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How to ease children into this most unusual school year

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PORTSMOUTH – While most school districts are beginning their year with remote learning, or some form of a hybrid model because of COVID-19, kids are searching for ways to deal with their new normal and the specialists say they might need help.

Children of all ages have not been in a classroom since March. They are grieving the loss of socialization, cut off from their friends, from sports and other extra-curricular activities that were a big part of their daily life.

Some are eager to return to school, while others are fearful and cautious. Child experts say the adults in their life need to recognize their feelings, and to learn new ways to talk with them about growing up in an unprecedented time.

Jodie Lubarsky is the Child, Adolescent, and Family Services Director at Seacoast Mental Health Center. She said kids are having a range of emotions, not the least of which are fear and grief, and one way to address this is to have conversations that are transparent and honest.

“Kids have grieved, and a second wave of grief is imminent,” said Lubarsky. “Kids have not been to school under the new guidelines and their classroom will not look like it did before. I think each grade will have its own differences in the ways it has to adapt. I think the process for a kindergarten student will be vastly different than that of a high school senior.”

Lubarsky said the adults should prepare for this second wave of grief. She said it is the caregivers who can help kids feel safe and comfortable.

Lubarsky said the Department of Education released guidelines, leaving the decision to each school district to decide how to structure their school year. She said educators want to teach, but must also learn a new way of doing it.

“There is no one size fits all, no right or wrong answer right now,” said Lubarsky. “What works for a small rural school may not work for a large urban school. Parents need to be comfortable with their own decision and not worry about how others perceive their choices.”

While many children are feeling stressed out, so are their parents, the experts said.

“A lot of parents are feeling overwhelmed,” said Rebecca Balok-Searles, a Behavioral Health Clinician for Lilac City Pediatrics/Goodwin Community Health. “Kids are, too. They’re excited about returning to school, but they’re overwhelmed at the thought of much of their learning taking place online. Everyone seems unsure of the future.”

Children thrive on structure and routine but that may prove challenging in a COVID-19 world.

“This is a time of massive uncertainty for kids,” said Kelsey Goodwin, a pediatric rehab therapist at York Hospital. “I have always worked with kids, stressing the need for structure to their day. Well, the pandemic brought that to its knees. I still advocate for structure for kids even if it ends up being a bit non-linear to what they are used to. A lot of the kids I work with say they like coming to see me because it represents a sense of normalcy between their new situation and what they were used to before. I am still here even if other things in their life are not right now. The kids want things to be the same and I want them to understand there will be a new form of structure in their lives, but they can have structure.”

Goodwin said it has been five months since kids stepped inside a traditional classroom.

“Even when they go back, things will not be the way they remember,” said Goodwin. “So many new rules and restrictions will be in place. We need to make sure kids understand this.”

Balok-Searles said she is seeing kids with various symptoms of depression.

“They are showing anxiety at having to home-school,” she said. “They are upset at not being able to socialize. Some are struggling a lot. Parents feel they lost a lot of the education time they should have had by now. I see one child who lost the end of his middle school year. He never got that closure and now he is a freshman in high school. That is a big transition to happen in a bubble. We need to acknowledge this is abnormal.”

A big concern for Goodwin is the greatly increased amount of time kids will be spending in front of a screen, for schoolwork and for play.

“Too much screen time suppresses melatonin,” said Goodwin. “It messes up sleep. We have always advocated for kids to not use devices at least a half hour before bedtime. Parents should try to find a way to break up the time kids spend in front of a screen, into shorter time periods.”

Goodwin said many kids and families are having a difficult time regulating their concerns.

“I see the worry in kids and in their families,” said Goodwin. “Not being able to see their friends is causing kids to grieve; it’s tough. Change is happening. Having structure can help and having parents model calm supportive behaviors is crucial. Parents will help kids navigate this new world.”

“We have to have hope and we have to impart that to our children,” said Lubarsky. “There will be times of anxiety and conflict. We need to hope this will get better and put one foot in front

of the other. We need to tap into our resilience and figure out how to come out of this in the end. We need to work together, and we can get through this.”

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has good information for parents regarding schools opening, at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>.