



NAMI Ask the Expert: In-Person, Virtual and Everything In Between – Supporting Families and Children Returning to School

August 27, 2020

**Presenter: Meghan Walls, PsyD, Pediatric Psychologist, Nemours Al duPont
Hospital for Children, Division of Behavioral Health**

Dan Gillison ([00:00:01](#)):

All right. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much, Teri. So good to have you all with us on today and for you to make this investment of your time. On behalf of NAMI, our board, our board president, Dr. Shirley Holloway, and our staff, we'd like to thank you for taking your time to be with us on today. This is a very, very timely topic. In-Person, Virtual, and Everything In Between: Supporting Families and Children Returning to School. As we know, returning to school could look a lot of different ways for a lot of different families and their children right now, so we're very exciting to have Dr. Walls back with us again. The Ask the Expert series is just what it says, ask the expert, so we appreciate Dr. Walls doing that for us. Without any other comments from me, I'd like to introduce our chief medical officer, Dr. Ken Duckworth, who will introduce Dr. Walls and give you an overview in terms of her background. Ken?

Ken Duckworth ([00:01:01](#)):

Thank you, Dan. I encourage you to submit questions after Dr. Walls' presentation. We're going to be taking all manner of questions related to this first-of-its-kind presentation on thinking about the mental health dimension of schools and parenting and learning. Dr. Meghan Walls was a guest on a prior Ask the Expert, Talking to Your Kids About COVID-19, perhaps in April or so. And as she is a pediatric psychologist at Nemours Children's Health System in Wilmington, Delaware, we wanted to have her back to have the conversation about schools, remote learning, and all the things that travel with this series of unknowns in the educational world.

I want to thank Dr. Walls for donating her time to our remarkable community, and I encourage you to give her your full attention. I'll jump in with questions when she's done, and I'll be taking them off of your questions directly. Thank you, Dr. Walls, and thank you all for attending.

Meghan Walls ([00:02:12](#)):

Thank you guys so much. I just want to make sure I have control of these slides here. Can everyone see these from the NAMI team? Let me know if you can see that.

Teri Brister ([00:02:21](#)):

Yes.

Meghan Walls ([00:02:22](#)):

Awesome. Great. Thank you all so much for being here today. Thank you to NAMI for having me. As Dr. Duckworth said, I spoke in the spring about COVID in schools, and I'm happy to be back today talking about this important issue. As Dr. Duckworth said, I'm happy to take lots of questions at the end, but we'll try to cover a lot of different topics, and I'll try to make sure that we're addressing some of the things that I think are most important as we think about our kids and our families going back to school. So, I will not bore you with the list of what we're going to cover, but really, we're going to talk about the whole gamut, so what does preparing to go back look like, what does talking to kids look like, and what's going on with kids' mental health as well? I think one of the most important things we think about here is how we are addressing this as a family and how we're addressing this as a community.

Meghan Walls ([00:03:25](#)):

So, what do we know about COVID-19 and family mental health? There have been a few surveys done nationally that show higher rates of stressors, higher rates of mental health issues. Particularly, those seem to be around, for adults, depression and anxiety. There is also a couple of studies or surveys that looked at women who are caregivers, so healthcare providers, mothers, I suspect teachers will be dumped in this group as we come to the new school year, and that has been really significant on that population. So I think that's a really important piece to consider. Personally, I practice psychology as a pediatric psychologist, and my own division at our hospital is at about 120% of where we were compared to last year. We have also seen an increase in suicidality, particularly in teenagers, and those sometimes lead to suicide attempts, so greater ED visits.

Meghan Walls ([00:04:26](#)):

Certainly, we are seeing some hard data on what's happening, but also, we know there is increased family stress. If you think about what's happened during COVID and as we're approaching the fall school year, we've had lost jobs, lost wages, childcare issues. We've also had family illness. So why do these things, and why is COVID particularly, I think, sort of impacting mental health in a way that we have not seen with other issues? I think we can think about COVID as two things. One is ... I talked about this a lot during my last presentation, but it's a novel virus, but it's also a novel situation, so navigating it is understandably difficult. But why else? Why is this sort of mental health surge happening?

Meghan Walls ([00:05:18](#)):

I like to call this ... ooh, almost knocked things over ... the perfect storm here. When we talk about mental health disorders, these are the things that create worsening or sustaining of mental health disorders or mental illness. Things like the lack of sense of purpose or a lack of sense of time, social isolation. Unknown is one of the most difficult things for humans, so not knowing what's coming next, this inability to engage in usually pleasant activities. We can think of school for a lot of kids as one of those activities, as well as sports. A lot of kids are missing sports.

Meghan Walls ([00:05:57](#)):

And then the middle that I put here, because I think this is really important when we think about kids, especially, and teens, is we always say things to our kids like, "Don't worry. You won't get that sickness," or, "You might get the flu, but it's no big deal," and we have a lot of kids and teenagers whose worst formerly irrational fears are now coming true. So people are getting really sick, people are dying, and this all coming together can really create difficulties. We're going to talk a lot today about what we can do to [inaudible 00:06:31] this perfect storm, because I think we can throw our hands in the air and say, "Well, this is really hard. A pandemic is terrible. We are bound to have more depression, anxiety, trauma." Or we can say, "This is really difficult and let's figure out how to go forward with it."

Meghan Walls ([00:06:50](#)):

I think the other important thing here is, these variables are happening to children and adults. So it's not just that kids are not in school or not playing sports. Parents are not able to see friends and family. We think about the disconnect between a lot of grandparents and older generations and what's happening during COVID. So when I say "the perfect storm," I'm not just saying because we were taking kids out of school. It's because there are so many things that have changed in the past couple months that are really different than how we used to look at them. So I want you to keep that in mind as we talk through that. I expect some difficulty, but that there are definitely things we can do to kind of work with that.

Meghan Walls ([00:07:35](#)):

I want to talk ... and I've done a couple particular interviews and talks with folks about this, because I think how caregivers are thinking about a plan for school is so important. I'm located in Delaware, as Dr. Duckworth mentioned, but I have watched parent mom groups, parenting under COVID groups, sort of just become undone at the thought of the school plan, and I think that goes no matter what the plan is. As Dr. Duckworth mentioned, we're going to talk about in school, we're going to talk out of school and virtual, but what comes first is that you get this plan. And that can be really overwhelming to parents, and I want to take the time to acknowledge that because I think sometimes as caregivers, teachers, parents, we are basically being told, "Well, just deal with it." Okay. But first, let's take a moment to kind of sit with your plan.

Meghan Walls ([00:08:30](#)):

So currently, my kids are going virtual, and that was a hard thing for me to deal with at first. I'm a clinical psychologist. I see patients all day. But before we talk to our kids, we have to adjust and accept it. So many of you probably know your school plans. If any of you are in the situation that the East Coast is on, we have made plans and changed plans and made change like 100 times at this point. So sometimes I know the plan doesn't stick, but certainly, I want to make sure that we are thinking about what we can do to address this issue.

Meghan Walls ([00:09:07](#)):

So being accepting of sitting with your own feelings. It is okay if you hate the plan. It is okay if you want to go sit and cry for a few minutes. It is okay if you're overjoyed with the plan and feel really relieved. Those are all valid emotions. I like parents to make a list of questions that they have, so if all of you have questions still hanging in your heads and reach out to your school or child's teacher specifically. So for a lot of parents, that might be even hard to think about what your questions are, which is why I suggest taking that step back and thinking about it. And so, when you reach out, you can word those questions in a way that is both, I think, appropriate and respectful, but also sort of demand some answers. You are your child's advocate. If your child has an IEP, before you talk to them about what the plan is, ask how those goals will be met. I have seen schools do so many different plans, and I have really asked, "How can we make sure that your parent and child dyad is going into this in the right way?"

