



Back to school strategies in the new normal : From the expert Dr Sloane Freeman

September has always been an anxiety provoking time as parents and children prepare to go back to school. This year, will undoubtedly evoke more stress and concern than ever before. Schools have been closed since March 2020 to reduce transmission of SARS Co-V-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Now that we have flattened the curve and as schools prepare to open their doors again, many parents and children feel reticent about heading back inside.

When we think about what it means to return to school, we must consider that schools are not only places for academic learning, but support social, emotional and physical development in a safe child-centered space. Schools also provide nutritious food through breakfast programs, developmental support through school-based services and mental health support through school social workers and counsellors. For most children, schools are the heart of their communities and provide the link between social, physical and emotional well-being. For parents of children with medical conditions, it is always best to discuss returning to school with their child's own physician.

All of us can play an important role in keeping schools open and safe by doing our part to keep community transmission rates low. Since schools are an extension of the community, lower community transmission rates translates into reduced risk of school transmission.

Some of the ways we can keep our community infection rate low are:

1. **Physical distancing:** stay two (2) meters apart from others
2. **Face masks:** wear a non-medical face mask or face covering as outlined by local public health units
3. **Hand hygiene:** wash your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based (60-90%) hand sanitizer. Cover your cough or sneeze with your elbow or tissue, not your hands.
4. **If you have symptoms:** stay home, self-isolate and contact local public health to find out where to get tested

As we embark on school re-entry, children and their families will undoubtedly feel stressed, anxious and hesitant to return. Mental health support is a key pillar of the back-to school plan for all children.

Strategies to support children transition back to class include:

- 1. Open and age appropriate communication at home:** Children will have many questions about COVID-19. It is important to communicate clearly the simple ways to mitigate virus exposure and transmission. It is crucial to note that COVID-19 is a mild illness in the vast majority of children.
- 2. Re-establish a consistent sleep routine.** This year is going to be harder than ever for children to get back into a bedtime routine. Consistent sleep routine is one of the most important strategies for promoting physical and mental well-being. Having a calming bedtime routine, keeping a dark room and going to sleep at a consistent time will help.
- 3. Limit screen-time:** This may be the most difficult strategy of all. During the pandemic, children have been using screens more than ever before. Screens are used for distance learning, socializing from home and of course, for recreation. Setting clear and consistent expectations about how and when screens should be used will help as children re-enter school and re-adopt routines and schedules. Try to avoid screens at least one hour before bedtime.

These certainly are stressful times. However, there are meaningful ways to reduce the spread of the coronavirus so children can benefit from in-person learning in a safe and nurturing school environment.