard to clarify their understandings.”

Do your best to protect your child and family members from COVID-19 and let your child know how they can protect themselves and others. Guides and rules for social distancing and hygiene and consulting with healthcare professionals should be followed. “Even young children can calmly understand illnesses. Let them know at an appropriate developmental level how COVID-19 can be passed onto others, that most people do not become very sick, and that health professionals are working hard to take care of the very ill in isolated settings,” Dr. Egger adds.

If you find yourself excessively worried, tense, or sad, consult with health, mental health, and other sources of counseling, such as clergy. Check for these reactions in your children too. “Stressful times contribute to mental health problems, especially if they were present before the stress started,” Dr. Gallagher says. “Make sure to take care of you and your children’s mental health during this health concern.”

Engage in reasonable distractions and have your children do the same. Consider taking in doses of news rather than checking it constantly.

Finally, watch out for problematic reactions to stress in you and in your child. Times of extended stress are associated with increases in the following:

- Substance use by adults and teens and some children. Be mindful of excessive use by adults and any use by those under 21.
- Sibling fights, since children may be cooped up with one another for long stretches. Be ready to help discuss conflicts and set guidelines for how to resolve problems.

- Fights and tension between and among caretakers. Parents will probably have more arguments, and conflicts between all of the caretakers are likely, including sitters, nannies, grandparents, and other family members. Tight quarters and limited time away from each other can contribute to arguments and even aggression.
- Domestic violence and child abuse. Tempers and poor decision-making flare up during times of stress. If you are concerned about your actions or the actions of others, make sure to rely upon regional resources and hotlines. Find ways to decompress and take breaks. This may mean that you will have to work as a team to relieve one another.
- Demoralization and depression. The situation can seem bleak, but try to keep information in perspective. How you do so will depend on your faith and beliefs. Turn to these sources for support. Also remember that, although sad, most people will survive as they have in past widespread health problems.

### **Resources for Talking to Kids About COVID-19**

The Child Study Center hosts educational webinars throughout the year. In its latest webinar, *Everyone Is Anxious: Talking to Your Child About Novel Coronavirus*, Child Study Center experts [Lori K. Evans, PhD](#), and [Kathleen Camacho, PsyD](#), discuss how to help children cope with COVID-19 and provide ideas by diagnosis and developmental level. [Watch here](#).

Other resources include the following:

- [CDC: Talking with Children About Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologists: Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Parent and Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [National Public Radio: Just For Kids: A Comic Exploring the New Coronavirus](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)

- The New York Times: [Talking to Tweens and Teens About Coronavirus](#) (subscription required)
- UNICEF: [How Teachers Can Talk to Children About Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\)](#)