Meghan Walls ([00:10:17](#)):

The next thing is gathering your support system. If you have friends, relatives who can help you out, get them on board. Have a conversation with your employer. Some states are different, but I have been really encouraging to parents to talk about how we can navigate this in the working world, because as parents, not all of us can take off all the time we need to maybe do virtual learning. If we are a parent who is an essential worker, maybe that might be even more difficult. But there are some ways that you can use FMLA and some of those other things, so I strongly encourage a conversation with your employer.

Meghan Walls ([00:10:58](#)):

Model appropriate coping skills. So feel your feelings. I talked about that a little bit. Take the time to deal with it and cope with it, but then also engage in some techniques that have been helpful to you. If you're a person who is saying they need to go out on a run before they process this, great. If you're someone who needs to talk to a friend, great. But use those things. And the other thing is for parents. If you think of your own ways of coping, I think getting back on these regular schedules, making sure you're getting enough sleep, making sure you are on your own daily schedule is really important.

Meghan Walls ([00:11:37](#)):

I am going to go rogue here. I know I'm not supposed to answer the questions, but someone asked, "What is FMLA?" Family Medical Leave. There's actually a lot of employers who are accepting Family Medical Leave for a school excuse, so if your kids are being homeschooled or virtual schooled.

Meghan Walls ([00:11:54](#)):

So why is it so important? I love some of these pictures, and I think what this shows us ... What I love is that bottom ... well, it's my bottom left. It might be your bottom right. But what that shows is that mom is upset, and it's okay. She's coping with it, she's taking a moment to gather herself, and her kid's giving her a hug. The mom who's screaming at the kid in the top right corner, the kid's screaming back. So what I've been saying about school is, if you throw a tantrum, your kid is going to throw a tantrum about it, too. If you

say that you need them to take a breath and talk to you about it and figure it out, they're going to do so much better.

Meghan Walls ([00:12:36](#)):

You think about babies. When we have babies, people always tell you your baby feels your energy. Well, your baby feels your energy the whole time they're living in your house. So if you are stressed and feeling like that mom in the top middle, take your time and then go approach your kids. If you can tell your kids what you're doing to cope, even better. That is, I think, one of the most important things that we can really do here. So I think if we can focus on that modeling good coping, we've already gotten through half of the battle here.

Meghan Walls ([00:13:11](#)):

So, what to say when you actually start to approach this system. I think parents get a little bit, I think, both nervous and exciting in some cases, and we end up ... and even me as a psychologist ... giving our kids all this information. So what I suggest is, actually, for your younger kids, if you haven't talked about COVID in a while ... So you might have talked about it in passing. You might have talked about it as it's on the news. But if you haven't had a conversation with them, go watch that other webinar about how to talk to kids about COVID. But the quick tips are, brief information, truthful information, and basic information. So for example, I might say to my five year old, "Part of why we're starting school this way," whatever it might be, "Is because of COVID. Do you remember about that virus we talked about?" And see if they remember.

Meghan Walls ([00:14:04](#)):

The second thing is, ask first and then listen. I think this is one of the biggest mistakes we make as parents, and I will include myself in this, is we ask our kids a question and we're so prepared to respond to them that we don't fully hear their answer. So when you're thinking about, how are you feeling about school? How are you thinking about it before you even tell them what the plan is? wait and hear their answer. For all you know, you might assume your kids are really upset about virtual or upset about going back, but they're okay. So you really need to listen to those answers.

Meghan Walls ([00:14:39](#)):

Give small pieces of information, things like, "Your school is going virtual for the first six weeks. Your teacher's going to send us some instructions of what your day looks like. Do you have any questions?" And stop and let them ask those questions. For your kiddos who are a little bit older, that might look a little bit different, right? So that might be something like, "You're doing virtual school. I know this is going to be a lot. You're being asked to be independent, which is really hard. How can we help you out?" Those are all good questions to ask your older kids.

Meghan Walls ([00:15:16](#)):

You have to be honest if you don't know the answers to these questions. There are so many things about COVID, unfortunately, that are unknown, which is why I put the

unknown in that perfect storm we talked about. It's okay to say to your kids from three to 18, "I just don't know the answer to that." What that does is two things. One is, it makes them feel like they can trust you, that you're not just making something up. But the second thing is, it gives you the opportunity to actually discover it together. So, "I'm not really sure what your teacher is planning on doing about turning in assignments. Let's ask her together. Let's find out."

Meghan Walls ([00:15:51](#)):

Another thing that I really think is important is talking about what they're excited about for the year, and you'll see me mention this a couple times here and there throughout. But I think when we have certain situations, whether that's all virtual, hybrid, in person, we sort of feel like we need to assume what's good and bad about that. But instead, you can ask your kids, "Hey, what's one thing you're excited about this year?" My eight year old told me that she is super excited because she doesn't have to get out of bed early, which is true. She has an hour and a half longer to sleep. So there are sometimes things that kids can do, and we'll talk again more about that. I think that's really important.

Meghan Walls ([00:16:33](#)):

And then, ask if they'd like to talk about how they're feeling intermittently. As time goes on, like, "Hey, I am checking in today. This is not a one-time conversation. I'm going to come back to it in a couple days and see how this is going." The other thing about return to school is, I think we have all been talking about it in the media and even in district level of, what's happening when we get back. Well, back to school is going to be a process. It might take two weeks for your kids to settle in, so making sure you're checking back is really important. Not every kid will be negatively impacted. Some will be, some won't be, but I think it's really important that we are at least paying attention to how they're feeling.

Meghan Walls ([00:17:15](#)):

Then the last thing is ... One of the things I love that we can do to help kids feel comfortable is, how do we battle against the unknown? We give things that are known. And so, what we do here is we can do things like ... For example, if you have an elementary school kid and their teacher sends you the schedule, instead of just keeping it in your email, print it out and look at it together. "Here's what your schedule's going to look like for the day. What are you most excited about?" It might be, "Hey, you are going back to school hybrid version. What backpack are we going to use this year?" So tangible things that people can wrap their minds around, and that goes for your teenagers, too. So having them print out their schedule, having them talk to you about even things like, "Oh, your friend got their license this year, right? Aren't they planning on driving you to school? Can we talk about if our family is comfortable about that with COVID?" So these things can really, really help to set kids on the right path, at least.

Meghan Walls ([00:18:13](#)):

I want to also talk a little bit about what words we use. Often, I think we fall into two categories of either, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. This is terrible," or, "It's fine. Get over it," and we need to find that middle ground. So the empathetic, validating words, things like, "I am so sorry that you're frustrated about virtual learning. I totally can understand why this would be difficult for you." Other things like, "I also am missing my friends." It is okay to use actual empathy, like, "I know how you're feeling and this is really hard." I don't think there's a single person who can say COVID has had zero impact on them, right? It might be for the better, it might be for the worse, but we've all had some impact. Use that empathy. Build that bond with your kids.

