

A Message to Parents:

“Mask up, wash up, and keep a safe distance,” has become the mantra during this Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. The impact of these requirements, though simply stated, has been confusing, frightening and a struggle for everyone. Consequences are potentially dire and can mean the difference between life and death.

Recent clinical data confirms that younger people are more impacted by the virus than previously thought. The misinformation was owing to trust in overt clinical signs of infection as the universal presentation. The prevailing reality accepted by most, is that no one is impervious to contracting the virus and therefore, no one is impervious to its potentially deadly effects. As such, we can only pray that the combination of compliance with masking up, washing up and keeping a safe distance along with an expedited, safe and effective antibody will put to rest the challenges of this particular strand of the SARS-COV-2 virus responsible for COVID-19.

Post quarantine, solutions to the safe return to work dilemma have helped establish guidelines to minimize harm and disruption of service delivery in all industries. In healthcare, that has meant assuring that the physical and mental health needs of employees, patients, customers and anyone seeking a service, is protected to the highest degree to prevent spread of the virus. Mask up, wash up, keep a safe distance, but show up to work, has stretched our ability to use technology and other environmental strategies to stay safe.

The 2020-2021 academic school year now begins on the same cautionary note. With schools opening around the state, parents and the various school districts are struggling with best safety and learning options. Options available by nearly all school districts include one of three: in person attendance, virtual attendance, or some hybrid version of the two. It goes without saying that core concerns with all three choices are threats to the health and safety of children, educators, and potentially **all** families. Questions abound - What should I do? Which of these options works best for me and my family? How do I keep us all safe? Is my child's safety more important than their academics during this pandemic? Why is it one or the other? How can I continue to work and remain employed with these choices? Who's going to help me get this done? I am neither teacher nor custodian, but a parent who loves my child and will do anything for their protection and safety!

Nestled within and between all of these words is a myriad of emotions. Nervousness, confusion, anger and frustration, are all curiously aligned side by side with the need for rational, critically balanced thinking and problem solving. Helpless feelings related to loss of choices and control over what happens to our children is paramount. Thoughts of the worst possible outcomes balanced against the guilt of not choosing one option over another, can reasonably cause anxiety and depression, further intensified by any other trauma or loss experienced during this period.

Solutions must therefore not ignore the emotional and mental impact of this complex mix of academic, employment, and economic threats for parents and their children. Seeking connections with others is important, for sharing ideas, brainstorming solutions and getting emotional support.

As families are making these critical decisions there are a few trusted options that can be considered.

1. Employer Flexible Work Schedules:

In a survey of employees who are parents of school-age children, helplessness was a primary concern. The ask was for flexibility in the work schedule to accommodate supporting the school needs of their children while maintaining their employment and economic base. This approach has been adopted by the Louisiana Department of Health and other agencies, as a reasonable accommodation given so much uncertainty. It also empowers parents to better manage and control their various responsibilities.

Check with your employer to see if this option is available.

2. Multi-Parent PODS

Parents have formed their own subgroups or PODS and are deciding how they can collectively manage the needs of their children. Parent PODS can range from traditional home schooling, to providing homework assistance, or custodial care and monitoring. Parent PODS smartly take advantage of the collective strength of each parent, balanced against the collective needs of each young learner. Parent PODS allow parents to work and assures that young learners are safe and staying on task. This can alleviate financial stress and lapses in education. It can diminish the helplessness, fear and anxiety, by adding more certainty about their children's safety and academic welfare while supporting ongoing employment. Parent PODS are a natural support group, strongly needed to avoid feelings of isolation during these times.

Survey your circles to see how this might be an option to support your family's needs.

3. Family Support

Anytime, all the time, family support is a sure bet if you have it. Leveraging this advantage may require more structure. A regular schedule of support, on premise is recommended, to better manage the environment. In truth, whatever works best, with a trusted family member to provide academic, custodial or monitoring support is what you go with. Groups of family members can similarly, function in PODS, not unlike the Parent PODS. The rewards are very similar, with the added advantage of all the bells and whistles that good family relationships can bring. Consider carefully, who in the family is best suited for this option. Affordable compensation is not unreasonable to help settle anxiety and stress under the circumstances.

Talk with your family members about helping and receiving some compensation if reasonable.

