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How co-parents can agree on a back-to-school plan, according to experts



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Summer wasn't even in full swing before parents around the country began fretting over the specifics of the 2020-2021 school year. The stressful questions abound: Should children head back to in-person instruction or all-virtual learning? How might families in which both parents work handle child care, if instruction is entirely distanced? And for exes who are co-parenting, how do you agree on what's best for your child's academic and extracurricular life in the fall?

"The uncertainty of what this [coming school year](#) looks like for children due to all the controversy only adds to the existing controversy in most co-parenting relationships," says [Linda Snell](#), a licensed clinical social worker at [New Method Wellness](#) in San Juan Capistrano, California. "The uncertainty of the pandemic and the challenges it brings for virtual learning in the home can override the co-parents' ability to collaborate and make decisions. Co-parents' may abdicate the responsibility of back-to-school to the parent who has been typically responsible for it in the past or who they feel has less responsibilities or more time."

We talked to Snell and several psychological and legal experts on navigating co-parenting and the complicated terrain of heading [back to school during a pandemic](#). Here are their seven best tips for getting on the same page, based on the issues co-parents are struggling with the most.

1. Consider which learning option is in your child's best interest

Experts agree that co-parents ought to approach any tough questions around back-to-school by considering what option is in the best interest of the child. Co-parents can approach their child's schooling situation like a business decision and use business guidelines to depersonalize it. "Focusing on compromise and consistency are key components," notes Snell. "Co-parents need to agree and demonstrate a willingness to support each other throughout the school year, which allows the children to view them as a team."

If clashing persists, it might be time to bring in backup in the form of a child's pediatrician, therapist and/or school counselor. "The advice and guidance of a neutral party who knows your child and is familiar with the family and family dynamics can be helpful in bridging the differences and helping to set up the new normal for schooling, as well as offering suggestions that are progressive and mutually-agreeable that neither co-parent had thought of," she says.

2. Keep your child's schedule consistent

While agreeing on a set schedule, both for day and night, might feel especially challenging during a time filled with so much uncertainty, it's a key step for co-parents and kids. "Both parents should be fully informed about each child's virtual learning schedule and try to maintain a similar schedule," notes Wendy B. Samuelson, an attorney with Samuelson Hause & Samuelson, LLP in Garden City, New York.

This means mealtime, screen time, instruction time, homework, exercise, free time and bedtimes all should be similar, regardless of whose night it is, adds Snell. "Doing this can go a long way toward your child's adjustment to feeling stable and secure during a time of uncertainty." In turn, this will support their academic success.

3. Decide who will take on which tasks that support your child's education

[Jennifer Weisberg Millner](#), an attorney who concentrates her practice in divorce, custody, adoption and appeals and is a shareholder with Stark & Stark in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, says the most important decision for most families will be determining who is responsible for supervising the virtual learning, and this might be based as much on which parent has both the time and the space for a child to learn optimally.

"Parents who have been separated or divorced should set aside their preconceptions about their parenting schedule and allow their child to work in a place that is most conducive to virtual learning, regardless of 'whose day it is,'" says Millner. "There will be plenty of time to make up for lost days when this is all over. It is paramount to ensure the child is in the physical space that will provide the best learning experience."

She also recommends that parents decide who will take the reins on keeping in touch with educators. "Many school districts are trying to engage the parents in the virtual learning process, so there should be a discussion and agreement made as to who will be the parent of primary contact for any learning issues and conferences with teachers," says Millner.

And no matter who is stepping up to take on these roles, it's crucial for co-parents to keep one another posted, explains Victoria Nungesser, licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist in Newtown, Connecticut. Co-parents who effectively communicate can better offer their child the consistent guidance and support they need while managing their class requirements, she says.

4. Make sure your child has devices that are required for learning

Optimal learning from home requires having Wi-Fi and certain equipment, says Millner. "When parents first believed that virtual learning was only going to be a temporary arrangement, many students were making do on mobile phones or tablet devices," she notes. "Now, with virtual learning seemingly becoming more prolonged, parents should consider acquiring a laptop or desktop computer with strong broadband connection, so that the child can get the best learning experience possible."

Along the same lines, Millner advises that co-parents determine whether or not there will be a laptop computer traveling with their child if they are moving back and forth between their parents' residences or whether there will be a computer available at each parent's house for their child's exclusive use. One parent can also volunteer to liaise with the school on any loaner equipment a child might need.

5. Talk about transportation

"One particularly frightening issue for parents is that of transportation to and from school for their children," says Millner. "For children who live within walking distance of school, parents are likely going to be concerned that if unsupervised, their children will not respect social distancing and wear their masks. For children who will be utilizing school provided transportation, these same concerns will exist when their children ride the school buses."

Although many districts are implementing precautions like ensuring school bus windows are open and children are masked and spaced out in seats, fears and risks persist. For that reason, parents should work to get on the same page about how their child will be getting to and from school, recommends Millner. "[Creating carpools](#) with other parents in a [bubble](#) is an excellent way of avoiding school provided or public transportation while making sure children are safe," she says.

6. Take risks into consideration and contingency plan

Nungesser says hybrid learning, which is a mix of online and in-person learning, could bump up the family's risk of exposure to the novel coronavirus. Extracurriculars and after-school social activities could present a similar conundrum. That's why it's important for co-parents to communicate about the safety measures the child and other family members will take, such as [social distancing](#) and [mask-wearing](#), around these activities.

And while being [exposed to COVID-19](#) or getting sick yourself isn't something any parent wants to think about, it's a must right now, says Nicole Sodoma, Managing Principal, family law attorney and certified Parenting Coordinator, [Sodoma Law](#) in Charlotte, North Carolina. "Much like children who are taught what to do in school if there is a tornado, parents need to put together a safety plan in the event the child is exposed to COVID-19 during instruction or otherwise," she says. "Start discussing now what the [plan of action](#) is if either parent, another person living in the home or the child is exposed to COVID."

7. Consider getting everything in writing

Not all co-parents will need to go to a lawyer, but having guidance in a document or agreement can be comforting, notes Sodoma. "Just like insurance, or any other contract, formally drafting a document helps protect you and your children in the event of an emergency or disagreement," she points out. "Not only can it serve to resolve disagreements quickly, but parents can also agree to direct issues of impasse to third parties such as therapists, co-parenting counselors and even parenting coordinators in some jurisdictions."

The case for finding common ground

In addition to making for smoother sailing at home and giving a child more confidence and comfort that they can handle whatever curveballs the coming school year might present, working to get on the same page will model effective conflict resolution skills for a child to use in their own current and future relationships, says Nungesser. She points out, "It also creates unity in the family system, which is going to be a positive for any child as they attempt to adapt to their 'new norm.'"

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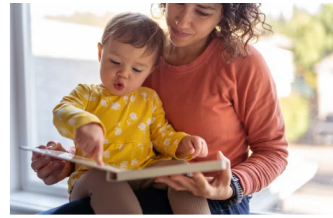




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