

DEALING WITH POTENTIAL EXPOSURE: THE STRESS OF PHYSICALLY REOPENING SCHOOLS

Many parents and teachers got a taste of what distance/virtual learning looks like during the spring and probably learned quickly about what worked and what didn't work so well for students. This fall, some districts will have students and teachers return to school buildings and previous protocols for parent-teacher interaction. For those districts that have decided to continue distance/virtual learning, parents and teachers will have to work even more closely together to make sure kids and teens are learning and to monitor their mental health.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

SET UP AN INITIAL MEETING.

During this initial meeting between parent and teacher, figure out the basics. How does the teacher plan to communicate—will it be in a special platform or through email, and how often should parents expect general communications? When one-on-one communication is needed, what day of the week works best, at what time, and should it be via phone, email, or video chat? Should routine one-on-one meetings be scheduled? If English is not the primary language spoken by the parent or caregiver, is there someone they can contact who speaks their language to ensure that the caregiver can get the support they need to stay updated on communications from the school, or support their child's studies? This is the time to ask questions openly. If the teacher isn't available for a one-on-one meeting at the very start of school, parents should find out when the meeting will occur or try using email to get their questions answered.

DISCUSS THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

If a student's parents aren't working or can work from home, the student most likely will be learning from their own home with a parent present. If a student's parents must physically leave the house to go to work, students may be learning outside of the home under the supervision of a caregiver other than a parent. Establish if the student has the technology necessary for distance learning or if the school needs to provide resources like a tablet or laptop. Determine if there will be more than one student trying to also engage in distance/virtual learning at the same time in the same place. Parents of students without Internet access should contact the school for accommodations or advice.

ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS.

Parents and teachers should talk about what a typical day of distance/virtual learning will look like. Is there a schedule for how the day will be divided? How much of the day will consist of live instruction, and how much will be independent study? What subject matter will be covered? Will there be "homework," or will all assignments be started and completed over the course of the structured learning part of the day? If the schedule is set by the school or the county, what flexibility do teachers have to adjust it?

IDENTIFY RESOURCES.

Kids and teens encounter more than just teachers and parents in the process of learning. They have guidance counselors, receive meals, and interact with their peers. Parents and teachers should discuss what resources are available to replace those interactions and supplement online learning. For instance, is the school offering some sort of meal program for students who typically receive free or reduced-price lunches? Are tutors or teaching assistants available for students who need extra help? How can the guidance counselor or school psychiatrist be reached if needed? Is there a contact list for other students in the class if they want to study together? Have parents organized a contact list for other parents in the class that they can share?

DISCUSS EXISTING CONCERNS OR CHALLENGES.

If a student has had a history of learning, behavioral, or health difficulties in the past, it is important for parents to let teachers know. This gives the teacher context for any learning struggles or absences that may take place. It may be necessary to set up an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 Plan to make sure the student's needs are being met. Make sure to be clear about how an IEP or a 504 Plan works in a distance/virtual learning environment.

SHOW SUPPORT FOR EACH OTHER.

Both teachers and parents are going through a challenging time. Parents can support teachers by sending thank you cards or encouraging students to thank their teachers. Teachers can help by showing patience with parents who may be juggling many new responsibilities and working with parents to find solutions to any challenges.

GET ON THE SAME PAGE ABOUT WARNING SIGNS.

A lot of young people are struggling with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will be harder for teachers to notice signs of mental health struggles without in-person student interaction. Parents and caregivers should be aware of the early warning signs of mental health conditions, and teachers can look for hints that something might not be right as well. Check out our fact sheet, *Know the Signs: Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Kids and Teens*, to be informed about what to look out for. If you do notice that something doesn't seem right, set up a time to talk with the school's mental health staff (usually a guidance counselor or school psychiatrist).

WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE HELP?

If you think a kid or teen may be struggling, Mental Health America has a variety of free, confidential, and anonymous screening tools that can help determine if they may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition. Visit [MHAScreening.org](https://www.MHAScreening.org) to get started. Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results.

If you think a child or teen is in immediate danger of taking suicidal action, call the national suicide hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Their trained crisis counselors can help you find local resources or suggest next steps. You can also look up information for a local mobile crisis team, psychiatric hospital, or psychiatric unit and call or go to the hospital for immediate support.



www.mentalhealthamerica.net