

Easing the Back-to-School Stress

August is approaching, which is typically when parents and children begin venturing out to purchase school supplies and prepare for returning to the classroom. Because of COVID-19, this upcoming 2020-2021 school year will look vastly different.

In March schools across the country, including those in Illinois and Michigan, were ordered to close for the remainder of the school year. Now as they prepare for the 2020-2021 school year, in some cases there is much that is still unknown. Will learning be in-person? What about remote learning? A hybrid model? Will children be safe?

It's a whole new world that goes well beyond the first-day-of-school stress for many parents and kids.

Kyle Boerke, a licensed clinical psychologist at OSF HealthCare, says there are conversations families should be having now to get ready.

"Whether it's the peer interactions, or it's masking, or it's addressing any concerns that kids have because while there is going to be excitement from the happy side, there is also going to be some excitement from the nervous side as well and I think that's important to understand. We need to have those conversations now as well," said Boerke.

One thing kids can start doing now to prepare for the return to school is to get their sleep schedule back on track because sleep impacts everything from our emotions to our ability to concentrate.

"Sleep schedules have been out of whack. Since March, when this whole thing came in and schools were shut down, kids were staying up later. They were sleeping in later. We've now been on that instead of a two-month summer, a four or five or six month long extended thing. And circadian rhythms in children is something that we need about two weeks to really fix, so this is really great timing because we have that three to four weeks before school is going to be back in session and we need to be making a concerted effort to get sleep schedules back on track," Boerke explained.

Boerke says that parents and guardians play a huge part in the way their children prepare to head back to school and acknowledges that they may be experiencing similar stress and anxiety as their children. However, whether it is helping them with their sleep patterns or reacting to things in a positive manner as they come, parents and guardians need to remember they serve as role models for their kids.

"Resilient parents create resilient kids. And I think that's probably the most important thing for us to understand is how I as a parent role play and model that resilience and that ability to manage the situation that we're all in right now has a big impact on how my son or daughter is going to do with it as well," said Boerke.

Some students may struggle when it comes to schoolwork especially if it's not their normal learning environment. They may feel added pressure to succeed, but Boerke recommends that parents take the return to school slowly as their child adjusts, especially if they are having to facilitate the learning.

"Be patient. We, as parents, have a tendency to really think [this much] of our kiddos. They are capable of [this much]. They are going to succeed perfect straight A's. And the reality is, we as parents need to meet our kids where our kids are – a lot less than where my expectations for where my child is going to be is at," Boerke continued.

Overall, whether it is wearing a mask, getting adequate sleep, interacting with their peers, or more, Boerke emphasizes the importance in setting a positive tone for kids.

“It really boils down to we as parents setting the right tone and the right precedent for our kiddos – for what’s in their best interest regardless of what our viewpoints might be,” explained Boerke.

For those that may find they need extra support, [OSF SilverCloud](#) is a secure, anonymous and interactive online platform to help manage the feelings and causes of depression, anxiety or stress.