

FAQ: How do I help my families with a child with autism advocate for their child and navigate the virtual and in-person learning options as the school year begins?

With all the changes students face with school reopening this fall, the concept of going back to school either virtually or in person can be especially daunting for families of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Here are some ideas and resources pediatricians can offer families:

- Encourage parents to advocate for their child:
 - Parents should reach out to the educational team
 - Schedule a time to meet with them to better understand the school's virtual and in-person learning plans.
 - If the child is returning to school in person, parents should request an updated Individualized Education Program (IEP)/ 504 to reflect the child's educational goals with the new classroom social distancing requirements
 - If the family chooses virtual learning, the IEP / 504 plan should reflect how the learning process will meet the child's specific needs and should be able to provide the parent with resources to support the learning team while at home
 - Given the high likelihood of need for transitions from in-person to virtual learning environments and back during the school year, it may be best to have an education plan for each setting if the family is choosing an in-person learning option
- Wearing masks may be challenging for some children. Pediatricians can offer parents resources. AutismSpeaks.org
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1I4BcpTflk> has prepared some videos to help parents teach their child how to feel comfortable wearing a mask. If parents find it challenging to teach their child at home or feel their child may benefit from additional services, the following may be helpful:
 - Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy,
 - Working with a pediatric psychologist with expertise in ASD
 - occupational therapy
- ABA therapy can also be helpful for children who have become more aggressive or have regressed in their communication skills since social distancing
<http://navigator.autismallianceofmichigan.org/#/login>
- For advice and resources for aggressive behaviors that persist despite ABA therapy or if the educational team deems these behaviors to require more attention, pediatricians can reach out to MC3 consultation program
<https://mc3.depressioncenter.org/> which offers provider to provider psychiatry support for primary care providers in Michigan.