Meghan Walls ([00:19:02](#)):

Let them be sad or scared or upset, so don't shut down those feelings. In pediatric psych, I call these the "big feelings," and I don't like to shut down the big feelings because I think that tells kids it's not okay to feel that way, and it also tells kids, "You just have to stop and not tell me you feel that way," and that doesn't help with coping. So I want them to be able to do that. And then another thing that I think is important is, I work in practice and I have a lot of teenagers say to me, like, "I don't want to talk to my mom about this," so they'll text their moms, or they will write their mom a note about it. So I encourage thinking a little bit outside the box here about how can we be thoughtful and creative about communication.

Meghan Walls ([00:19:47](#)):

The other thing is, once you've had this whole conversation, pick one thing ... one thing ... that they're feeling really positive about and really think about how we can make a plan for that. An example of this for a younger kid might be your, I don't know, fourth grader says that even though they're doing virtual learning, they would love to get a couple new folders and their new markers and that would make them feel really excited. It's small, but it's something you can say, "Okay, let's come up with a plan for that. Should we go shopping online? Is our family comfortable going to the store?" That planning really helps kids to wrap their minds around what's going on.

Meghan Walls ([00:20:29](#)):

For an older kid, that might look like, "Tell me one thing I can help you with before the school year starts." And they may say something like, "Last year, I got kicked offline all the time because everyone in the house was using wifi. How are we going to fix that?" And it might be, "All right, great. Let's talk to your school, make sure you have your Chromebook, your internet provider, and make sure we have that done." Just that one thing really, really helps kids to get on board with this.

Meghan Walls ([00:20:54](#)):

This isn't on the slides, but one of the most powerful things we can do is to offer our kids ourselves as their support, but also to have a plan to do so. When we can combine all these tips I've given with that empathetic, validating parent, kids do really well. A question I've been asked a lot when they're having these conversations is, "What do I tell my kid ..." And again, we'll talk about some of this, but, "What do I tell my kid if

they're really sad because they can't see their friends? Is this going to do damage forever?" What I talk about is being empathetic, but then also reminding your kid that you want to have that relationship with them. Your family is often stuck in your house together, so make the most of that. Really build those bonds, keep that conversation going, but offering a way to communicate is just so extremely important.

Meghan Walls ([00:21:50](#)):

We kind of know what to say, or maybe how to start the conversation, and we know a little bit about that we need to pull ourselves together and model good coping. That doesn't mean not showing emotion, right? Sometimes good coping is showing emotion and then knowing how to deal with it if it gets too hard or too difficult to function. But those are the building blocks, right? But what do we do? How do we help our kids get through this, and how do we prepare for the school year?

Meghan Walls ([00:22:22](#)):

The next piece that I want to talk about is talking to our kids and our teens about resilience. I love this image. I have used this in so many presentations because I don't know about all of you, but there are so many times I hear people use the word "resilience" and I'm like, "I don't know what that means exactly to you," or, "I don't know how you're defining that." To me, what resilience means is the ability for kids to go through something difficult and work their way back.

Meghan Walls ([00:22:51](#)):

A key that I think is important here is, that doesn't mean perfection. A lot of families and schools expect you have something bad happen or difficult happens and now you're fine again. And to me, resilience is the ability to work through those difficult things. And as parents and teachers, I would argue that helping our kids learn how to get through difficult times is our most important job. It's really a lot easier to parent when things are going well. It's a lot easier to teach when things are going well. But when things are going wrong, that's when we can actually teach kids the building blocks to how they cope with things in life.

Meghan Walls ([00:23:32](#)):

I won't read this entire thing, but what I like about this image is I think it shows that resilience is not one thing. It's not that you can have enough emotional control to get through something and move on. It's not just that you can learn about coping and move on. But instead, it's the willingness to work and overcome those difficulties combined with these other things. One of the things that I think is really important on this chart that I think we leave out a lot when we talk about resilience is the connection piece. When kids have connections, they do better. We can talk ... and I'm happy to answer questions and answers about how that looks different this year. But I think that's something that we often don't talk about with resilience. We talk about the kid's coping skills. We talk about how the kid's doing, but do we talk about, who's in their community? Who's their friends? Who's their teachers? Who are they trusted adults? Who are their therapists? Who are their physicians?"

Meghan Walls ([00:24:32](#)):

So I think we need to remind ourselves that part of being resilient is having a team that's behind us. And for kids, that's all of you, and I assume why you're signed on here, because you have a child or teen in your life who's really important to you. So I think those are all things that can be thought about with resilience.

Meghan Walls ([00:24:51](#)):

The other thing that is really important to think about with resilience is when we look at young kids ... so kids in that early elementary range ... the number one thing ... and which is part of the connection piece ... but the number one thing that ... or the number one variable that affects resiliency in young children is one caring, consistent adult, which is from the Harvard Center for Child Development studies. I think that's really powerful, because I don't know about all of you, but I have talked to a lot of parents and, frankly, even felt this way myself, where I think, "Oh my gosh, my kids are not having the things that they usually have." And it's nice to take a step back sometimes for those younger guys ... so early elementary, K, 1, 2, and think, like, that adult is still really important in the development, and those relationships go a long way. So again, that's why I focus so much on how are we talking to our kids? How are we interacting with our kids, and how can we keep moving forward from that?

Meghan Walls ([00:25:53](#)):

I mentioned this already, because it's my favorite thing, the one consistent, caring adult. But there's this quote that I love, and I think this goes beyond just our little kids. I'll paraphrase here, but basically what it says is that every child should have an adult who is totally wild about them. It's from a developmental psychologist and it's much longer, but that's the point of it. I go back to that so frequently, that we can have so much power as adults in our kids' lives. To me, that builds a responsibility, but also a relief, and so I hope that that's something that you all take with you, that even showing up to a presentation like this when you're stressed and trying to think about school means that you are thinking about what's best for your kiddo, and you already are being that caring adult. So I think that's a really important piece, and I think parents are really hard on themselves during COVID because of the juggling of everything, and that's something I like to focus on.

Meghan Walls ([00:26:49](#)):

Allowing emotional responses is important, but so is labeling them. So for kids who are in elementary, and even middle school, I see kids who don't really know the difference between maybe frustrated and angry, or they are not sure the difference between their body feeling anxious versus sick. And so labeling emotions with kids is powerful. For little guys, you can do this by, like, "Draw me how you feel," or, "Here's a person to color in. Color in the colors you're feeling," and talking through that with them, because we want to, again, validate this is a novel, weird situation, to have a pandemic, and we're all going to get through it if we validate and empathize with the emotions.

Meghan Walls ([00:27:36](#)):

What else? We can teach positive coping skills. And I'm recognizing as I'm saying this out loud that I did not send these three links to my friends at NAMI, so I'll do that right after this presentation. But my three favorite active coping skills are diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery. And I actually have short videos on each that I really like that are on YouTube, and the reason I like them so much is because they're free access, so everybody can get them. You don't have to download a fancy app. You do not have to have access to anything but really a smartphone to use them. Basically, the reason I like these three so much is diaphragmatic breathing is really teaching kids and teens what I call low, slow breathing into their bellies. And progressive muscle relaxation is quite literally teaching kids how to progressively relax their muscles by tightening and releasing. And guided imagery is when you think about probably something like a guided meditation, but for kids, they break it down a little more.

