

Back-to-school 2020

What will learning look like
for your child this year?

School districts have several factors to consider as the 2020–2021 school year starts—how do they keep their students and staff safe? How do they ensure that students are getting a strong education? What about students’ social interaction with peers? Although many districts have their initial game plans ready, these plans may change and/or other schools may still be in the decision-making process.

Given the uncertainty of how students will be participating in school in the fall and beyond (i.e., virtual/remote learning, in-person, or a hybrid model), as caregivers, you are in a unique position to help your child prepare for any of the three outcomes. This may seem like a daunting task, but let’s take it piece by piece. What follows is a review of the models and some tips to help your child prepare.



REMOTE/VIRTUAL LEARNING] Your child learning remotely (i.e., not in a school building) using technology such as a Google Classroom or other virtual learning environment and/or using work packets sent home from school.

TIPS TO PREPARE

- Remind your child that this is how school will be starting but that, at some point, they will be returning to school in their school building.
- Check in with your child regularly. Give them time to express their worries and concerns about not going to a school building (e.g., missing friends and teachers, feeling bored, etc.). Some children may not want to talk about their worries and may prefer to draw their worries in a picture or write about them.



PRO TIP: When your child shares their worries/concerns with you, follow these steps: (1) repeat what they said and/or ask them to talk to you about their drawing, (2) thank them for telling you, and (3) then provide calm/reassuring information. Although some of the things they say might sound silly, remember that children typically process information differently from adults. In their mind, it is a genuine concern.

- Prepare your home environment to increase the likelihood of a successful online-only learning experience. Some tips include:



HAVE CLEAR BOUNDARIES. Identify a specific table/area as the school space. Remove distracting materials from the space. You and your child can even work together and use colored tape to outline the school space to make it fun!

FURNITURE. Make sure the furniture in the school space is comfortable and meets your child's needs. For example, sometimes kitchen tables can be so tall that a child would have to stretch up and over it to reach things. You may need to modify your current setup to ensure your child can easily work with their school materials. Another option is to allow your child to stand up while they work—many kids can focus more easily if they can stand up and move around while they work!

SEATING CHECK. Does your child like to watch TV? Or perhaps they love their box of Legos or train set? PlayStation fan? Position their seat in the school space so they are not facing their beloved toys/distractors. Out of sight (is more likely to be) out of mind. After creating the school space, keep the environment as consistent as possible (i.e., try not to “switch it up”).

- Incorporate fun activities into your child's day at home. Leah Kaufman, OTD, OTR/L (occupational therapist) and Marja Ruderman, M.S., CCC-SLP (speech and language pathologist) at May Institute offer the following tips for helping kids have fun while learning at home:

STAY CONNECTED. Utilize technology to plan phone/video calls with relatives and friends.

STAY ACTIVE. Go for a walk at least once a day. Talk about what you see while on your walk (bring paper to draw different animals or flowers). Practice some yoga moves or play freeze dance. You can incorporate technology into this—many game systems have games that involve standing up and moving around. Additionally, YouTube has several free get-up-and-dance videos that are appropriate for children and teens.

PREPARE SIMPLE SNACKS OR MEALS TOGETHER. Snacks such as trail mix and yogurt parfaits are easy recipes to follow.

- Create a schedule that incorporates clear online-learning time and time for breaks. In general, it may be best to try doing online-learning time in the morning for younger children and in the late-morning/afternoon for pre-teens/teens. Details for making (and keeping!) a schedule can be found in the *Make a Schedule* section on page 4.

IN-PERSON] Your child going to a physical school building for school.

TIPS TO PREPARE

- Remind your child that this is how school will be starting but that, at some point, they may return to online learning.
- Check in with your child regularly (see previous section).
- As much as possible, learn about the different procedures that might be in place at school upon your child's return. An excellent resource is your school's (or school district's) website. These procedures may include mask policies, hallway policies (e.g., “one-way” hallways), lunch/snack routine alterations (e.g., lunch in the classroom), and changes in recess, amongst others. By knowing more about these changes, you can help communicate them to your child—the ultimate goal. Your caregiver mantra should be: “The fewer surprises the better.”

LET YOUR CHILD KNOW THAT SCHOOL IS GOING TO LOOK VERY DIFFERENT FROM BEFORE. Inform them of any changes at their school that may be coming. Describe some of the differences. Show them examples/pictures on the computer (e.g., use Google Images to find a picture of “children in class wearing masks”).

