Transitioning Back to School During a Pandemic

Written for Parents of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder
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The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic requires several adjustments to the delivery of educational services for children grades K-12. New information about the virus, our ability to treat it, and strategies to mitigate spread is generated on a daily basis. As of May 2020, projections suggest a 12-month or longer scenario in which the pandemic could factor into how services are delivered in a variety of public and private sectors.

This document includes

1. A *list of resources* published by various state and national agencies to assist families in safe risk mitigation strategies to reduce the spread of COVID-19

2. *Parent Planning Guidelines for Transitioning Back to School* to help parents prepare their child to return to school in the fall,

3. **Considerations for Conversations with Treatment and Education Providers** to assist parents with how the professionals and educators they are working with can help them to problem solve

This guidance document was put together to reduce the effort families would need to invest searching for resources available to assist them in supporting their child(ren) with special needs.

The recommendations established in this document are designed to support families in Michigan while they attempt to navigate a return to educational services following the 2020 shut down based on Executive Order 2020-35. The MI Safe Schools: Michigan's 2020- 21 Return to School Roadmap was released on June 30, 2020 and outlines the return to school recommendations with 6 phases for return to face to face educational services based on prevalence data of Coronavirus across the state. Families should be familiar with state requirements, as well as considering their personal situation with their family risk and their child's educational needs. The Michigan Department of Education can provide additional resources should parents have uncertainty about specific situations that their child is experiencing that is not covered in this guidance document.

Family and Educational Resources

The Autism Alliance of Michigan offers resources and articles on their website for families of children with Autism that can help them during the pandemic.

- COVID-19 Resources

The State of Michigan offers resources on Coronavirus for childcare providers, healthcare professionals, and residents and community members.

- Coronavirus Resources

Michigan Department of Education offers a variety or resources including news releases related to the pandemic, online learning opportunities, social and emotional health, and many other topics.

- MDE COVID-19 Education Information and Resources
- MDE COVID-19 Special Education

Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Project offers information on Coronavirus related topics for families to access to help support them at home and in getting back to school.

- START Project

Parent Planning Guidelines for Transitioning Back to School

<u>Types of instruction</u>
- **Online**: Fully remote learning, which can take different forms. Much of it is self-paced, self-led instruction, with some real time meetings online. Benefits: Having children stay in the home has the least chance of contracting COVID-19, flexible scheduling may be best for some families. Cons: This form provides the least amount of social interaction, heavy burden on families to provide home instruction childcare, and self-management for adolescents.
- **In-person**: In-person classes with everyone in attendance at the same time. This will likely come with restrictions such as wearing of face masks, social distancing, remaining in one classroom versus switching rooms during the day. Benefits: This form allows the greatest amount of social interaction, teacher-led learning, lesser need for families to provide childcare. Cons: This option may expose students to risk of contracting COVID-19 or spreading the illness, the school year is likely to function very differently from what students have become used to, so this may present transition issues.
- **Hybrid**: A combination of in-person and online instruction, forms vary greatly. Some of these allow for in-person instruction with smaller groups of students, alternating days in school with days of at-home, online instruction. Benefits: Students will get to see some of their peers and engage in socialization, teachers lead most of the instruction, exposure to smaller pool of students may reduce some risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19. Cons: Scheduling might be difficult for some families to work around, there is still a need for more childcare, in-person instruction carries some risk of COVID-19 exposure.

Risk Benefit Analysis of Re-entering the School Environment

Parents should evaluate the risk and benefit of attending in-person school services based on the individual risks that are associated with their child's needs and their family situation. Individual risks should be assessed to determine the level of safety in a given situation, as well as the benefits of returning to school.

Things to consider when determining if returning to a school environment is in the best interest of your child and your family:

- Do you, your child, or other family members or friends that you have regular contact with have an increased risk of serious health complications if someone gets COVID-19 (e.g., over the age of 65; health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, obesity; or immune issues such as autoimmune disorder, cancer treatment, other medications)?

- Does your child engage in behaviors that might make it more likely that they could get or spread COVID-19, such as mouthing objects, spitting, feces smearing, etc.? If so, is there a behavior intervention plan in place to prevent and/or reduce these behaviors?

- If you choose not to have your child return to school would there be increased risk of behavioral issues or significant regression?

- What precautions will your child's school take to ensure learning spaces are sanitized?

- Are there certain educational goals that can be completed via live or recorded video chat?

Suggestions to prepare for the transition to school
The following provides information for parents whose children are returning to in-person or hybrid school services following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is designed to help parents prepare for re-engaging with those services as safely as possible. These suggestions may also be helpful for families preparing for fully online learning.

