

Naples Daily News

HEALTH

Are kids ready to go back to classrooms? Experts offer insights how to prepare

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Published 6:00 a.m. ET Aug. 24, 2020 | Updated 6:13 a.m. ET Aug. 24, 2020

Parents can expect their children to feel excited about returning to classrooms.

Mental health experts advise to watch out for stress, which often is subtle and can build up over time.

Roughly 126,000 children in Lee and Collier public schools are starting the new school year Aug. 31 after months of being home and having routines disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

School districts have developed an array of instruction plans for parents to consider, from virtual learning to returning to classrooms after the state Department of Education required bricks-and-mortar reopening.

“These are difficult and complex decisions parents are making,” said Emily Ptaszek, president and CEO of Healthcare Network in Collier County. “There is no playbook.”

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In Lee County, roughly 42,000 students in all grades are expected to return to classrooms while nearly 43,000 students will do remote or virtual learning, including homeschooling, according to the latest Lee school district figures.

Collier school officials reported 24,000 students in all grades are opting to return to campuses while 17,200 students will do remote, virtual or homeschooling.

The numbers in each category are expected to change as some students and parents have not provided their decisions, according to school district officials.

Parents understandably are concerned their children will be exposed to COVID-19 if they go back to classrooms, along with how they will adjust to practices schools put in place to control spread of the disease, according to Ptaszek, a board-certified clinical psychologist.

The key for parents is to prepare their children for the changes and why.

“If they have information and education that is age-appropriate, they can do fine,” she said.

For younger kids, experts recommend practicing getting ready in the morning and emphasizing their children need to follow instructions from teachers.

That can help address anxiety and expectations, said Dr. Terry Adirim, a physician and professor of pediatrics at Florida Atlantic University’s College of Medicine.

The school will be very different from how kids remember it before the pandemic, and it is important to point out other kids will experience the same changes, she said.

When kids get home, ask how their day went and pay attention if something doesn’t sound safe, she said.

“You have a right to expect that your child’s school will actually carry out the safety procedures they outline in their plans,” Adirim said.

Officials at SalusCare, a nonprofit behavioral health center in Lee County, agree there is uncertainty among children and parents alike about going back to school, according to Georgina Hilinski, with children's therapy services.

"My best advice would be to validate whatever your child is feeling," she said. "As we all know, we are in unprecedented times and it is important for children to understand that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel right now," Hilinski said.

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Children already impacted

Studies show the pandemic began taking a toll on children's mental health months ago.

Roughly 29% of parents in May said their children were showing signs of mental health suffering due to social distancing and school closures, according to a Gallup survey of 1,200 parents of children in kindergarten through grade 12.

For those kids having a hard time adjusting to school after being away so long, early identification and intervention is important, according to Jessica Liria, children's outreach specialist at David Lawrence Center, a mental health provider based in Collier.

"Allowing them the opportunity to express their emotions and guiding them through it will ease the transition," Liria said. "Linking them with brief therapeutic services can help to establish coping skills and should be an option at the first signs of a concern."

Parents should consider regular check-ins with teachers to keep track of what's happening, she said.

Hilinski, with SalusCare, recommends finding a balance between the time kids spend on computers and family time.

"Try to set aside some time to disconnect from technology together and be fully present for each other," she said.

Symptoms that children are experiencing too much stress include physical ailments like stomach aches and sleep difficulties, said Frances Duverge, a clinical psychologist with Healthcare Network.

Emotional and behavioral signs include increased irritability, inability to focus on activities and changes in eating habits, Duverge said.

There is a bright side that children can be more flexible in their thinking about change, especially if encouraged, she said. That can go a long way toward them adjusting to being back in school and following new rules for safety.

"I think whether kids physically returning to school adjust to the changes will largely depend on the individual child and the environment set up by the school," Duverge said.

Liria, with David Lawrence, said young people are resilient and adaptable and most kids will fare well going back to classrooms.

"For most of our students, they will adjust to the safety regulations and jump right back in the swing of things," she said.

For children who haven't been wearing masks, parents need to get them used to masks before returning to classrooms, Duverge said.

"I would encourage parents to gauge their kids on how long they can wear a mask before they can't take it anymore," she said.

Build up the duration each day and give kids reinforcement for success, she said. That can be a small toy for younger kids and extra screen time for older kids.

Another idea is to reinforce to younger kids that wearing a mask "is an exciting accessory" like a scarf, she said.

Parents feel guilty

It's been tough for many parents to decide between sending their kids back to classrooms or keeping them home for virtual learning, Duverge said.

Parents have had to juggle the decision with their work and health risks of household members, like grandparents, if they opt to send their kids back to classrooms and end up bringing the disease home, she said. Some parents feel the weight of either choice.

"One thing that is consistent is guilt among parents," she said. "The guilt is a heavy, heavy hitter."

Etzia Hamilton, 40, a mother of three in Lehigh Acres, is fine with her kids going back to school. Her eldest will be a senior in high school and her two other sons will be in fourth grade and ninth grade.

Hamilton initially considered virtual learning but changed her mind. She works full-time and going back to school in person will be better for her kids, she said.

"They need the socialization and they wanted to go back to school," Hamilton said.

For some, virtual school is a great option, said Hilinski.

"For others, especially for children who struggle with staying focused, virtual attendance may bring out additional stressors for children and families," she said.

There are some students who may be upset they are doing virtual learning and there's ways to address that too, Liria said.

“We want to validate their frustration and disappointment, but provide a discussion about the risks and benefits, and the reasoning behind the decision,” Liria said. "Emphasize that this will not last forever and it is only temporary."

Parents can say they will continue to monitor the risks and the kids can return to in-person school when the parents feel it is safer, she said.

“No matter what option has been selected, it was not an easy decision for the vast majority of parents,” she said. “This is something new for everyone and there are still many unknowns about how everything will work out.”