Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

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School Decision-Making Tool for Parents, Caregivers, and Guardians

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Many parents, caregivers, and guardians face new and difficult choices about how their child will return to school in the fall, such as deciding between in-person and virtual learning.

This tool is designed to help parents, caregivers, and guardians weigh the risks and benefits of available educational options to help them make decisions about sending their child back to school. It is organized to provide parents and caregivers with:

- Information on COVID-19 and why safely reopening schools is so critical.
- Tools to:
  - Help you assess your child's and your family's risk of COVID-19;
  - Consider factors that will help you make a choice, if offered, of instructional format (e.g. virtual, in person, or a hybrid option); and
  - Prepare for the school year, regardless of format.

Introduction

Schools play an important role in students' educational achievement, health, and wellbeing. Working with local health officials and with parents and caregivers, schools also have an important role in slowing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) while protecting students, teachers, and staff and helping ensure students have safe and healthy learning environments.

As schools begin to reopen across the nation, parents, guardians, and caregivers will be making decisions based on numerous factors, such as individual preferences, health concerns, work situations, and school considerations. When making decisions about school for your family, there are many things to think about beyond academics, such as access to school meal programs, social services, extended day childcare, extra-curricular activities, social-emotional support from peers and educators, and transportation. Parents, guardians, and caregivers will be thinking about numerous factors, such as individual preferences, health concerns, work situations, and school considerations.

Many schools are offering parents and guardians a choice between in-person and virtual modes of instruction. CDC's **Decision-Making Tool for Parents and Guardians** is designed to help you think through school re-entry and the choices that your child's school is offering.

Decision-Making Considerations

Because of the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE), instructional formats such as class size, setting, and daily schedules will likely look different than in past years. Consider the risks and benefits of these different instructional formats. For example, in-person instruction may offer easier access to school services, improved educational efficacy, more opportunities for social interaction and return to work for some parents and caregivers, but it also has a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure for your child than virtual instruction. Families will differ in their choice of instructional formats based on whether the student or members of the household are at increased risk of severe illness, the student's academic needs, the level of COVID-19 spread in the community, available school transportation options, school ability to execute recommended guidelines, the student's social-emotional wellbeing, comfort and familiarity with the school's reopening plans, and the family's situation and needs.

As you are making decisions about your child(ren) returning to school, it is important to consider the full spectrum of risks involved in both in-person and virtual learning options. Parents, guardians, and caregivers should weigh the relative health risks of COVID-19 transmission from in-personal instruction against the educational, social-behavioral, and emotional risks of providing no in-person

instruction when deciding between these two options. Aside from a child's home, no other setting has more influence on a child's health and well-being than the school. The in-person school environment not only provides educational instruction, but supports a child's social and emotional skills, safety, speech, mental health, reliable nutrition, and opportunities for physical activity. This tool is designed to help weigh the risks and benefits of available educational options to help you make decisions about sending your child back to school.

What We Know About COVID–19 and Children

COVID-19 is a newly identified disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. Scientists are still learning about how it spreads, how it affects children, and what role children may play in its spread. Limited data about COVID-19 in children suggest that children are less likely to get COVID-19 than adults, and when they do get COVID-19, they generally have less serious illness than adults [1]. Common symptoms of COVID-19 among children include fever, cough, runny nose, sore throat, headache, body ache, and diarrhea; many children may have mild or no symptoms [1]. As of July 21, 2020, 6.6% of reported COVID-19 cases and <0.1% of COVID-19-related deaths are among children and adolescents less than 18 years of age in the United States [2]. While uncommon, deaths and rare illness such as multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) may occur [3].

Evidence and information about transmission (the way germs move from person to person) of COVID-19 to children is relatively limited. Evidence from other countries suggest that most pediatric cases resulted from children becoming infected by a family member [4]. The more individuals a person interacts with, and the longer the interaction, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread. The risk of getting COVID-19 is also influenced by the intensity of transmission in your community. Your State, local, Tribal, or territorial health department website should provide information about the spread of COVID-19 in your area.

