

We have been asked recently by many families our opinion regarding the safety of children returning to school. Much is being said/written about the issue, and it is undoubtedly a difficult situation with a wickedly complex constellation of factors. Offering an opinion that applies to every family, to every school, and to every community regardless of the level of illness is impossible and arguably irresponsible. However, we do want to provide some general thoughts that we hope will be helpful.

SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS

- I firmly believe that we should be doing **everything we can to make it possible for children to return to in-person classes this fall**. This objective should be one of our highest priorities, perhaps our highest, as a society.
- As I have thought about this over the last couple of months, following the data on COVID-19, including what other countries have seen with schools reopening, I have felt, with all factors considered, it is **seemingly safe for children to return to school**. “Safe” because children seem less likely to acquire the infection, less likely to have severe illness, and less likely to spread the illness to adults (parents and/or teachers); “seemingly” because, though this is what the current data suggests, we are admittedly working with early and limited information.
- Mine is not an opinion of “we need to get back to normal life and let the chips fall where they may” as some are expressing in light of our current economic crisis. I am simply offering a **pediatric perspective** on our current situation and what the currently available data would suggest as it relates to children’s overall health and the role children play in potentially spreading illness in our community.
- What I am NOT saying is that children should return to school this fall “no matter what.” Instead, I am saying we should be aiming for that because it is so vital for the welfare of children. Also, for all who share this sentiment, it follows that every effort should be made to ensure that school reopening occurs **as safely and as resourced as possible**.
- The **American Academy of Pediatrics** has released a [statement](#) that you may find interesting.
- Our current level of community illness is concerning, continues to trend upward, and has made the issue of reopening schools more challenging. If we as a community had committed two months ago to make it possible for kids to return to school, it would have translated into **actions focused on keeping our community illness at low levels** (thinking not of businesses reopening but rather Memorial Day parties, bar gatherings, etc.). **Disappointingly, that is not what has happened**. Now we are left with a situation of potentially starting the school year simultaneous with very high community spread of illness.
- A primary way of controlling the spread of disease once activities resume is **aggressive testing** and [contact tracing](#). Three months ago, when thinking about the potential of

school reopening in August, I would have assumed we would be in a much better place with testing than we currently are. This too is disappointing and makes reopening schools more precarious.

- In addition to all the planning being done to make school as safe as possible, one of the most critical aspects of planning is **what will be done when the infections happen** as they most surely will. This is where “contact tracing” is so essential in keeping inevitable cases to a minimum. Hopefully, that effort will be leaned into.
- It is worse than disappointing that this issue has been politicized. Disagreement is to be expected, embraced, and worked through; using our children and their education as political footballs is not. Shameful.
- Our school administrators and teachers **deserve an enormous amount of praise, support, and grace** as they try to make these decisions. What they are trying to do is extremely difficult, by some standards impossible, as they are dealing with limited information/resources, a rapidly changing situation, and many conflicting issues/interests. This situation has highlighted something long known but underappreciated, i.e. our teachers are essential workers in our community, underpaid, and put themselves at risk for the sake of our children. This has been true before COVID and is further appreciated now.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR YOUR FAMILY

We do not yet know what options or plans will be forthcoming from the Orange County School Board, though we have seen Seminole County’s and imagine they will be somewhat similar. When it comes to deciding for your family, we have quickly realized that everyone’s situation is unique and nuanced. Therefore, what will likely be most helpful will be some guiding thoughts for your family in making the decision.

- **Having options is stressful.** That is especially true when 1) considering something as consequential as our children’s education, and 2) the options all seem less than desirable. I feel burdened for you as families; we hope to help make the process less stressful.
- When asked about school decisions throughout the years (before COVID), we have always advised families to try to think about **what’s best for “this child, this year.”** The idea here is every child is different, and children’s needs are different at different times in life. That is perhaps more true with decisions this year than before.
- When considering options re: school, I feel it is helpful to be **“eyes wide open” on the trade-offs.** There is no perfect situation, and if you can get as clear as possible about the likely negatives of each situation and be okay with them, it can help make the decision a little more clear.

- Therefore the following exercise might be helpful for your family:
 - What are your options?
 - What are the potential or likely negatives of each option?
 - What are your family's priorities? If your family's #1 priority is minimizing the risk of infection, then returning to full-time in-person school is probably not the best decision. However, if you feel it is most important that your child gets the academic instruction and you know that is not accomplished for this child with virtual learning, then the best decision is probably not a completely virtual option. These are not "right and wrong" but rather aligning with our unique family situation.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

- **Get a Flu shot.** This is a message we say every year and is perhaps even more important this year. Additionally, there is likely to be more demand for flu shots and, therefore, the potential for running out earlier than previous years.
- Maintain a **positive outlook**. Our children will adopt our attitudes.
- **Be flexible.** Schools will have to adjust what is sure to be a changing situation and some unforeseen circumstances. Be prepared to be absent more than typical, even with non-COVID-19 illnesses as all illnesses are going to be regarded with more caution. Expect potential classroom closures and absences due to COVID exposures. These will happen; prepare for these situations, both mentally and logistically.
- Avoid the politicization and false dichotomies. Our current situation is difficult, thus needing thoughtfulness and solidarity.
- Be involved and supportive. Our teachers will need that, and your children will benefit.
- Maintain **rhythms and routines**. This approach can have a dramatic benefit in reducing children's stress, even more so when circumstances outside of our control are changing. Routines such as family meals, family walks, bedside debriefings - consistent occurrences that the child knows to expect - help provide a sense of normalcy when other circumstances seem less predictable.

2020 has been and will continue to be a different and difficult year; however, children are amazingly resilient. What they need most is a caring adult on whom they can count. No matter what happens with school, we can all be that for our children. We are grateful for the many teachers who also play that role, coming alongside our children in so many countless and selfless ways. Likewise, we at Middleton Pediatrics are thankful for the privilege of serving your family during this challenging time.

Dr. Middleton

Middleton Pediatrics