Meghan Walls ([00:28:36](#)):

I like these three the best for a couple of reasons. One is because they are something to do. I talked a little bit about the fact that having something to do is so helpful. Two is because they give an immediate response. Almost every child and teen I do this with feels some relief right afterwards. It doesn't stay forever, but it convinces them it's worth working on coping skills. And the third thing is that these three techniques actually are aimed at both the mental and intellectual piece. So when we're feeling really nervous, how do we get our brain to quiet? But they also address the physical anxiety and angst that a lot of kids are feeling right now. And in fact, there's great research on biofeedback, which is when they hook kids' fingers up to machines to read their temperature and their sweat. These three particularly are great at changing kids' physiological response. How much better do all of us feel when we don't have a racing heart or sweaty hands or a pounding headache? So that's the reason that I picked those three, and I'll make sure to get those links out.

Meghan Walls ([00:29:46](#)):

I think the other reason that those are great is because I find that even my young kids ... I would say down to four and five ... can do these easily. But these are great for the whole family. So when you're teaching your own kid resilience, when you're thinking about what you're going to do, a great thing that you can actually do is do this with them. This coping skill doesn't have to be, "Here's a YouTube. Go do it." It can be one of your things. Maybe your kid says to you about school, "I have no idea, but I'm just really anxious." Great. Let's do one of these things together. Let's focus on them together.

Meghan Walls ([00:30:23](#)):

Another thing you can do is instill that confidence during change and hard times. While I don't recommend saying, "It's all fine," I think you can say, "We're going to get through this and we will make sure that you do okay." Or, "It probably is going to end up being okay once we figure out school." Phrases like that are okay to say to your kids. The other thing you can say to your kids are things like, "I believe that you have the tools to

get through this," or, "I believe that you are so great at math that we will make sure that you keep excelling in math this year," really instilling that confidence in them.

Meghan Walls ([00:31:00](#)):

Another thing ... and anyone who works with my clinically, this is my phrase I walk around my clinic saying is, "Avoid avoidance." One of the key pieces of how we continue to maladaptively cope ... so how we adapt in not great coping skills ... is by avoiding things that make us anxious, sad, whatever it might be. And I don't mean really scary and dangerous things. I mean things like we don't go and talk to our kids about school yet because we just don't think they can handle it yet. Things like, we're not going to tell them that they're not in the same class as a kid they really like because they might get upset. Avoidance breeds anxiety. So the longer we avoid something, what happens in our brain is our brain says, "Oh good, you did it," and that means that that thing was actually really scary, good thing we didn't do it, and now the next time that subject comes up, it becomes even scarier. So when I say, "Avoid avoidance," have these conversations, engage in the anxiety, think about what you can do to help your kiddo, because that will really, really truly help you all to move on.

Meghan Walls ([00:32:08](#)):

Keep socially connected and be creative. I am extremely lucky. I am on our medical staff at a children's hospital, so I have the benefit of both my amazing psychology colleagues working on the mental health side, but also some of the best pediatricians, infectious disease docs that I know. We've talked a lot about how to be creative about being socially connected while being safe, which is a hot topic in itself. But we've learned a lot about COVID, so we've also learned that things like being outdoors, six or eight feet away from each other spaced out is okay. Can your teenager see their friends in safe conditions? It's hard. It's hard to believe and hope that your kids will follow those rules. Can we schedule play dates or FaceTime instead of just trying to catch someone on the fly? Can we write a letter? Can we do a drive by where their teen is going to drive by and talk to your teen in the driveway for a half hour? We can be socially connected.

Meghan Walls ([00:33:08](#)):

What I think is so wonderful about what we've learned research-wise is it's given us some permission to not shut down in our houses, but to figure out how we navigate this. The biggest loss, I think to all of us, is this social piece. Teenagers, kids, adults, it's really difficult, so being creative about how to engage is just one of the top things that I think is important.

Meghan Walls ([00:33:34](#)):

Encourage this kind of, "Try again," attitude. I'm sure some of you on here have kids who did virtual learning last year and it was probably not great. I'm sure some of you had kids that got pulled out of school later than you would have wanted them to and it wasn't great. So I would approach this school year like a new one. Encourage your kids that this is going to be a new start and we are going to try again.

Meghan Walls ([00:34:01](#)):

Then the other thing is to help reframe kids' thoughts. I'm going to talk a little bit more about this one particularly, because I think it's important in how we address and approach these issues. Negative thoughts are really common when things are hard, but they can actually lead to anxiety and depression. So what we know is that when we are already anxious and depressed, we tend to have more negative thoughts. But we also know when we start to have some of this stress, the same thing can happen. The example that I often give for COVID is that you had this thought when everything shut down of, "Oh my gosh, this is never going to get better," and that can send you into this place where you feel very, "Oh gosh, maybe that's true," and your anxiety gets spiked and it sort of starts this cycle.

Meghan Walls ([00:34:51](#)):

So reframing thoughts ... In the world of therapy, we talk about our cognitive approaches, and this is just one piece, but I think it's an important piece, and I wanted to share it because I think it's something you can actually offer your children and your teens as a tangible tool, not just how to cope with things and calm down, but how can you guys interact. So helping kids reframe can actually improve their mood. The example I'm going to give here is your kid is whining and crying and really complaining ... and let's say they're 11 or 12. They're really complaining and they are having the spins and you say to them, "Why are you so worried?" And they say to you, "School is going to be terrible online this year." And you say, "Okay. Can you think of any other ways we can think about that?" And they might say no.

Meghan Walls ([00:35:46](#)):

So you could start offering some thoughts. "What are some good things that might happen? Might you get to sleep in later?" "Well, yeah, I really do like to sleep." "Cool. Might you get to actually hang out with our neighbor who has been really safe, too, and you've been seeing already more than the normal school year because you end earlier?" "Yeah." And you can help them walk through that. Then you ask them, not you, to tell you, "Okay, let's play a game. Let's reframe that thought. Tell me a different way you can think about this." And so, for this example, that might look like, "School might be tough online, but I'm so glad I get to sleep in later and learn code this year."

Meghan Walls ([00:36:25](#)):

Here is the most important part about trying to change the way we're thinking about things. We are looking for flexibility, not perfection. So what I mean by this is sometimes we have the tendency to flip and be like, "No, no, no, school is going to be so great and perfect and wonderful," and our kids and our teens see through that, and we see through that. We know that's probably not the totally correct answer. But if we can get our brains to be flexible around thinking and to think about the fact that there is so much else that we can consider, then we can do a lot better with these things. So when you're thinking about this kind of thing, it's not perfect, it's just flexibility. How else can we think about something?

Meghan Walls ([00:37:11](#)):

Routines and schedules. I won't spend super long on this, but I wanted to touch on this. I think one of the most important things we can do ... And when I talked about the perfect storm, I talked about no sense of time and purpose. So getting back into normal routines. Whether your kids are going to be virtual or in person, start having them set their alarms. Have a bedtime, even if they are virtual and let's say your school ... For example, some elementaries, I know, are doing half days, just going the afternoon. I still want your kids up at the same time and going to bed at the same time. Consistent meal plans. For your younger kids, you can make this visual. Make their chart of their schedule. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it can even be pictures. Wake up time, breakfast, lunch, dinner, especially if you have a week or two. For my younger kiddos, I love to have them have something they can do. That might mean checking a box, it might mean ... Some families that I work with actually have this schedule on the fridge and they move a magnet when they're doing each thing, so something tangible.