- Reestablish daily routine - it is important to practice a daily schedule that will be similar to what your child will be expected to do once they return to school. Try to learn as much about the return to school schedule for the fall as you can. For example, attend meetings that your school provides, or contact your child's teacher and/or administration. Once you have that information you can attempt to replicate active and down time activities, mealtimes, transition times, and other aspects of the schedule that your child will be returning to school with. If your child has behavioral issues related to changes in routine and associated with completing work tasks you can start slowly and build up the number of transitions, the type of activities required, and the time on task. You can also supplement with rewards and reinforcing activities for positive behaviors and following directions. When creating a routine, it might be helpful to build in fun and preferred activities into the schedule. Following difficult or nonpreferred activities with preferred or reinforcing ones is a great way to reward completing something nonpreferred.
  - [Preparation key to ready children with disabilities for school year by Purdue University](#)

- Practice gradually changing bedtime, wakeup time – similarly to tips listed above it is important to gradually get back to a regular schedule than it is to make a sudden change. Behavior and performance are impacted by sleep and drastically changing your sleep schedule can result in loss of sleep or restlessness. Try to set initial bedtimes and wake times close to your child's current sleep schedule. Make changes based on 15-30-minute intervals beginning with wake times. Waking up earlier is a natural way to encourage earlier bedtimes. Make sure to avoid naps. As recommended above make gradual changes. If your child is in bed awake for long periods of time before falling asleep at bedtime, then wait until they are able to fall asleep within 20-30 minutes of going to their bed. Following your child's lead in sleep and wake cycles to determine when they are ready to have the schedule changed again will help to make these changes with less behavioral issues.
  - [Autism Speaks Sleep](#)

- Getting ready in the morning – When planning for a return to school it is helpful to assess your child's current ability to be independent or assist with tasks that need to be completed to get ready for school in the morning such as dressing, hygiene, meal prep, packing backpack, etc. It is also helpful to determine which things can be done the evening before to make sure that you have the least amount of stress as possible for the early morning rush. This is especially true if

you or your child are not morning people or if you have other children that you also have to assist in the morning. Once you have determined what you can do the night before and what you need to do the morning of to get ready, set a schedule of what needs to be completed in what order for the smoothest routine and then how much time it takes to complete each task. Practice your schedule with your child as part of your daily routine associated with the bedtime and wake up schedules as recommended above.

- Help kids establish a morning routine by SmartKids
- New Morning Routine - ASD and Visual Schedules by FatheringAutism

- Riding to and from school – Similarly to the recommendations mentioned above it is important to practice the routine of going to and from school. Arriving at school may be associated with positive or negative feelings for your child depending on their past school experience. If it is possible to arrange a meeting with the teacher or to visit the classroom these are things you can add into the daily routine to practice. If you are unable to arrange those things, then it may be possible to do some sort of an outdoor activity on the school grounds that could help acclimate your child to returning to the school building. If your child is not used to going out and traveling by car or bus, then it might be helpful to add other outings into the community before getting started with practicing going to the school building.

- Teach proper handwashing- This can look different depending on the age and developmental level of your child. To begin, it is often helpful to observe how your child currently washes his or her hands. Many children struggle with washing for enough time and getting all parts of their hands clean. Visual aids are very helpful in this regard, as they can help your child to see how proper handwashing is done. Likewise, watching videos of proper handwashing can be very helpful as well. To help your child learn to wash for enough time, which is generally at least 20 seconds, find a concrete way for him or her to mark this time. Many people do this by singing, such as the Happy Birthday song, or watching a timer while washing. Experiment to see which of these your child prefers. There are many visual timer apps that can be used to help mark the time necessary to wash hands.   This is also a good time to practice using hand sanitizer as well. Some children might need to build up tolerance for hand sanitizer, which has a different feel and smell that some might find unpleasant. Practice this by using very small amounts of hand sanitizer, and gradually increase these while giving your child a lot of praise for using it. You can have them practice using hand sanitizer right before they engage in a pleasant activity they are motivated to do, which may create a positive association between the use of hand sanitizer and the fun activity.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends the following steps for proper handwashing:
1. Wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold), turn off the tap, and apply soap.
2. Lather your hands by rubbing them together with the soap. Lather the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
3. Scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds. Need a timer? Hum the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice.
4. Rinse your hands well under clean, running water.
5. Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.
   - Visual aids created by the CDC around hand washing hygiene

- [CDC video on proper handwashing](#)

- Teach tolerance for face mask- This will be important to practice before school begins. Depending on your child's sensitivities, you may want to experiment with different mask materials. Many children with ASD prefer natural fabrics, such as cotton, to synthetic ones. Paper masks tend to have thinner material than cloth ones, and some find these easier to breathe through. Start small, tolerating the mask for short periods of time, and very gradually build up to longer durations. It will be helpful to pair wearing the mask with a desirable reward, such as verbal praise, a high five, or some other desirable object, such as a small toy. You can also teach "First, then": First we put on a mask, then we can go somewhere you want, for example, to a store or a park. You can also make this fun by getting a personalized mask that has a favorite color or character on it. It will also be helpful for your child to learn to tolerate familiar people wearing masks, since this might be a new and possibly confusing experience. Practice wearing them at home and you can do video phone calls (like Facetime or Zoom) watching friends and family members wearing masks.
    - [Social Story about wearing a face mask: created by The Boggs Center and Children's Specialized Hospital](#)
    - [Video on how to teach mask tolerance by Applied Behavior Services (Teaching Children Mask Tolerance: A) Caregiver Instructional)](#)

