

Tips for Children Returning to School Part of the Time (Hybrid) Due to COVID-19



Center for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy and Central Ohio Primary Care:
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Impact of Hybrid Schooling During the Pandemic?

The general impact of continued educate-from-home approach could increase parents' stress levels, and children's reactions, much like it did in the Spring of 2020. The introduction of partial in-school time with partial educate-from-home time has a reasonable possibility of increasing difficult reactions even more. Realities like weekly changes in routines (e.g., every other week 2 days at school, and off-weeks at school 3 days) create stress. Children in elementary school would particularly have a hard time keeping track of the variations around hybrid models. Parents stress would likely increase as well while they work to keep track of which week it is, and what day is home vs. school-based instruction. As stress increases, family members often become less effective in their roles.

Family Stress and Hybrid Schooling?

While homeschooling creates its own stress (for more on that, see the Tips for Homeschool sheet), the stress from hybrid schooling compounds on homeschooling stress due to the continual back and forth of schedule and role changes. Parents who work often face juggling the variations in weekly routines that result from school calendars. With hybrid schooling, parents face both those "normal" variations (e.g., school being closed due to teacher in-service day), and the shifting back and forth of "days on" and "days off." Negotiating these continual shifts in scheduling with an employer alone create more stress. But add to it that every week parents and children must adapt from their "teacher/student" roles while homeschooling to the "parent/child-off-to-school" roles and additional, unrelenting stress can result.

TIPS for Hybrid Schooling and the Weekly Variations in the Home?

Set-up "Home Days" and "School Days" Routines: The more routines that can be used for these two very different types of days, the better. The "what do we do today" question can produce unnecessary stress, and therefore reducing the need to ask that question helps the family operate more smoothly. Often, once the routines for the two different types of days are created, putting them on a poster or dry-erase board can help everyone keep in mind the "what we do today" for home versus school instruction days.

Create a Color-coded Calendar: Creating a master calendar that tracks the whole school year can serve as a visual map for each week's routines and demands. Because our brains recognize color as a categorical cue, using two opposite primary colors (parents can consult a color wheel to pick the two colors) to represent Home Days versus School Days on the calendar let's everyone recognize what's coming tomorrow without needing to read the words. The less resources a child or parent's brain spends on figuring out that simple difference, the easier they will find it to cope with the ongoing fluctuations in demands on them.

Daily Foreshadowing: In fiction, when we read something that hints at what's coming next, the author has foreshadowed future passages. Like that, parents and children can foreshadow the next few days using a nightly or morning review of the next two to three days. They can review the color-coded calendar after dinner, for example, and create a plan in their heads about when Home vs School days will be in the near future. They then can review the Home Day routine hanging on the wall and discuss something like "Tomorrow is a red day which means it's a school day. Let's look at what we have to get done on a school day to prepare ourselves for tomorrow." The planning for the next day both reduces stress and teaches problem solving/resilience skills to children.

Information Manager: Today's schools send parents lots of information electronically. Some of that information is pushed directly through emails or texts, but a large portion of it shows up in apps like Schoology. The challenges of keeping track of events, PTO funding drives, homework assignments, and project deadlines can be daunting for parents under normal circumstance. The hybrid model produces even more challenges to managing educational information because the already daunting task of information management now varies by Home vs. School days that then impact on how much time at home must be spent adapting to projects, test preparation, etc. For that reason, one parent should become the information manager and in charge of sharing what the school sends out (or posts on an app) everyday with the other parent and the children. Planning for what's next needs someone who is always on top of the information coming from the school.

Social Director: A key impact of the hybrid model will be the creation or re-emergence of peer social relationships. In a non-pandemic world, those relationships among children create demands on the family to organize play dates, sleep overs, etc. The hybrid model creates limitations on how much socialization can occur at school and will likely increase demands on the family to engineer out-of-school socialization among new or re-discovered friends. Parents can best cope with this stressor by working together to share their collective time supporting play dates, balancing those with ensuring protections against virus exposure. Also, flexibility and adaptation to the "at a moment's notice" requests from children can help parents manage children's needs during the pandemic.

Risk of COVID-19 Exposure: Teaching children and teens the value of risk management and implementation of strategies like handwashing and mask wearing will be important for the School days. Parents will likely need to be sure that the bookbag not only has lunch and homework in it, but also has hand sanitizer and two or three masks tucked away. Another Tips Sheet is available on teaching increased personal hygiene habits during the pandemic. But, the best tip of all is to practice at home what is required at school. In this case, the old saying "practice makes perfect" is indeed the case.

Resources and Referral

If these tips are not enough based on your family's needs, ask your pediatrician for a referral to CCBT. If you need help motivating your child more or deals with inattentiveness, ask for a referral to CCBT. The behavioral health providers at CCBT can help create more detailed plans than this form, and answer questions that are more than what's discussed here.