

## Laughing to Keep from Crying: Coping with Back to School in the Era of COVID-19

8/24/2020

Sarah here. Across the country, the school year is starting- if it hasn't already, it will be within very soon. For the past couple of weeks, we've brought you practical ideas and support to help you and your family get ready for the 2020-2021 school year. First, Lisa shared information about getting an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to meet your child's needs (see *Advocating for Your Child's IEP*). Last week, I focused on developing a game plan and getting yourself organized for back-to-school given this year's...unique global health climate (see *Let's Get Organized for Back-to-School!*).



This week, I'm changing gears to focus on the emotional side of back-to-school. And, oh my goodness is there ever an emotional side of back-to-school this year! Back-to-school *every year* is full of excitement, anticipation, anxiety, uncertainty, angst and dread. But, this year, we have all of that normal stuff *plus* an overwhelming helping of uncertainty, courtesy of COVID-19. So, things are a big stressful mess and *everyone*—kids, parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, bus drivers, extended family members, health care providers...seriously, *everyone*—is experiencing a jumble of emotions about going back to school in the era of COVID-19.

I wish that it weren't this way. I wish that back-to-school was easier and more straight-forward. I wish that there wasn't so much stress about making decisions for you and your family. I wish that school staff members felt safe and weren't distressed about returning to schools. I wish

that kids could go about their business as usual and that parents could feel okay instead of struggling with doubt and guilt about their back-to-school plans. I wish that things were “normal,” but the truth is, I’m not really sure what “normal” is for school at this point.

So, instead of lamenting about how things “should” be or giving you an optimistic-to-the-point-of-being-naïve pep talk, I’m going to use a strategy that may help you cope with this and other challenging times. Providing empathy with humor and helping you laugh to keep from crying.

Ordinarily, back-to-school is a time that parents look forward to...



But COVID-19 has created a *lot* of stress for parents! In a lot of families, it may be the parents—rather than the kids—who are hesitant about the start of the school year. As I mentioned last week, a lot of kids seem to be *thrilled* about going back to school this year- even kids who normally *hate* school. They *can't wait* to get out of the house and be around other people!



Of course, not all kids feel so excited about returning to school in-person. Some kids are really hesitant to be out and about in the world. After so much social distancing, they have serious concerns about whether it's safe or a good idea to return to school in-person. Instead of being giddy about the change of scenery and seeing their peers, reluctant kids may feel more like:



And frankly, some kids may be digging virtual school. They may be independent kids who thrive at self-paced learning. They may also really love their COVID-19 wardrobe.

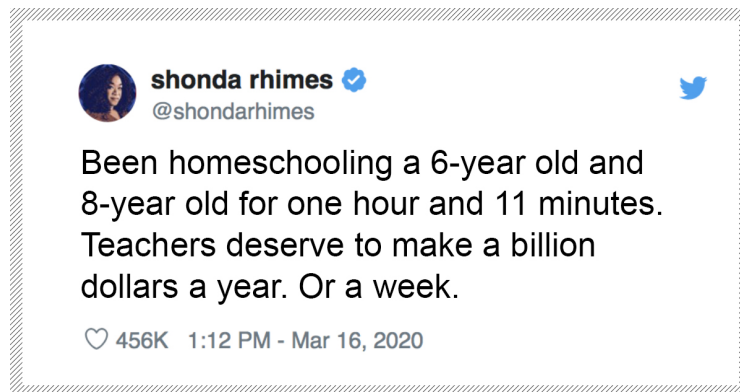


Some parents have concerns about sending their kids to school, but school attendance may be a necessity given practical considerations, finances, academic needs and, well, sanity. Virtual school isn't feasible for everyone...I mean, families may have made it across the finish line in the Spring semester, but let's face it, a lot of us ended up feeling like:

**I'm homeschooling like that  
substitute teacher who  
rolls in the tv for a movie  
and just eats snacks in the  
back of the class.**

@fruitsofmotherhood

While parents may have valued and appreciated teachers before, well...let's just say that being thrown into teaching gave many parents a lot more appreciation for what teachers actually do:



It's a fact: COVID-19 has turned everyone's normal plans upside down. This year, instead of it being a given where kids will go to school, parents (and schools) across the country have been faced with difficult questions. What will education look like? Will it be in-person? Synchronous remote school? A hybrid model with both virtual and in-person class? Will school be conducted by classroom teachers or through a separate "virtual school?"

