

Back to School Thoughts

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Across the United States, students are in the process of returning to school after the summer holiday. For many students, this will be the first “normal” academic year had since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gone is the mandatory social distancing, masking requirements, and suspension of sports and other school activities. As a parent, I struggled watching my son’s kindergarten year unfold in weird ways. Faces of beautiful children were covered in masks, friends were out for weeks from school for COVID-like symptoms, kids at lunchroom tables spaced so far apart you had to yell to be heard, and many classes being taught by substitute teachers because staff were out sick. Thankfully, my son’s school did a fantastic job implementing CDC guidelines while recognizing the value of in seat learning and having a dynamic classroom environment. I was happy as a parent, clinician, and educator.

However, while our students are back in the classroom, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the challenges our children faced over the past two years. Students were sent to remote learning, often leaving parents to manage curriculum and acquisition of student knowledge. Teachers were left with trying to navigate the challenges of translating complex materials into the online environment (often with no training or access to sufficient technology). I can still picture my wife, a high school math teacher, sitting at our dining room table attempting to not only create, but efficiently deliver dynamic content. Students with special learning needs were often left with limited resources-pushing them further behind their peers. Some are currently arguing that most, if not all, students are academically behind from where they should be and will be playing “catch up” for years to come.

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Students were isolated from friends and in-person support systems. We saw news headlines about increased anxiety, depression, and stress in our children. CNN presented preliminary data in April of this year showing a significant increase in suicide among adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19. The sheer increase of Americans, both young and old, suffering from mental health issues is alarming (particularly in the context of minimal mental health support in many parts of the country).

Finally, the normalcy of being a child was stripped away from many. Children running on the playground, doing a science experiment in the classroom, or heading to a birthday party or sleep over was not allowed. We, as humans, are social creatures and thrive in the company of others. Instead of spending time in activities or with friends, many of our children were found interacting with screens. There is an endless amount of data suggesting that significant screen time can lead to increased rates of depression, anxiety, poor sleep, and even obesity. It can be argued that many of the lock down measures implemented around the world may have helped reduce the spread of COVID-19, but in turn may have created a whole slew of psychological and medical problems.

Overall, the goal of this writing is not to cast a black cloud over the excitement of returning to school and hopefully a sense of normalcy, but to serve as a reminder of what we have all been through. As adults, we have hopefully found ways to cope with the lasting effects of the pandemic, but our children are still building that skill-set. As a parent, clinician, and educator, I celebrate the opportunity to return to a stable learning environment for our children, but it is

imperative to keep a keen eye on those lasting effects from the pandemic. Our children are dealing with content in the classroom they may not be ready for (despite their remote year in school), they are dealing with mental health issues that may be difficult to manage, and many kids may just struggle with developing the routine and consistency that brick-and-mortar education requires (who really had any consistency during the pandemic?). Our return to normal reaches far beyond the elimination of a virus. In my opinion, dealing with the virus was the easy part, the hard part will be helping our children navigate the social, emotional, psychological, and physical challenges they must endure moving into this academic year.