Meghan Walls ([00:38:18](#)):

For older kids, I really love the idea of them having their own planner or calendar. We are so reliant on our iPhones, but they don't do the same thing to help our brain organize. If your kid is looking at their wall calendar of what's coming next versus looking at their phone and a text pops up from a friend, those are very different things. So we want to make sure that for your older kids, you're not just saying, "Look at your Chromebook," or whatever else, but print out that schedule, put a planner on their wall, really get them involved in the process. And basically, what this does is it just helps our brains function better. We know that our brains are going to do better if we are on a schedule. It improves mental health, it improves our sleep, and those are so important in having a good school year.

Meghan Walls ([00:39:09](#)):

So, what do we do about some of our preparations for actual school? I was on our governor's taskforce for school reopening, so admittedly, I have probably read the CDC guidelines and gone through these things more than the normal person here. So much of my perspective was, "Let's talk about kids' feelings and let's talk about what things we can do to help them be comfortable." The first thing is addressing your child's feelings about school. And again, I talked about how we should do that. We shouldn't say, "Are you nervous?" Instead, we should be saying, "How are you feeling?" You can ask things like, "Are there things you're excited about and kind of nervous about?" Those are fine, but don't put the feelings into their heads. Don't say, "Oh my gosh, you must be so nervous about going back into that classroom." That is not helpful.

Meghan Walls ([00:40:03](#)):

If they are fearful, address those worries. Talk to your school. It's really hard because there's this balance between sort of overemphasizing the safety piece or making kids feel like you're really worried about it, too, and it won't be okay and not doing anything. So just as an example here for going back to school, I recently heard from a child who was really nervous because she had heard that if she walked on the floor in her school

and someone had coughed and didn't have their mask on, she would get COVID. And we do know that surface-to-surface is not as common, so the mom and I talked her through the facts. We said, "Surface-to-surface isn't as common," but we also talked to her about, "What would make you more comfortable?" She was like, "Well, I don't know." I said, "Let's think about it." And one of the things we came up with was that she would leave her shoes outside. It's a small thing. We're not overemphasizing the fear. We're actually mitigating that fear, right? But we're addressing it. If you blow off kids' worries about return to school in person, I think we're really doing them a disservice.

Meghan Walls ([00:41:10](#)):

Talk about the changes your school is making. I have seen school plans. I know these schools have a bazillion changes in rules and your job as a parent is to pull out the most important or what I would consider the most different for your kids and talk about those. Those might be distancing, hand washing, masks. This picture is pulled from kids who already started school but in a different country with their face shields on. What is the change, and how do you prepare your child?

Meghan Walls ([00:41:41](#)):

The next piece is you need to actually prepare for that change. I did share with NAMI ... and these will go out in the email ... some great resources that we've worked on with Nemours about mask wearing. We feel at our organization ... and I feel pretty strongly as a pediatric psychologist ... that there are certainly kids who have developmental issues or who perhaps have other medical issues who may be excused, but that most kids can be taught mask wearing. In our clinic, I would say down to age three, kids do really beautifully with it, especially if we talk about it. So that tip sheet will be addressed and added into when they send that out.

Meghan Walls ([00:42:25](#)):

But some of the things that I just wanted to mention real quick about that are things like, we're going to not take out the mask the day they have to go to school and say, "You have to wear a mask." We're going to prepare a couple days in advance. If your kid's a kid who is just a fidgety kid, I really suggest doing some things like finding a preferred activity. So a lot of my little guys, K through three, I tell the parents, "Save screen time for when you want to practice mask wearing." Try different materials. Try different behind the ears, over the head. You can try different things.

Meghan Walls ([00:42:58](#)):

Talking about social distancing. If your school is going to put your kindergartner or your fifth grader or your eighth grader six feet apart, then I think it's important to talk about this concept of, "You're going to be distant, yeah, but also, it's there for a reason." And also, hand washing and hand sanitizing is a big one. If you haven't already ... I think most families have ... KidsHealth from Nemours is a great hand washing video for little guys. For your older kids, having them watch some of the really funny TikTok videos on hand washing are really important. Let's make sure our kids know how to do the health hygiene pieces.

Meghan Walls ([00:43:40](#)):

And then framing these as keeping people safe is really helpful. So even, I think, for older kids ... But I'll be honest, I even do this approach with our little guys, like, "Hey, you are helping to stop COVID. Do you know that?" And they think that's great. And then reaching out to your school to answer questions is important.

Meghan Walls ([00:44:00](#)):

Addressing 504 and IEP needs. Preparing the kids for the schedule. I've already talked a billion times about asking your kids how they're doing, but that's that. Don't plant the negativity is a big one for me. So for parents who are really upset with the school plan, that goes back to what I talked to in the beginning. And then to keep that conversation going.

Meghan Walls ([00:44:19](#)):

What about virtual learning? The same two things are, I think, important. What are your kids' worries? What are they feeling that they're excited about? Another thing is setting up that learning space. Last year, admittedly, I think we were all thrown into a little bit of chaos, but we want to be aware that space actually is really important. There's some good research talking about clearing space and making sure we have dedicated space to work. That's for adults, too, so for those of you who are working at home, trying to separate your work space, so not laying in bed on our laptops. That goes for our teens and our kids, too. Laying out that schedule for your younger kids so that they can kind of see. Maybe you color code it if you've got time or have them do it. I like to print out a schedule and have kids color it in. Math is pink or science is red. Have older kids work on their own schedule. So if they can print it out, if they can hang it up.

Meghan Walls ([00:45:18](#)):

Set the expectations. If your child has a schedule, talk to them about it. If they're going to be home, working in breaks is really something that's useful. Most schools that I've seen the schedule for have them built in, but if they don't, making sure you're taking those breaks. If your child's going to be in childcare doing virtual learning, ask them. That's your job and your right as a parent to know, "How are you doing some breaks from the screen time?" This is a lot of screens, right? And then working with other families about what they're doing. Can we figure out how our kids could maybe do some learning times together? Can we exchange help with math because I'm less good at it than you are, and I'm really great at teaching your kids letters. For older kids, that might be that you talk about which teen is really good at something and can they find time offline to connect in some way.

Meghan Walls ([00:46:12](#)):

Again, I actually think this might be even more important for virtual, addressing any IEP or 504 needs, so Individualized Education Plan needs. And again, preparing your kids. Are there specials built in? Is there recess built in? I know some schools are taking the option of saying, "Let's squeeze virtual in in less hours and then we'll let you go," versus building in a recess. Thinking about ways to connect with peers is really important. I

think we understand that some of our kids are missing out on really big things here, so I talked already about how to be creative with that, but I just think it's so important to think about. And I think, as a pediatric psychologist, my job is twofold. One is to make sure that we're taking care of the mental health of kids, but that becomes bigger to me with this. To me, my job is also to help families navigate and figure out how to be creative during a really difficult time.

Meghan Walls ([00:47:06](#)):

Work on small social gatherings that keep families safe. I am sure you guys have all seen articles and on the news about bubbling or having one or two families you trust, and that seems to be something that works pretty well for people. Focusing on the positive, again, reframing it, making sure we keep the conversation going, again, is really important. But also, that we are thinking about, for our virtual learners, that reframe I talked about. I have heard a lot of kids who have said it's really difficult to think about what this will look like, or, "I'm really struggling to ..." Teenagers. "I'm really struggling with the concept of going virtual." So I think if we can help people to get on board with reframing, we're going to do so much better with helping our kids. And I, again, think that empathy is so important here. So I don't want to blow that off, but I do think how we talk to our kids about it is extremely important.