PROVIDE YOUR CHILD WITH PLENTY OF TIME TO ASK YOU QUESTIONS.

HYBRID] Your child attending some school remotely (i.e., not in a school building) and some school in-person. The amount of time spent in-person and in remote learning may vary depending upon the guidelines adopted by your child’s school or school district.

- An example of a hybrid schedule could be for half of the school’s students to have in-person learning on Mondays and Tuesdays and the other half on Thursdays and Fridays, with Wednesdays set aside for a deep cleaning of the school. On the weekdays they are not physically attending classes, students would participate in online learning.
- The hybrid model requires a great deal of flexibility from everyone involved—school administrators, teachers, students, and their families.

- Keep as many beginning-of-school routines as “normal” as possible. This year, back-to-school shopping may look different, but you can still make it fun for your child. For example, rather than physically going to stores, go online with your child and shop for school supplies with them.
- For school supplies that may have a worrisome context to children (items relating to health/safety such as masks or hand sanitizer), give them as many choices as possible when selecting these items. For example, “Do you want the blue mask or do you prefer the mask with flowers?” This simple gesture will give them a valuable sense of control during this challenging time.
- Incorporate fun objects that help them feel and be safer while at school. For example, have them choose a fanny pack to use at school or—even better—make one. It does not have to be anything fancy, just a pack that wraps around them. This can be their special space where they keep extra masks, hand sanitizer, or other calming supplies (like a special supportive note from you!).

TIPS TO PREPARE

- The tips in the Remote/Virtual Learning and In-Person sections are also applicable for this model. Remind your child that this is how school is currently taking place but that, at some point, they might be returning to school full-time or return to remote learning full-time.
- Make a schedule. Details for making (and keeping!) a schedule can be found in the *Make a Schedule* section on page 4.



- Even though your child may initially be going to school in-person, it is a good idea to consider having an at-home learning space ready to go in case schools need to switch to another model (remote/virtual learning or a hybrid model). Prepare your home environment to increase the likelihood of a successful online learning experience (see previous section).



MAKE A SCHEDULE] Having routines disrupted can be very stressful for everyone in the family, especially children. Making a schedule can help provide the consistency that people need during difficult times...and during not-so-difficult times as well!

TIPS FOR CREATING A SCHEDULE

■ MEET THEM WHERE THEY'RE AT.

Consider your child's strengths and challenges when creating a schedule for them. If your child is a strong reader, a written schedule may be a good choice. If your child does not read yet or still needs support with reading, a schedule with pictures (and words below the pictures) is likely a better choice. You can also break down the schedule into very specific components.

PRO TIP: Taping actual pictures of the steps in the schedule is even better! If you are unable to do that, you can find pictures using a quick online search.

- **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** Develop a clear (i.e., succinct, easily understood) schedule. The fewer words, the better. Example: "Math, Reading, Science"
- **CHANGES HAPPEN!** Update the schedule as soon as possible if you anticipate a change in routine. Inform your child of any changes in routine right away and remind them about these changes.
- **USE WHAT YOU'VE GOT.** If you have a schedule that your child used at school, use that as a template. This will help with consistency. Use sticky notes or paper and tape to write/draw each component of the daily schedule so you can swap them around if the schedule changes.
- **GET PHYSICAL.** Incorporate physical activities into the schedule. Kids need "wiggle breaks."
- **BREAK IT UP.** Include breaks in the schedule. Use breaks to do fun activities with your child or have your child play independently. You can also incorporate self-care activities

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such as meditation breaks, music-only time, and stretching.

TIPS FOR USING THE SCHEDULE

- Keep it accessible and easy-to-see (at your child's eye level).
- Review the schedule each morning and provide visual/verbal prompts throughout the day.
- Try to keep the schedule as consistent as possible, but remember "changes happen!" When a change occurs in the schedule, it should be announced or previewed (e.g., "You finished all of your science work for this week. Let's do reading time.").

The ultimate goal is that your child will follow the schedule independently. When your child is completing components of their schedule on their own, celebrate with them!

"Back-to-school 2020: What will learning look like for your child this year?" was authored by Whitney L. Kleinert, Ph.D., LP, LABA, BCBA-D. As the Director of School Consultation at May Institute, Dr. Kleinert oversees the implementation of applied behavior analysis (ABA) direct and consultation services across all school-based contracts, including Boston Public Schools. Dr. Kleinert is a licensed psychologist (LP) in Massachusetts, a nationally certified School Psychologist, a certified health service provider, and Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the doctoral-level (BCBA-D).

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