

How parents can encourage a safe return to school



Your Turn
Reisha Brown
Guest columnist

School is a central point in the lives of many children. It serves as an academic environment where children can learn and practice social and emotional skills, get exercise, and access nutritional food and mental health services, while also being introduced to art, music and sports. Children have the opportunity to explore and express their inner creative spirit at school.

However, this year because of COVID-19, the traditional school experience will be incredibly different. To maintain an educational environment of comfort, security and stability, schools will be instituting significant changes. These changes can be overwhelming for both parents and children. If your child is returning in-person to the classroom this fall, here are some ways you can help prepare them for the “new normal.”

- Speak openly, positively and calmly with your child about returning to school. Talk about the different look and feel of the school/classroom, friends, teachers, etc. This will place your child at ease and limit the risk of anxious feelings.
- Listen to their thoughts and fears, and help them understand it’s OK to be concerned, but that teachers, school officials and parents are working to make sure that everybody is safe. Be open to considering how they are experiencing things from their point of view.
- As children often take their emotional cues from

the key adults in their lives – including parents and teachers – it is important that adults manage their own emotions well and remain calm, listen to children’s concerns, speak kindly and reassure them.

- Practice wearing masks at home before school starts. Show them how to take it on and off. Make a game of how long they can keep it on, or not touch it. Decorate them with stickers. Encourage your child to draw a picture of his or her class, including teachers and students wearing personal protective equipment.
- Review the proper cough/sneeze elbow method and hand-washing with your child, and practice often at home. There are many apps, such as Ella’s Hand Washing Adventure, to help teach hand-washing to children. Make sure to teach them that even though germs are invisible, they could still be there. When children understand why they need to wash their hands, they’re likely to continue doing so.
- Express the importance of physical distancing. There are great resources on YouTube and online for children of all ages that help explain social distancing. Clear messaging to children about the purpose of social distancing and personal hygiene is particularly important. For younger children, games, songs and stories are the best way to encourage and teach them.
- Make sure your child understands the importance of not sharing school supplies or food.
- Prepare your child for the possibility that schools may need to close again to help them be ready for the adjustment period.
- Offer emotional support by having consistent discussions about the school day, friends, stressful situations, etc. It’s important to be calm and proactive in

your conversations. Their emotions will change regularly, and you need to show them that’s OK.

- Be aware of symptoms of depression and anxiety. Notify your health care professional immediately if you suspect symptoms.
- Be aware of concerns about stigmatization and bullying due to misinformation around COVID-19. Let children know that the virus has nothing to do with what someone looks like, where they are from or what language they speak. Remind your children that everyone deserves to be safe at school.
- Review your school’s sick policy, knowing what symptoms to watch for and when to keep children at home.

It’s also important for parents to be ready for children who are disappointed if they are unable to return in-person to school. Listen to what they have to say and what their disappointments are. By understanding their disappointment, you can move forward to help them make the most of the time they are going to be at home. It’s also important to continue to remind them that learning can happen anywhere.

Working together as a team (school leaders, health experts, teachers, parents and students), we can achieve a safe, cohesive, community-focused environment within schools, with the goal of preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Dr. Reisha Brown, a pediatrician with Healthcare Network, has been included annually in Castle Connolly’s regional directory of “Top Doctors” for pediatrics since 2015. Brown has been practicing medicine since 2002, moved to Southwest Florida in 2007 and joined Healthcare Network in August 2018.

I miss my grandfather and I don’t want my friends to die too



Your Turn
Maddelena Kaji
Guest columnist

When I pictured my grandfather passing, I always imagined it would be of very old age and he wouldn’t feel afraid. Instead, he was infected with COVID-19 at his nursing home over 1,000 miles away from me and died alone in a hospital bed in April of this year.

I never thought people would ask me, “Are you sure he really died that way? All the reported numbers are false, don’t you know?”

To say I am furious all the time would be an understatement.

I frequently text my fellow high schoolers to stop eating out indoors, to stop hosting parties and to stop going out without their mask. Some don’t respond, some tell me to “go to hell,” and others tell me I am “literally

the last thing we need” because of my “negative vibes.”

Forgive me for being negative, but my granddad is dead because of something you don’t even think exists. It’s like losing a family member to lung cancer and everyone around you giving each other cigarettes and questioning if humans even have lungs to begin with.

I am tired of accepting the excuse that teenagers are naive and don’t know any better. Aren’t you supposed to have a general concern for humanity by age 15 at the very least? As a teenager myself, why must I argue the value of life with other people who are old enough to drive cars and to vote?

With August rolling around and my friends attempting to return to their normal lives, I remind you all that once a person of high risk for COVID-19 complications is infected, it is too late to go back and order take-out or wear your mask to the store. That person could die now.

To everyone who has kept the mentality that “if I get COVID, it’s on me, I’ll deal with it,” I remind you that

you aren’t the only one who is going to have to deal with it. Everyone you could have come into contact with at school, at restaurants, at work or at home is going to have to deal with your negligence. Some of them won’t live to tell the tale.

As more children are killed in our own community after testing positive for the virus, I hope all of us remember that COVID-19 doesn’t play favorites. No matter who you are, you are completely unprotected once you test positive for coronavirus without any antibodies.

You don’t need to believe in science in order to look at a headstone. We, as a community, need to become more responsible for protecting one another, because if we make the risky decision to reopen our schools and our businesses at full or even half capacity, the adults and children we lose will be gone forever.

Lives aren’t worth going out to parties. Make the right decision now, before it is too late.

Maddelena Kaji is a 17-year-old rising senior at Leon High School and an aspiring journalist.

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