Meghan Walls ([00:48:23](#)):

As I think I always try to do, I always try to wrap up talks talking about, what about mental health? I think one of the most important things here is that we know this is an adjustment. For some kids, I would even go so far as to saying this can sometimes make things feel traumatic. And for some of our families, they have lost family members. They have lost jobs. There have been, in certain populations, much higher rates of COVID. So I certainly also want to address that for some kids, this is not just an adjustment to school, but an adjustment to the last six months, and so we're helping them prepare to enter back into normal. But we also need to understand that it's not every kid. The reason that I think that is just so important is because we know that our kids deserve to be checked in with and to be treated as individuals. Of kids who experience traumatic events ... I always like to throw this in here ... about 10% of those kids still have symptoms or concerns a year later.

Meghan Walls ([00:49:42](#)):

We also know that COVID is ongoing. Learning and different approaches to learning are new, and so we want to make sure we're considering the fact that one year later for these kiddos might not be March, it might be next July, it might be next fall. We're not really sure yet. And that sort of goes to my next point. We don't know the overall outcomes. It's too soon. But we do know that we can keep checking in. We do know that if you, as a parent, or your child is having a change in things like sleeping, eating, irritability, mood, you should be checking in and reaching out for help. If your teens are kind of retreating, don't want to be engaged with others, it might be time to reach out for help. I will give applause to my colleagues across the country here because I think we've all done an incredible job of reacting to the pandemic, and almost all providers are using telehealth now. Some are back in person, but if you're having concerns, I think

it's so important to reach out. Your pediatrician is a great place to start, or your insurance company.

Meghan Walls ([00:50:55](#)):

But I really want parents to think about the fact that, yes, this is an adjustment. Use the tools I talked about. But if your child or teen seems to be doing really poorly, you really need to reach out to get more help and more assistance. You are not in this alone. There is always a way to make those connections to mental health providers. And in most of our ... We're very lucky. I'm in Wilmington, Delaware, we have Nemours and surely we have CHOP, but there's a lot of great children's healthcare systems that do an incredibly good job in the world of psychology as well as a lot of community providers. So don't feel alone or like ... If you're listening to this and sitting thinking, "Those things are all great, but my kid seems beyond that," I want you to reach out and to really think about how important that is to your child.

Meghan Walls ([00:51:44](#)):

I like this quote, and I've been throwing it at a lot of my seminars and at parents when I'm talking to them. But I think this is so appropriate, particularly for COVID. "There are no easy answers, there's only living through the questions." I expect these questions will keep coming. I think if we can do some of the things that I talked about today, we'll be doing a great job to start. And I think that, again, I will say, being here today and just taking part in this is such an important piece of how we move this puzzle forward. Engaged parents, teachers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, adults, are such a key part of how we have kids be successful this year.

Meghan Walls ([00:52:29](#)):

So thank you all for being here and for listening. I think I'm going to toss it over to Dr. Duckworth for question and answers.

Ken Duckworth ([00:52:39](#)):

Thank you, Dr. Walls. We have a good list of questions. Let's start with something from the department of unknowns. "My school has still not shared their full schedule and school is scheduled to start next week. How can I help my daughter prepare when there is still so much unknown? She is quite young and I think she's going to need a lot of support to stay on schedule."

Meghan Walls ([00:53:08](#)):

Great question. The first thing I would recommend is ... and I'm sure you have done this, and I'm sure that some of the other parents in your school have as well. But it's okay to be a little bit of what I think is an appropriate nuisance when these things come up. So call your school, reach out to them and ask them. And you can even say something like, "I listened to a webinar with a psychologist who talked about the importance of preparing our kids. When can we have that information?" I know NAMI's biggest thing is being an advocate, and it's one of mine, too. So I think that's number one.

The second thing I would say is, my guess is ... I don't think you mentioned it in the question, but my guess is you're starting virtually if you don't have your schedule yet. What I would do is prepare for the things you do know. Give her some of that information and also give her some of the tangibles I talked about, things like, "Let's find your space of where you're going to do your work." My guess is that if she's a younger kiddo, she'll have two or three hours on the computer, so let's talk about, "Where will that be? What will that look like? Will Mom help you get signed in? Will a babysitter?" So even if you have some of the unknowns, you can work on the knowns for now and pair that with being a really good advocate within the school system.

Ken Duckworth ([00:54:30](#)):

Thank you. I encourage you to send in more questions. Here's a question. "How do we support teachers who are facing tremendous unknowns, potential medical risk in terms of the mental demands placed upon them. Have you thought about that? What groups are working on it? How can I as a parent support my local teacher?"

Meghan Walls ([00:54:53](#)):

I love that question, and to whomever asked that, thank you. I jokingly said when we were planning for our school stuff in Delaware that we should probably pay our teachers \$8 million a day because now we all know what it's like to be a teacher at home. And I think our teachers are so incredibly important to our kids' success. So I think first of all, one of the things you can actually do as parents is reach out to your own school and ask. "Are there ways I can support my teachers locally?" I know that's a very small answer, but when I think about these things, I try to think about, "What's tangible? What can I do to actually feel useful?"

The other thing that you can do, if you're talking about overall how to support your teachers, is go to your school board meetings. Listen to what the teachers association is asking for. Locally, we've always heard some really great feedback, I know on my end, about how we can help support teachers associations. And their unions are very strong, so that's another thing.

And then the last thing I'll say is ... I should have maybe started with this ... is yes. I think this is something that's on my mind constantly. How do we help teachers' mental health? And I think one of the things you can also do as a parent and a community member is really advocate for systems within your school that give teachers ways of having resources. So whether that's sharing even things like this, these presentations, or asking your school, "Who are teachers being referred to if they're having a really hard time?" It's okay for you to ask those questions as a parent.

Teachers have a really hard balance this year because they are being asked, "What should we do and what do you feel comfortable doing?" but they're also being asked to still teach and take care of our kids. So I love that question. I think locally you can really be active and help out your teachers. I know so many teachers who are so thankful for parents like you who are asking those questions, because they're also having a really hard time with people saying, "Just deal with it and go back to school." So I think those are really important things to address.

Ken Duckworth ([00:56:53](#)):

Let's shift gears to teenagers a little bit. "I have a rising senior," one person writes. Can you think about how to talk about the losses that are inherent with a virtual school year that will miss some of America's most cherished moments in terms of the rites of passage? How do you talk to teenagers about the loss of prom and all the drama ... the drama theater, not human drama. Drama theater, that kind of thing ... of sports seasons, whatever it might be that has meaning to that teenager.

Meghan Walls ([00:57:29](#)):

Yeah. I have gotten this question on and off for the past six months and I have a three-pronged approach to this one. The first one is going back to the concept of validating your kid's feelings. When they are upset about that, saying, "You're right. This is really hard and I understand why you're having such a hard time with this." And number two is talking about the pandemic like a pandemic. These are teenagers. They get it. Even if they don't love it, they get it. So saying things like, "Here is where we are with COVID in our state, in our country, and here is what we can do to keep making change for the better so that we can go back to more of those things." Because that's the other thing. There's community responsibility in mitigating this disease. So talking about that honestly with teenagers I just think is so important. We sometimes don't have those conversations with our kids because we think they're too high level, but I think having those conversations is just so important.

