

UW Health: Children face added stress in return to school amid COVID-19 pandemic

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MADISON, Wis. – After a summer largely free of the stressful pandemic experience many students faced in the 2020 school year, it is time for students to return for the new academic year.

Some students will return in person, while others will attend school virtually, and those attending in person will return and wear masks in schools, in many cases, along with other public health measures, and these things can compound the anxiety many students face returning to school, according to Dr. Marcia Slattery, pediatric psychiatrist, UW Health, and professor of psychiatry and pediatrics, UW School of Medicine and Public Health.

Parents should know that many children and adolescents have anxiety before starting a new school year, long before COVID-19 was a factor, she said.

“A common trigger for anxiety is uncertainty; not knowing,” Slattery said. “Who will be my teacher? Will I be able to do the work and get good grades? Will other kids like me? Will my locker work?”

But, certainly, the pandemic adds additional dimensions of anxiety and stress for kids at the start of this school year beginning with the endurance of in-person attendance five full days each week. Additionally, students could have anxiety about the greater work expectations, as online classes typically included fewer tests and less homework.

Beyond academics, the social demands of gathering closely with hundreds of other

children can be a challenging adjustment for many, and compounding this scenario is the anxiety over getting sick or making others sick, Slattery said.

Routines are an anchor for children of all ages when things are in flux, which has proven especially true during the pandemic, she said.

So, while things may change at school, a strong home routine, like doing homework at the same time, getting to sleep at the same time each night – and getting adequate sleep – incorporating exercise and eating meals at the same times, can go a long way to helping them be resilient, according to Slattery.

Also, if it's possible, to help ease children into the new environment, take them to tour the school, practice driving by the school and learning drop-off and pick-up areas, she said.

"It's all about familiarizing environments so the children know what to expect and when," Slattery said. "There's a lot in flux because of the pandemic, but empowering children and families to control what they can goes a long way."