Schools are trying to prepare for various contingencies, develop decision trees and "follow the rules" specified by the higher ups (governing school boards, county, state and federal officials). With all of the possibilities, teachers learning about back-to-school plans for Fall 2020 may be hearing:



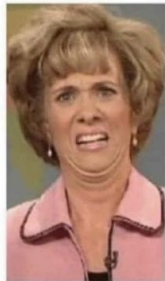


**Alexandra Finley**  
@AlexJFinley

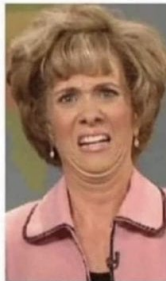
Admin in 2020: please be prepared to teach online, in person, both simultaneously, on a moving train, while juggling, in a burning building, under the sea, during a wrestling match with a T-Rex, as a hologram, and riding a unicorn. Also be safe and we value you.

Meanwhile, parents have been anxiously waiting for news about how back-to-school will be proceeding for their kids. They may have taken surveys about their preferences and may have been asked to select which instructional model their child will be utilizing this Fall. Frankly, none of the options seem great right now, leaving many parents feeling like:

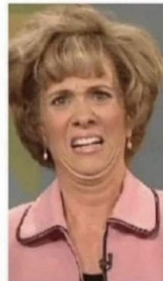
Every parent right now



STARTING SCHOOL  
IN PERSON



STARTING  
SCHOOL ONLINE



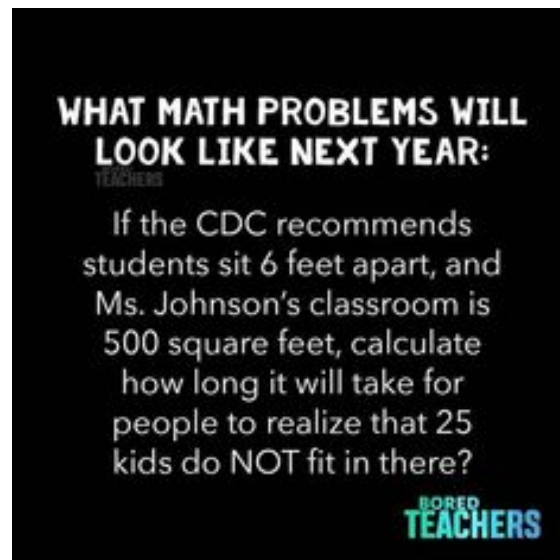
HOMESCHOOLING

Feeling like all of the available options for your child's upcoming academic year are less-than-ideal at best and cringeworthy or downright unrealistic at worst is not a great spot to be in. That can cause some serious parent stress. Like many parents, my husband and I had to select our daughter's start-of-school option for Fall 2020. This process felt a lot like:

Schools: Please confirm your decision on what your child will be doing this Fall by next week.  
Every parent:



Parents, teachers, administrators...everyone understandably has a lot of questions about how school reopening plans will actually work. Schools didn't *magically* get larger classrooms, more teachers, and massive budget increases...so if classrooms will be following student-to-teacher ratios and social distancing protocols...