The third thing is, ask your kid or teen, "What can I do to help you feel like you're getting some of that?" It may not be all of it, but can I have small get togethers? "Would you like if we planned next summer when we think things will be better to have some of those things in a makeup way? What would be helpful most?" That's number three. And then if your kiddo is still struggling, really reaching out to get more support because I think if you can parent in those really positive ways and help them talk through it and walk through it ... You can't fix or change this problem, but you can change how you cope with it. And if they're still struggling, that's when I have been saying to folks I think that's a great time to reach out and get some more support.

Ken Duckworth ([00:59:14](#)):

Staying with teenagers. A question comes in, "I have a 15-year-old son who has been psychiatrically unstable this summer. The clinicians are asking me as a parent to decide if he should start virtual school or wait until he is more stable. He has not had his IEP yet. How do you think about the risks of remoteness and isolating versus the risks of attending school?" So this is a parent who has a choice and there's some vulnerability in their child from a psychiatric perspective.

Meghan Walls ([00:59:50](#)):

First of all, I think to the mom or dad or guardian who wrote that, I feel for you. I think there's a lot of teenagers right now who are going through really difficult times, and I think part of it is that isolation, period. I would say a couple things on this. The balance of isolation versus the risk of perhaps struggling psychologically has to be weighed by both your clinicians, you as the parent, and the school. One of the things that I would

suggest, if you haven't already, is having that conversation in a way that is very collaborative. But the other thing is to think about ... And I would really encourage you to do this with your son. He's 15, so I want him engaged in that process. I would actually sit down and make a list, like, "What are the things that you would really benefit from if you went back to school, and what would be really difficult for you?" Because he probably also knows what's really hard.

I know part of the question is, "Do we start? Do we not start?" I think that has to be a family decision, but I do think making sure he has that IEP in place is really important, and then talking to him and involving him in that conversation and letting him be a part of that is incredibly important. Because if he feels uncomfortable going back and you don't realize that yet, you might be setting him up for failure. But if he says, "My depression is so bad because I'm stuck in my house all day," well, then, maybe going back to school is a good idea. So I would really weigh the pros and cons with your clinician, which it sounds like you are, and have that three-way collaborative conversation.

Ken Duckworth ([01:01:29](#)):

Yeah, I just want to say I agree. I've worked with a lot of teenagers over the years. It's important to involve them in the decision making, because as you said, they understand what's happening and they have to make these difficult decisions for their own lives.

Alright, let's talk about screen time. We have a question of a person who hates the screens. This child has some kind of learning vulnerability, doesn't like to pay attention. The other one is, "My child's hobby," middle schooler, "is video games. So I'm looking at six hours education and five to ten hours of video games depending on how many limits I set." So let's just talk about the two ends of this remote learning experience, if you would take each of them up, please. Thank you.

Meghan Walls ([01:02:17](#)):

Sure. Screen time is another big, I think, topic right now as we talk about virtual learning. So let's first talk about the kids who either have trouble with sitting in front of screens or who maybe can't pay attention to the screen, or some of our kids who have learning disabilities that makes it really hard to learn. There's a couple things that I think are important. One is, think about when your child does and doesn't have to be in front of that screen. Do they need to go to morning meeting? If they don't, if it's just the teacher singing a song and starting the day for the younger kids, maybe you don't start until small reading group. Talking to your teachers and the school about that is really important. "How can my kid who has trouble with the screens limit the screens?"

Another thing that I highly suggest doing and I've seen lots of schools be flexible with is asking for the work to be emailed to the parent and printed out or picked up at the school printed out, because sometimes kids can listen to the lesson on screen, but some kids are visual learners so for them, they need to put the paper to the pen. Those are okay things to ask for. Then the other thing I think about with those kiddos is ... this wasn't mentioned in the question, but I think we all get screen fatigue. I'm sure many of you listening feel like I do sometimes when you're on hour six of a Zoom call. So making sure your kids are not taking their breaks during the day to watch YouTube or watch a

TV show. Make their breaks non-screen. I would say that could go unsaid, but I think we've all adapted to whatever we can get done to get done during this. But if you can manage to check screen time, that's important. But the very first thing would be talking to the school about how we can manage this.

On the flip side, some of the middle schoolers and high schoolers I know think this is really fun that they can be on their phones and their screens all day and are playing video games and some of these things. So what I highly suggest to parents ... and if you've heard me talk before, in my other webinar I think I mentioned this, but also just in general ... is really, really suggest a screen and electronics contract with your teenagers. Don't just yell at them on hour nine of the day out of the blue. Come up with rules. Have them sign it and you sign it. They don't follow those rules, they lose the privileges. They follow those rules, they get the privileges. Think about what your family is comfortable with.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says that for kids over two, they recommend limiting screen time, but thinking about what works with your family, and I think that's extremely important this year. The one other thing I'll say for that one is, if you are a parent who feels like you end up fighting with your teenager or middle schooler over this, there are a ton of really awesome apps. My favorite one is literally just called Screen Time, and you can shut off certain things on electronics but leave others. So they can do their learning, but not sign on for the fourth hour to video games. So take some of that stress out of it, but also talking to your teen first. Again, that sounds like, I think, probably a broken record from my last answer, but I think involving our kids and teens in the conversations and decisions means that the outcomes just end up being so much better.

Ken Duckworth ([01:05:24](#)):

Here's a question, a little different, shifting gears. "My son missed the first week of school because we had a family member quarantining with COVID. How do we think about that? Should we have him tell people?" So this is the question of, "Will my child be stigmatized for having a family member who quarantined?" and the child with it.

Meghan Walls ([01:05:51](#)):

Sure. I think this is a great question because I mentioned this in that last slide I was talking about. Some families have had family members really sick or pass away from COVID, and this is really important to address. I think that depends on what your family's comfortable with. I don't think there's a yes or no to this question. But I would think of it as is, what does your child think? I'm not sure how old the kid is, but if your kiddo is saying, "I don't care. This is no big deal," okay, then it's no big deal if they talk to their friends once they're back in school. You're being a responsible family by having that kiddo stay home and quarantine because someone was exposed.

But the next part of this is, if you choose not to talk about it, that's okay, too. Every time your kid goes back to school after strep throat, they don't show the note to the whole room and say, "Hey, I was out for strep." They were just out sick. So you don't have to. I don't think I would want a family to feel pressured to, but I would really talk to your child and have that discussion. The only caveat I'll add here is some schools are asking

families to at least tell the school if that's happened because they're just trying to pay attention to the community spread, or making sure kids get the work if they do have to quarantine longer than they think. But other than that, I think it's a family-based decision, based on what you and your child are most comfortable with, to make sure that we're addressing, where is the anxiety? Is it the parent? Is it the kid? And how can we also make sure that our kid is comfortable going back to school after that's happened?

Ken Duckworth ([01:07:19](#)):

Yeah, that was a younger kid. I think it was a first grader and the question was, "How do I make it okay for my first grader to have missed a week of school, and when he's asked, what do I have him tell people?" That kind of thing.

Meghan Walls ([01:07:32](#)):

Yeah. And again, I think the other thing is, I think everyone's understanding of the missing school at this point, so if you're pulling a kid out for a good reason, I think the teacher is pretty understanding.

Ken Duckworth ([01:07:44](#)):

Let's talk about divorce, separation, different households. Now, this is a person who's writing in with a nine-year-old child and the parents are living in different towns. One parent is reluctant to integrate the other parent much due to their risk of infection. How can the parent who lives in the wrong town who doesn't see much of the child be engaged in a productive way in their educational experience?