Children at Increased Risk of Severe Illness from COVID–19

Some children may be at increased risk of getting COVID-19 or may be at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19. For these children, parents and caregivers may need to take additional precautions with regard to school re-entry. There are more COVID-19 cases reported among children with intellectual and developmental disabilities than those without [5]. People of any age, including children, with certain underlying medical conditions are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Additionally, children who are medically complex, who have neurologic, genetic, metabolic conditions, or who have congenital heart disease might be at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19, compared to other children. Severe illness means that they may require hospitalization, intensive care, or a ventilator to help them breathe, or may even die.

Household Members and Caregivers at Increased Risk for Severe Illness from COVID–19

While there is no way to ensure zero risk of infection, it is important to understand potential risks and how to adopt different types of prevention measures when resuming activities, including returning to school. Parents and guardians should consider whether other household members are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 when making decisions about which activities to resume.

In addition, long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put some groups at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 or experiencing severe illness, including some members of racial and ethnic minority groups, and individuals experiencing homelessness.

If you, your child, or a household member are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19, you will need to weigh the benefits, risks, and feasibility of the educational options available. The table below will help you to assess your risk for COVID-19.

Household and Community Risks for COVID–19.

In this section, a "True" response indicates higher risk for COVID-19

	Does Not Apply	False	Unsure	True
My child has an underlying condition that increases the risk for severe illness from COVID-19.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I live with someone, or my child's caregiver, is at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19 due to age or underlying medical conditions.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The level of community spread in my area is high.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Critical Role of Schools

COVID-19 transmission and illness are not the only risks to consider when making decisions about sending children back to school. Schools provide important services and supports for children's academic, social-emotional and physical health. For instance, social interaction among children in grades K-12 is important not only for emotional wellbeing, but also for children's language, communication, social, and interpersonal skills [6]. Some students may have experienced social isolation and increased anxiety while not physically being in school due to COVID-19.

Schools also provide critical services, such as school meal programs and behavioral and mental health services. Continuity of other special services is important for student success and lack of access to these services and supports have the potential to widen existing disparities and cause long-term effects on children's educational outcomes, health, and the economic wellbeing of families and communities.

Review Your School's Plans to Reduce Risk

Review local school or school district reopening plans to understand the steps they are taking to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and support educational goals. Schools can implement strategies across 4 key areas to reduce the spread of COVID-19:

1) promoting behaviors that reduce spread (e.g. social distancing, washing hands and wearing cloth face coverings),

2) maintaining healthy environments (e.g., ensuring proper ventilation, cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces)

3) maintaining healthy operations (e.g., staggering schedules, keeping students in small groups), and

4) preparing for when someone gets sick.

Schools in communities with higher levels of SARS-CoV-2 will likely take more steps to prevent the spread of disease. See CDC's Considerations for Schools for examples of some steps schools may take as part of their reopening strategy. Parents and caregivers might also be interested in learning how the school plans to support the emotional wellbeing of students—both in person and virtually.

Schools can work with state, local, territorial, and tribal health officials to determine whether and how to implement these considerations to meet the unique needs and circumstances of the local community. Implementation should be guided by what is feasible, practical, acceptable, and tailored to the needs of each community.

Decision-Making Tool for Parents and Guardians

Choosing whether or not to send your child back to school can be difficult. When weighing decisions about your child returning to school, it is important to consider your family's unique needs and situation and your comfort level with the steps your school is taking to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Some considerations may include the specific risks to members of your household if a child were to become infected in school, as well as access to school meal programs, social services, extended day childcare services and extra-curricular activities, social-emotional support from peers and educators, and school transportation.

The questions in these tools are designed to help you weigh the risks and benefits of available educational options before you make decisions. Recognizing that there may be many unknowns, answer each question with a check in the column that most closely reflects you and your family today. When you are finished, review your answers. Remember, each family is different so certain questions may be particularly important to you. Multiple checks in the "Unsure" or "Disagree" columns might warrant a conversation with school administrators, your healthcare provider, or your employer. Parents may also want to use the tool to make their views, concerns, and suggestions known to school administrators.