4. Hired Help – Family, Friend, or trusted referral.

This is a worthy investment and consideration if financial means permit it. Terms in this case can be more definitively outlined. A simple hand-written or more formal contract with agreed services/deliverables including compensation terms is not unreasonable. The skill sets needed can be better defined in the solicitation. The times needed could be determined to maximally support parental employment schedules.

Start the conversations with trusted family members and friends for potential referrals and recommendations.

5. Take Advantage of No-cost or Low-cost Tech and Tutor Supports

Though remote learning is a safer option, the economic challenge for parents who can't afford laptops or necessary WIFI, will be limiting because learners will have difficulty completing assignments online. There are a few options available for assistance. Two websites to look into are **EveryoneOn.org** and **CommunityVS.org**, for nonprofits that connects low-income families to affordable internet services and computers. For tutors, check out **Coved.org** and **Tutor.com**, which pairs students K-12 with tutors and libraries for assistance. As with all online resource, parental evaluation and monitoring is advised. The main take home is to investigate low or no cost options available for support.

6. Protect your Mental and Emotional Health - intentionally and with a vengeance!

Though discussed last, this is a critical first in this list of priorities. Clearly, the most profoundly traumatic event of our generation is the current pandemic. The weightiness of looming deaths, unnatural physical distancing, and required consciousness to the very air we breathe is highly predictive of irrevocable trauma and PTSD for many. For others still, the uncertainty and unpredictability challenge resilience and faith on a day to day basis. As such, attention to our mental and spiritual health is as much a necessity as figuring out the school dilemma and then coping with the choices. Ultimately, our longevity and the intellectual growth of our young learners depend upon us being mentally and emotionally healthy! So here are some thoughts about what you can do.

a. Ignore your foolish pride and ask for the help that you need. Do not try to figure this out nor fix this alone!

b. Don't forget to BREATHE, mindfully and meditatively, for a few seconds throughout the day, multiple times of day. Breathe deeply in, to the count of 5 then push it out slowly to the count of 5. Proper breathing efficiently supplies oxygen to the brain and other vital organs for effective functioning. *BREATHE!*

c. Get some time alone to relax and be with yourself. Alone time is important for centering your thoughts, feelings and actions. The quietness of early morning or late evening may work best.

d. If less than 50% of your day is spent with adult company, make a conscious effort to add back that time. Be sure the company you keep does not complicate things further but truly is a value add to your day.

e. If your life has been sustained by your spiritual connections, stay connected even more during this period, with the people, places and things your spirit has been nourished by. Don't be afraid to venture out and vary the source and means of spiritual support. Virtual services and support groups, podcasts, published materials, courses, opportunities for giving....are all easily accessible. Search the Web.

f. Feed off the earth! As a rule, the closer your diet is to products from the earth, plants and animals, with minimal adulteration by preservatives and food prep, the healthier. A variety of colors, healthier portions of fruits and veggies, and recommended servings of meats and carbs means life and life more abundantly. Eat better for your body, brain and emotions.

g. Move and Move more! The recommended minimum is 150minutes of "exercise" a week. No gyms or professional equipment and memberships are needed. Added naturally over the course of the day is best. Get a pedometer. Walk more. Squat during breaks. Google exercises with a broomstick and a jump rope for both cardio and toning. Don't over think it - Just do it!

h. For entertainment, enjoy a good series on Netflix or another paid or free network. Listen to the music you love and use this time to explore different types of music. Virtually visit the 7 Wonders of the World or any place you're curious about or intrigued by such as museums, art galleries...Learn a new skill. Commit the time to add back a passion that you enjoy.

i. Limit excessive use of alcohol, tobacco and controlled substances to alleviate anxiety, depression and stress. Practice the guidance provided. Use honest conversation with a trusted friend or family member to listen and support. Seek professional individual or group support if necessary. Many virtual options are available.

The reliable constant for parenting is always negotiating the maze of choices in the best interest of our children. During this pandemic, parents are wise to carefully consider all options for what's best for their entire family. Openness to alternatives that support the academic needs of young learners, and sustained employment and income for parents, requires a menu of carefully considered solutions. Recognizing and deciding when to stand firm and when to bend and adjust, is a core expectation of parenting, especially now.