- Teach social distancing guidelines- Among many changes in returning to school and other places we used to frequent, there will likely be rules around proper social distancing. Many of these will use visual guides to help with proper distancing, such as tape placed on the floor. You can practice following these guidelines in different ways. One such way would be to place masking tape on the floor in your home and practice staying on this spot. This could be made into a game where each person has to practice staying on his or her spot. Framing this as a game may help to keep this activity positive and may encourage your child to follow the rules.

- [Video on teaching social distancing by Brain Pop](#) (Social Distancing: A Kid-Friendly Explanation Using BrainPOP's Make-a-Movie)

- Following new rules- A good general discussion to have with your child is about new rules. Many children with ASD understand concepts in terms of rules and are more likely to follow guidance if it is phrased this way. It can be challenging for rules to change but preparing your child for the change in rules may help. You may have to discuss a few times how there has been a change, and now there are new rules. A way to practice this is to discuss how rules have changed in other settings, such as stores and other indoor places.

- Use of technology – It may be necessary to evaluate or to re-evaluate your child's current skills using technology to assist them in more effectively accessing the school curriculum. Request assistive technology evaluation at school, if not already on your child's IEP. Now that we are having more contact in a virtual environment rather than a face to face one we need to take another look at the skills children have to navigate that and to interact with their teacher and peers. Are they able to meet their current IEP goals with the technology that is available to them? Do they need additional technological support and/or training to better manage the new tasks that they have? It is important to talk to your IEP team about how to best

accommodate your child.
- [What is Assistive Technology?](#)
- [Considering Assistive Technology](#)

- IEP & Contingency Learning Plan– If your child has an IEP or 504 Plan then it will be important to review the IEP. Look at the goals and the services that were deemed necessary for your child and then determine whether and to what extent special education was provided during the school shut down from March to June. If you have questions about progress, then it would be important to schedule a meeting with your child's IEP team. It is also important to determine if the current return to school plan that your district has come up with will allow your child to access the services that are included in the IEP and whether or not you have concerns about how your child will meet the goals that were identified. If there are concerns about this then it may be necessary to call a new IEP Team Meeting to determine the appropriateness of the IEP under the current situation. The team may determine that a Contingency Learning Plan needs to be created. This plan helps the student access services based on changes necessary in light of COVID-19.
  - [Michigan Department of Education Evaluations and IEPs](#)
  - [Family Matters Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education Fact Sheet](#)

- Advocacy – When evaluating your family's current situation and your child's educational needs in the 2020-2021 school year, you might find that you need some additional support to navigate the IEP process or other educational rights your child has. It is important to educate yourself on your child's rights. There are also organizations that can provide families with assistance in examining your child's rights. Below are organizations that offer advocacy for families of children with disabilities.
  - [Michigan Alliance for Families](#)
  - [Autism Alliance of Michigan](#)
  - [The ARC of Michigan](#)
  - [Special Education Mediation Services (SEMS)](#)

- Anxiety about return/illness- It is natural for many children, those with and without ASD, to feel anxious about returning to school and about getting sick. There are many ways that parents can help them alleviate this anxiety. To begin, it is better to talk more about something in order to prepare for it; preparation reduces anxiety. Go over ways in which your child can stay safe, such as practicing social distancing and following personal hygiene guidelines. It is also important to let your child know that most people who get sick from COVID-19 do recover. During moments of anxiety, it can be helpful to find ways to reduce this in the moment, such as practicing deep breathing, going for a walk, visualizing a calm scene. Make sure your child knows that he or she can talk to you at any time about his or her feelings. Keeping a regular routine is also helpful and can be a source of comfort for children. If your child continues to be anxious and the above techniques do not help, you may want to seek the help of a professional counselor or psychologist.

- Videos from Anxiety and Depression Association of America- longer presentation about managing COVID-19 anxiety:
  - Tips for Managing Anxiety and Depression
  - Managing Coronavirus Anxiety: Tips and Strategies for Families

    Picture board to help communicate about health and COVID-19 by patientprovidercommunication.org
  - COVID-19: Visual Aids

Considerations for Conversations with Treatment Providers

Many of the suggestions listed above for school may be applicable to any treatment services your child receives.

You will want to understand what new procedures and safety precautions your child's provider or clinic may have put into place. This may help you determine if returning to in-person services would be best for your child. It will be important to determine if your child can benefit from virtual, online services or if in-person services would best suit his or her needs.

If you decide in-person services are best, then find out what new procedures or precautions your child will have to get used to. These may include some of the ones discussed above, such as wearing masks or washing hands before starting services. Practicing these at home can prepare your child for the "new normal."