**Safety at School - Virtually**

The 2020-2021 school year is looking drastically different due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to an ongoing survey conducted by Burbio.com, more than 60% of U.S. K-12 public school students will be attending school remotely to start the school year, up from an estimated of 52% in early August.

Dr. Channing Petrak is the Medical Director of the Pediatric Resource Center, affiliated with OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois in Peoria. She acknowledges that while online usage among children and teens has been on the rise, the world of virtual learning can seem daunting.

"In the past, we've always said limit that tablet time, limit that media time. And now we're having a lot more tablet/media time, online time – which we have to because we're doing online schooling. And that's okay. We also just realize, give ourselves a little grace because we're busy, they're busy. So we might want to occupy them with some media time and that's okay. But we have to realize that while they're online, so are people that are not really friendly or appropriate for them to be interacting with," explains Dr. Petrak.

Students across the U.S. typically start their day by clicking a link that then leads them to their online virtual classroom with their teacher and peers.

If your student was supplied with a device from the school, it is important to ensure they are utilizing that rather than a personal device. Additionally, Dr. Petrak recommends that parents and guardians speak to school officials about the safety measures in place for their student's virtual learning experience. It is also important to remind students not to share their virtual classroom link with others in order to keep the classroom a private space for students only and to keep potential predators out.

"I think the things to think about as a parent are what platform is my school using for virtual teaching and online anything. So talking to the school and just ensuring that whatever platform they're using is secure is the first step. I mean, that's number one as a parent. What is that platform? Is it secure?" says Dr. Petrak.

Although security measures are put in place by schools, teachers and students play a role in ensuring their classrooms are a safe space. Not only are teachers able to view who is in their classroom, they also have the ability to create a "waiting room" to preview the students before they enter. This is recommended to use when taking attendance to ensure everyone who is in the classroom is who should be there. Students are also advised to mention anything that may seem suspicious in their virtual classroom to a trusted adult.

"Maybe that trusted adult isn't mom or dad because you're a little worried about that. It might be an aunt or uncle. It might be a teacher. It might be somebody else. But tell a trusted adult."

Most virtual learning platforms allow for individualized, one-on-one conversations and messaging options in order to personalize the experience for students. This also allows the opportunity for students to bring up a concern or potential issue to their teacher without doing so in front of their classmates.

"You do have that option of talking to the teacher alone without everybody else knowing. And the teacher can do the same – they can send a message to a student saying, 'I'm a little concerned about (whatever they're observing). Do you need to talk?' and then maybe they can even hook them up with the school counselor if they need to. So there's possibility there that technology allows us even though we're not face-to-face," explains Dr. Petrak.

The line of communication between students and their parent or guardian during this time is key. Dr. Petrak recommends checking in on your student's school work daily and asking them about their day. Follow-up with school administrators directly with any concerns.