If your child or a member of your family has been diagnosed with COVID-19, please follow CDC's guidelines and stay at home until the criteria to discontinue home isolation have been met.

Back to School

Note: These questions address your views about how your school is preparing for school year 2020-2021. If you answer "unsure" to any items regarding your school's plan, consider reaching out to your school administrator for more information.

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree
I feel comfortable with my school's reopening plans for reducing risk of spreading COVID-19.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe my school has the resources needed to effectively implement their reopening plan (e.g., staffing, supplies, training).	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel comfortable with my school's plan if a student or staff member test positive for COVID-19.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe my school has a plan to provide an effective program of instruction every day of the regular school week (generally five days).	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am satisfied with how my school communicates with families about the changes it is considering.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am satisfied with how my school is addressing parents' or caregivers' concerns and questions.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child knows how to properly wear a cloth face covering and understands the importance of doing so.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child can wear a cloth face covering for an extended period of time, if required by the school.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child has a reliable mode of transportation to and from school (e.g., school bus, carpool, walk/bike, public transit).	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am comfortable with how my child's mode of transportation to and from school is reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19 (e.g., decreased bus/transit capacity, wearing masks, increased cleaning and disinfecting practices).	☐	☐	☐	☐

Virtual/At-Home Learning Feasibility

Note: The questions in this section assess whether learning would be feasible for you and your child.

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree
I am able to work while my child is not in school (i.e., can still successfully do my job or I am able to telework).	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have access to reliable internet and a device, such as a computer or tablet, which my child can use for virtual learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can supervise or identify someone who can supervise my child during periods of virtual/at home learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child has a space where I live that is free of distractions during school hours.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My school provides a virtual learning option that allows students to have real-time interactions with their teachers (e.g., have live instruction).	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree
My child's learning style and needs are compatible with digital modes of learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Academic and Social-Emotional Wellbeing

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree
My child will be able to keep up academically through virtual/at-home learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child will receive quality education through virtual/at-home learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child will be sufficiently engaged during prolonged periods of virtual/at-home learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child will be able to stay socially connected during prolonged periods of virtual/at-home learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐
If my child needs specialized adaptive communication devices, equipment, or learning aides, I am able to have them where I live.	☐	☐	☐	☐

School-Based Services

Note: The questions below review some school-based services that your family may be using. You may want to consider whether you have been able to access these services through a virtual/at home learning option, your satisfaction with the services to date, and whether you would prefer to receive these services in school. If your child is at higher risk for severe illness and relies on school-based services that are only available on site, you may want to have additional conversations with your school to address concerns you may have.

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree
If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or other specialized learning or behavior plan… My child is able to receive the required IEP learning accommodations through a virtual/at-home learning option that meets my family's needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
If your child receives school-based learning services (e.g., tutoring before or after school) … My child is able to receive needed school-based learning services through a virtual/at-home learning option that meets my family's needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
If your child receives school-based nutrition services (e.g., school breakfast or lunch) … My child has an alternative to the nutrition services provided in schools that adequately meets our family's needs [Your school district's child nutrition website may have this information].[1]	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Does Not Apply	Disagree	Unsure	Agree
If your child receives school-based behavioral services (e.g., social skills training, occupational therapy, speech/language therapy) ... My child is able to receive needed behavioral services through a virtual/at-home option that meets my family's needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
If your child receives school-based emotional or mental health services... My child is able to receive needed emotional or mental health services through a virtual/at-home option that meets my family's needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐
If your child attends after care (including after school clubs and activities) provided by the school... My child has an alternative to the after-care services provided by schools that adequately meets my family's needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐

[1] School meals in some states may still be available to parents with kids for children learning from home, although this may be subject to change. Learn about parent meal pick-up options here: https://www.fns.usda.gov/meals4kids ⧉

References

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