Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping With Stress From Making Education Decisions for your Kids Due to COVID-19



Many parents are facing difficult questions around whether or not to send their children to school as schools make decisions around what teaching will look like in the new academic year. This has brought with it a new wave of uncertainty and the stress that comes with it as people weight their personal comfort with the idea of a return to school while the virus is still active in many communities.

Gathering information

If your child's school is reopening for in-person classes this academic year, or starting to do "hybrid" learning—where children will both attend school in-person and online. You may find yourself uncomfortable with the idea of your child re-joining classes even if physical distancing measures are in place. On the other side, you yourself may be facing a return to your workplace but your child's school has decided to continue distance learning, which can place you in the difficult situation of needing to make arrangements for care or continue to home school your child.

The best way to feel calm about the uncertainty around your child's education is to equip yourself with as much information as possible to help you make the right decision for your family.

Find out what the plan is for your area. Look to your local education department or school district to see what authorities are saying, and *why*they're saying it. Has the COVID-19 infection rate gone down in your area, so they think it's safe enough to open schools? Or is a high infection rate keeping schools closed for the near future? Is there a plan to review openings or closures quarterly? Does your school have an opt-in or opt-out system that allows some children to go back to classroom learning while other can make arrangements to stay at home? Are some of the children in certain grades able to opt in or opt out in your area? Gathering as much information as possible will give you a good sense of the situation in your area.

Engage with your community. If there's an email list for your child's school, school district, or the local school board, ask to be on it so that you can get updates as and when they happen. Visit your local hospital's website for information about the infection rates you live. Remember that many things might change in the coming months, so it's important to stay up to date.

Don't rely too much social media. While it can be nice to receive moral support from friends near and far,sometimes well-meaning people can post articles from biased news sources or opinions presented as

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fact. Get your news from trusted, national news sources and your state and local authorities instead. Some of the trusted news sources are **Health Canada**, and the **World Health Organization**.

Making a decision for your family

With all the information you've gathered, you are now better informed to make a decision for your family. Here's are some guidelines.

Talk to your partner or co-parent. They will probably have their own ideas of opinions about what they are comfortable with for your child. This can be tricky if you're divorced, or if your child's other parent has a different idea of what returning to school will look like. It is very important to have an open conversation focused on what is best for your child's safety and education, and try not to bring your emotions into the conversation.

Measure the pros and cons. Ask yourself what you feel most comfortable with, weighing all the information you have. You might find that the course of action you had originally planned is not a reality right now, but may be in a few months. In those cases, have a "contingency plan" for when you *will*be able to do what you'd like. For example: "I want the kids to go back to school, but the county's hospitals are saying that the daily infection rate for our area is high and they are advising that people continue to stay home. When the infection rate drops and health officials change their recommendation, I'll feel comfortable sending them to school." Be sure to talk to your school district or local board if you chose to send your child to school and the rates begin to rise, to see what their plans are should circumstances change.

If your children are older, you might talk to them about how they feel about going back to school. If you feel they're able to handle such a conversation, there's no harm in including them in the discussion. Talk to them about what they are (and aren't) comfortable with, what activities they would like to participate in again, and how they feel overall about being back with their peers social distancing.

Talking with your children

No matter what your child's age, chances are they'll have questions or assumptions about what their next year of school holds.

Be honest. It is important to be honest and direct with your child. If you're unsure about what's going to happen next year, or you haven't made a decision, you can simply say, "Right now we don't have enough information to know whether it's safe for you to return to school. As soon as I know more, we can talk about it again."

Tell your children as soon as you've made a decision with your partner or co-parent. Sit down as a family and explain what you've decided. Make it clear that came to this conclusion after gathering all the information you could because you want your children to be as safe as possible.

Talk about any new family rules. When the COVID-19 pandemic began and communities were in lockdown, many children learned a new set of rules, including physical distancing, regularly washing their hands, or wearing masks. If you've decided they can go back to school, talk to them about what the "new" rules will be. Some questions to consider are:

- Can they embrace their friends on the playground?
- Will they be able to play sports or participate in their regular extracurricular activities?
- Can they eat lunch next to their friends?
- If the situation in your area changes, will you revisit your decision to send them to school or keep them home?

It is important that you allow your child to have the opportunity to ask questions, as they may be getting their information from online, television, or from their friends. If you don't know the answer now, revisit the conversation.

Be prepared for frustration. Your children might not be happy with the decision you have made. Remain calm, focused, and re-state that what you've decided is what you believe is in their best interests. Remind your kids that all families are different and there are a lot of opinions online. Not everyone is going to agree with your family's decision.

Let them express their worries. It's been a very unusual year everyone. Your kids might be feeling anxious, stressed, or worried about doing things they have been told are unsafe. When they talk about their concerns, listen thoughtfully so that they know they've been heard. Let them know that you are glad they spoke to you and that you understand what they are saying. You can also remind them of past times that they felt uneasy or confused before, and how they got through it. If your children continue worry and you see a change in their behaviour, you might consider having your child talk to a counsellor so they feel they are being heard from someone besides their parents.

Explain that the plan you've decided on will need to be flexible, and could change again. For example, if by the first semester of home-schooling there are very few new COVID-19 cases, you might feel comfortable letting your kids re-join their classmates for the second semester. Or, if you decide they'll be going back to school in the fall, you might need to pull them out again if the cases increase. Let them know that you'll keep them updated on any new decisions as soon as you've made them.

Once you've made your decision

Map out what your decision will mean for your family.A return to school might mean that schedules need to change for dropping off and picking up, whereas keeping your children at home might mean you or your partner needs to help them stay on their educational schedule with additional structure. Try to picture what a typical day or week will look like, so that you can plan what changes will need to be put into place.

Understand that your decision might not be popular. Other parents, teachers, family members, or friends might not understand or agree with your decision. So long as you are compliant with local health guidelines, that's all right. Your priority is keeping your family safe and making sure your child's education is as uninterrupted as possible, not worrying about the opinions of others. If someone disagrees with you, you can simply say, "I appreciate your concern, but we've made a decision that we're satisfied with."

Take advantage of your assistance program.

If you're feeling worried or anxious about the return to school, your assistance program is here to help. Our caring counsellors are available 24/7, and can help talk you through whatever problem you might be facing.