

PARENTING

Pregnancy & Baby Learning & Play Child Health **For Mums & Dads** Ask Us Games

Back to school 2021: Parents are looking forward to a return to school days

There are some flags you should be aware of though, say experts

Published: August 29, 2021 14:19 Last updated: August 29, 2021 19:45

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Students return to Indian High School in Dubai for face to face learning after the summer vacation. | Above: Photo for illustrative purposes only.

Image Credit: Virendra Saklani/Gulf News

As sunlight broke through the clouds this morning, it was greeted by familiar mayhem; children were squealing as they got ready for school and parents chased them; some cajoling, some threatening; to hurry up. Then, it was go-time and children headed to school – albeit with some upgraded leaving-home protocols including grabbing the hand sanitizer and masks.

UAE parents are glad for the change – the return to some degree of normalcy. Indian expat Saloni Ghosh, who has a 13-year-old daughter, tells Gulf News: “She’s more than excited to go back to school. She’s really looking forward to going face-to-face. The kids are fully vaccinated. And these kids are also going out and having dinner parties, so no point in stopping them from going to school.”

Hafsa Ameer, who is a Sri Lankan expat, echoes the sentiment, saying her 10-year-old son was happy to get ready and head off to school. “I was more nervous than he was,” she laughs.

Swapping skill sets

Geeta Ramakrishnan, Wellness and Ontological Coach, explains: “It is not just the book knowledge that a child gathers from school. Children also learn the necessary social skills to help them thrive when they grow up. They know how to interact, learn some negotiating skills, learn to empathise with expressing emotions, learn how to be kind, and interact civilly and socially with their peers. These learnings essentially build their value system, which acts as a foundation for creating a well-balanced, confident, and successful adult life.

“Unfortunately, the isolation due to COVID-19 has put a pause to this social growth, creating a sense of disconnect in children when it is the age to laugh, play, and learn. They do have access to knowledge via online classes. That in itself requires them to adjust and build new skills. But it robs them of their social skills, which I think is an essential survival skill needed as an adult,” she adds.



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- Geeta Ramakrishnan, Wellness and Ontological Coach

It's something Indian expat Wangchuk Lama Watteel noticed first-hand. Things were difficult “during the lockdown,” she recalls. “He [my now four-year-old son] was already going to nursery. Then came the lack of structure in his day...It just became one big tantrum, there was no rest, he was not eating healthy – it was just one big mess. And there was no physical activity, so that aggression – because their little bodies need to move around – I could really see that affect his mental health,” she explains.

Lama Watteel adds that things got better when school reopened and offered face-to-face learning once again. “He got the right amount of stimulation during the day. Right time to rest. His snack time and rest time were managed,” she says. “They, schools, educate our children with the tools to survive, hygiene, don’t share each other’s meals. He’s too small to be wearing masks in class but still, [they learn] the ideas of bubbles...discipline.”

Ready for squabbles?

This is not to say that things are going to be easy – far from it. Socialisation is a learned practice – and this year, it’s going to be a relearning experience. Especially since this deep dive into human interaction comes after a year marked by some isolation – or at least limited – human contact.

There will be little lash-outs as routines for sleep and meal times are made and enforced. And as playtime is negotiated. “During COVID-19, online games and social media are a prime source of entertainment and communication between children. The parents will need to enforce discipline to keep the children out of these addictive games, or at least negotiate some slots for them.”

Another fallout may be dealing with stress – caused by exposure to COVID-19 numbers or a repeated call for caution where touching surfaces or meeting people is concerned. Coach Rebe, Career and Transition Coach, says chronic stress – as imposed by a global pandemic can have wide repercussions on a person's mental health. "Chronic stress can have a huge impact on the brain. It can put you at risk of a number of physical and psychological challenges like depression. Exposure to chronic stress in childhood can lead to disruptions that impact mental and physical health of the child, says Rebe.



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- Coach Rebe, Career and Transition Coach

It may not happen, but for both parents and teachers now is the time to break out that ever-watchful eye.