So, it's not surprising that a *lot* of teachers are feeling anxiety about returning to the classroom. While it might be easier for teachers to manage stress about their own health and safety if they

were decked out in protective gear from head to toe, I think we can all agree that this wouldn't make for a very warm and friendly learning environment:



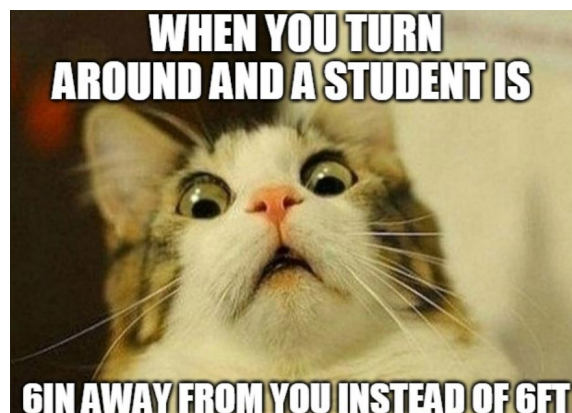
That being said, teachers will have the difficult task of balancing instruction, classroom management, and overseeing the health and safety of themselves and their students. I could easily imagine that leading to reactions like:

Me last year when a student wanted to give me a hug: awwwww come here honey, you're so sweet!!

Me when students want to hug me now:



...or reactions like:



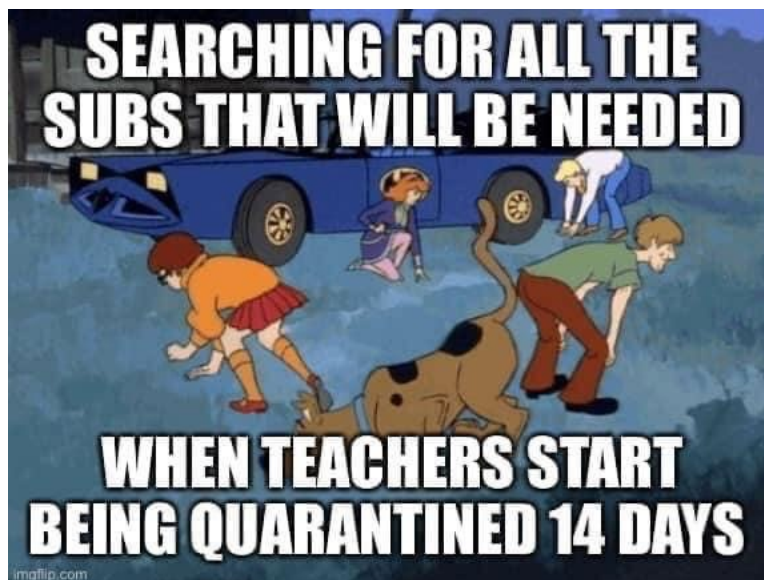
Consider one intersection of classroom management and health behaviors: wearing face masks. Now, imagine being an elementary school teacher who is trying to ensure your students wear their face masks properly and consistently in class. Some truly ridiculous things I could imagine a teacher having to say include:

***"Please do not chew on your mask."***

***"No, you may not blow your nose in your mask."***

***"You're not a pirate, please take your mask off your eye!"***

Here in Florida where our case numbers continue to be high, it's hard to feel hopeful that schools will remain open- even schools with really solid plans for sanitizing, distancing and protective equipment use. There are many schools across the country that may have pretty transparent guidelines and decision trees for COVID-19. But, when I think about contingency plans for what will happen when students and/or staff inevitably test positive for COVID-19, I can't help but feel like they aren't very realistic...





Many parents and educators aren't sure of what *would* need to happen to transition to 100% virtual education. So, we're left telling our kids and ourselves:



That's the truth: it's normal to be nervous about the first day of school. It makes sense for *everyone* to be nervous about the first day of school this year. So, as we start the Fall semester, just remember that there are...

Two kinds of people when going back to school



We can choose to put on a happy-albeit-maybe-a-bit-forced-and-nervous face before school starts. We can curl up in a ball and wish that it would all go away. But, as parents, our kids are watching how we approach the uncertainty of this academic year. So, do the best you can, remember we're all in this together, your feelings are valid and sometimes you need to give yourself a break. It's okay to laugh to keep from crying. Sometimes, that's what gets us through.