



This time of year carries a mix of excitement, anticipation, anxiety, sadness, and of course stress. In a non-pandemic year, preparing for the return to school is thick with complex summer to fall transitions, all with the goal of shifting back to “school-normalcy”: adjusting sleep patterns, shifting nutrition, getting supplies and clothes ready for the new year, and gearing up the family to “get back into the swing of things”. Add to that the massively messy 2020, robbing us of too many things to name. The end of the last school year took a gigantic hit, the disruption continued through the summer, and as we face this fall, the *only thing for certain is that we will begin this next school year with uncertainty*. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken the world on to a path of parenting unlike anything we have known in our lifetime, leaving us full of palatable waves of emotion while forced to make decisions with lingering unanswerable questions. Some are incapacitated by fear, others are amped up and angry, and still others are in full force avoidant mode wishing it all away.

Many of us hoped this would simply be over by now. What seemed like a sprint to adjust to distance learning last spring has now shifted into a marathon mindset... There is a full school year ahead of us that will be ever-changing. As teachers and parents work to keep putting one foot in front of the other during this long haul, it seems the more accurate analogy is likely that of a muddy, cruddy obstacle course of epic proportions. This pandemic marathon seems to involve muddy pits, sections of army crawling under wires wrought with threats of harm, climbing over impossibly steep rock walls, leaping over looming barriers, in between each segment, pulling yourself back up to firm grounding, willing yourself to *just keep going* and get through this as unscathed as possible. It’s one thing to face these obstacles as adults. It seems more daunting when we need to help students navigate the same thing in their lives, after all, they’re just kids!

Ultimately, we will hopefully come through this stronger, with more clarity and a healthier sense of what is most important to us collectively and individually. Still, whether teachers or parents, facing this fall brings many unknowns, the strain of differing opinions, confusing and inconsistent data, and all of the potential pathways that this next school year could take. Here are some tips for navigating this obstacle course that has no preview:

Know that there really isn’t a ‘right answer’ here. Put your judgement away and move towards accepting we are all just doing the best that we can, under the circumstances that we face, and understand that what is right for you may not be right for someone else. There are always 3 sides to every story: your truth, their truth, and the reality-truth somewhere in between. You rarely know all of the most important pieces that contribute to someone else’s decisions. Educate yourself as best as you can, lean on your resources, then make your decisions and move on. Know that your decisions are right for you at this time and will be how they need to be. Stop stewing and brewing your worries! Move on.

Focus on the day-to-day basics and keep those activities as stable and consistent as possible. Providing a stable foundation at home will help everyone in the family feel more safe, secure and rooted. Things such as regular family meals, wake and bedtime routines, and maintaining exercise and physical activity are all very important, and are things that you can control – which feels good!

Be the calm you wish your family to feel. Anxious, yup. Scared, absolutely. Angry, disappointed, and grieving – no question. You have a right to all of your emotions and for sure are not alone in feeling what you are feeling. It’s important that you find your outlet for those feelings and tend to those more intense layers with other adults whom you trust. Know that your kids are fantastic observers but pretty lousy interpreters. There is incredible value to our children observing us experience normal emotions especially when they can see us move through these in a healthy way. However, becoming unhinged in the midst of the more intense flavors of right now can feel frightening and create influence for children that can have impact in unintended ways. Your emotions are contagious. Use your words to label and describe feelings, and partner with your kids to engage in positive self-talk, deep slow breathing, imagining things going okay, and noting the expectation of a safe, calm experience for school. Kids will develop their own conclusions if we don’t help them understand our array of feelings. Showing healthy coping builds resiliency.

Getting ‘back to normal’ isn’t possible. We need to begin helping our children to understand that school, whether in person or otherwise, this year, will not be as it was before. Avoid being too definitive, but do have some open, honest conversation about what you know, what you don’t know, and in general what might be expected as we move into this next school year.