Rebe explains: "Parents and teachers have a key role in screening for psychological and emotional disorders in children. They are capable of addressing these concerns and provide them a positive environment by engaging them in stress buster activities or games.

"Parents must refrain themselves from overburdening their kids with fear of falling sick or getting exposed to the outer world. Parents must focus on developing the right hygiene habits in kids. They mustn't ignore the emotional symptoms which might reflect anxiety and depression in kids. Kids should be engaged in activities which rejuvenate them and not drain them out."

PARENTS SHOULD

- Have clear communication on what to expect and how to behave.
- Watch out for alarming behaviour – need to isolate, over excitement, etc.
- Ensure physical, stress-busting activity.

Dubai-based Indian expat Jaseena Pandikasala, from Kerala, who has been in the UAE for more than 12 years and is a mum to three children – 10, seven and two-months-old – says a return to school has been a positive thing. “[Last year] my son, [then a] grade 3 student, managed everything by himself, though I found it difficult [managing] my grade 1 daughter’s work. When their school started five days of face-to-face [schooling], we started sending them, from September 2020. This year also they’re going face to face, which is really convenient for me as a working mother,” she says.

“We find it very positive taking face-to-face learning. The screen time was more when they opted online, even though the school were giving ample breaks in between. And their behaviour, physique – everything has a more positive vibe now. Without exercise and physical activities, the kids had gained weight. Now they are getting back to normal,” she adds.

COVID-19 has been a bugbear for the world – and it appears it’s here to stay. “The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the Ministry of Education, they are doing their level best to keep a safe environment for our children – there are bubbles and everything in place and we in our daily lives are going about meeting people, touching surfaces. So why should we not send them to school?” asks Lama Watteel.

“We are adapting to a new way of life. At this stage I feel it’s a good time to teach our children better hand hygiene, social distancing, and keeping themselves safe and surviving in the new normal,” she adds.

A parent's concern

"My child's fears of COVID-19 were exacerbated by my neighbour falling sick and having to be hospitalized with it. He became obsessed with cleaning his hands and his things – now I wonder if he's got Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Things have gotten worse with me thinking about how to handle his return to school, which he's terrified about."

- Parent who requests anonymity

Dina Dimitriou, Coaching Psychologist and author of the book 'Are You Parenting The Adult Of The Future: A Practical Guide of 7 Life Skills Of The Future To Prepare Your Teenage And Child', answers:



Dina Dimitriou

Hello and thank you for your message and for reaching out. I am sorry your son is experiencing heightened phobia of COVID-19. The pandemic has affected all of us in different ways and it has undoubtedly affected many children. Obviously, I cannot tell you if your son has developed OCD as he would need an official diagnosis for that. If you are concerned, I would advise you to contact a mental health professional.

In the meantime, please see if these tips might help him.

1. Our kids see us as their role models. Everything we do they model, so in this case try and model calmness. If your child wants to talk about COVID-19 then make sure to be calm and reassuring when discussing it with him. Also, try and discuss with him in a developmentally appropriate way. This will make him feel less anxious. Also, be mindful of your reactions when it comes to the pandemic since our kids are always watching us.

2. Since your son is already practising healthy habits, try and reduce how much you talk about germs and the pandemic.
3. Be there for him when he wants to talk about his fears and try not to brush him off. Sometimes our children need to be heard without judgment.
4. Help him with self-regulation. Self-regulation is the ability to process our own emotions and behaviours in a healthy way. Learning to self-regulate takes time for children so try and always be there for him throughout this process even if he gets a bit uncomfortable. This will massively help him when he is at school without you.
5. Make a habit to practise self-care such as taking time to relax, take a few breaths or even do something he enjoys and distracts him. This could be reading, playing football, swimming, etc.
6. One of my favourite tips is practising gratitude. Try once a day to sit together as a family and express the things you are grateful for. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, it helps their mental and physical health but also to strengthen family relationships.
7. When it comes to returning to school, I would advise you to again to stay calm and reassuring explaining to your son that schools are taking many measures to keep everyone safe. If he is still struggling after a few days, I would talk to his teacher, so they are aware of his struggles.