Meghan Walls ([01:08:17](#)):

This is a tough one. I've heard from a lot of families who either have divorces or even where grandparents take care of the kids usually part of the time because parents work. I think this is such a tough question to navigate. I know this question is from ... I like how you worded it as "the bad town" parent. But I think the key here is figuring out how to communicate the plan. Your child is going to do the best if you're all on the same page. I recognize that is so difficult with families who have had divorces or perhaps parents don't get along as well. But the other thing that I've talked families through doing and that has worked pretty well is, instead of talking about the plan as it is for who gets the kid at their house or who's going to do the learning, talking about the plan as, "What would we have to agree on in terms of safety and health for us to feel comfortable with our child going back and forth?"

I've actually worked with quite a few families and we've sort of come up with this list that both parents can agree on, and what ends up happening is the kid is really happy because they get to go back and forth, but the parents feel comfortable. Now, if both parents are saying, "I'm not willing to do that," sure, then maybe we can't let them go to that parent's house as much. But I would like to think that sometimes we just need to think outside the box for these things a little bit, because we know that kids are watching us and hearing us, and so if we can show them problem solving also during this time, I think we can be better off.

The last thing I'll say is, if there is an actual health risk and this is a decision that your family has made and you think it actually is for the best of the kid, I would revert back to talking about that piece of creativity. Can that parent see the kiddo outside in a park? Can they have scheduled FaceTime every night? So being creative, because I recognize that sometimes there is that health barrier for people.

Ken Duckworth ([01:10:09](#)):

Talk about the social dimension of school. "I have a shy teenager and I was hoping that some relationships might form in person. How do I support my shy teenager who's light on friends in a virtual world how to think about finding more supportive relationships?"

Meghan Walls ([01:10:35](#)):

When we think about the social aspect of school, I think all of us as adults can think back to those hallway conversations, the times where we see a kiddo who's our friend in the lunchroom and we get excited. So you can't deny there's a social aspect to in-person school. We also know that we are trying to adjust in, what I say is all the ways, to the pandemic and figuring out what to do. And so while I would love to say, "Let's just send your kid back to school and we'll figure it out," I think that's not the realistic answer here.

But what is, I think, a realistic answer, and maybe even a helpful answer, is I've actually seen some of these shy kids who I have had parents encourage them to do things like if they're in class with a kid two or three times and they're like, "Oh, that might be a kid I want to reach out to," to ask the school for their phone number or email. And you can have them text or have a Zoom call, and for some kids who are anxious, that actually feels easier for them. Or even link up on playing video games.

So again, it goes back to being creative. This is not perfect. We know it's not optimal. I am very hopeful that by next school year, especially our teens will be back in school for that social aspect. But I think in the meantime, you can play to your kid's strengths. The other thing is, I've been asking schools for the kids I work with ... some of them are having virtual clubs and meetings, and I think that's another great way to engage in that social piece.

Ken Duckworth ([01:12:02](#)):

Great. A question for Teri Brister about NAMI Basics. Teri, are you up for describing NAMI Basics on demand? This will give Dr. Walls a breather as well.

Teri Brister ([01:12:15](#)):

I would be delighted to. NAMI Basics is our education program for parents and other family caregivers of children and adolescents with mental health conditions. It's not necessary that the child have a diagnosis or have any kind of specific diagnosis, but if there's a parent or a caregiver who's concerned about the child, they can take the course. Like NAMI's other programs, it's offered in person, six sessions. But unlike NAMI's other programs, we've launched a virtual version of this course late last fall on demand, meaning that parents and family caregivers can sign up for it online and take

the course any time they want to in their own time. They can sit through 15 minutes of it tonight after the kids go to bed and take it as they are able to.

It includes the same information. There's an opportunity to participate in a very private chatroom with other families that have taken the course to share stories, to get support, find support. You can find information on it. The simplest way is to go to the Basics webpage, nami.org/basics. And if you scroll down just a little bit on that page, you'll see the link where you can click to sign up to take it, and it's free of charge. Probably more information than you wanted, but during the pandemic, we went from ... and I'll probably misstate the numbers, but we had, I know, 5,000 or 6,000 people who signed up for it in a one-week period of time, so our numbers increased tremendously during this time of shutdown. And I just got a question, actually, from my granddaughter's pediatrician this morning about the course and she wanted information to share with parents that are coming to her about going back to school concerns. So thank you for that question.

Ken Duckworth ([01:14:18](#)):

Nice. An excellent question. Dr. Walls let's take a look at the slide that has the resources, because there's a couple questions about the resources.

Meghan Walls ([01:14:28](#)):

Sure.

Ken Duckworth ([01:14:29](#)):

If you could just walk people through what's in some of these before we stop. This will be our last activity.

Meghan Walls ([01:14:35](#)):

Yeah. Some of these are the NAMI resources and I will thank Teri, I think, and Elyse for putting some of these together. But I think our goal here is that we want families to be able to have some resources to sort of work through, so those ... The first one is the NAMI COVID resources, which you all could probably speak better to than I can. Child Mind is a really reputable source for a lot of this information, and they also talk about back to school, both with in person and virtual. We're sort of also, I think, thinking about not just back to school, but mental health in school, so you see that next one talks about school mental health activities. And then some of these other ones are sort of more mental health resource guides.

But as I said, the other things we'll be sending is I have also given Teri and Elyse today a couple of websites that will link you to Nemours KidsHealth, and that's our health system's blog and information page. There is a link to a lot of what I talked about today with both virtual link, there's a link for in-person school return. And the other pieces that I think are really important in terms of resources we have is that we have resources on things like masking. And so I sent over and you'll all get both a one-page PDF document which is available in English and Spanish about how to help your kids with learning to mask, and then for our younger ... That's for our older kids, too, so how do we prepare them. And then I also sent over, which you'll all be getting, a social story, which is sort of how we walk younger kids through something by telling a story about masking.

So those things will all be available. And I would really encourage folks to follow up with additional information on these websites and any of these resources because it's so important that we attend these seminars, and it's also important that we continue to check in with our kids and if you have questions or thoughts, these are really great places just to find them.

Ken Duckworth (01:16:45):

Well, thank you, Dr. Walls. This was a very interesting and important discussion. I'm going to turn it over to our CEO, Dan Gillison.

Dan Gillison (01:16:53):

Thank you very much, Ken and Dr. Walls. It was such a pleasure to have you with us again, and with all the resources and the information that you provided to us and talking with us about what's just an incredible time right now. It's something that none of us could have forecasted, and we're all going through it together. I think the biggest thing that we'd like to make sure our audience knows is that you're not alone. We're all in this together, and the screen says it. Remember, you're not alone.

Again, thank you to Dr. Walls and to Ken. I want to thank the NAMI production team, Elyse Hunt, Teri Brister, Elizabeth Stafford, and Liam Winters. And last, I'd like to leave you with this reminder about our upcoming Ask the Expert webinars. The next one will be on the 10th of September and it will be nutrition and mental health. Then in October, Ask the Expert will be on the 8th of October and the topic will be schizophrenia. So we hope that you will be looking forward to the announcements of those and will register to participate in those as well.

Remember that this has been recorded. We will be sending out the information after the session closes on today. We appreciate you being with us on today, and remember about reframing the thoughts, modeling good coping skills, and just knowing that we are in this together and we will get through it together. This is a very long moment in time, so thank you all very much for participating.