Back-to-school COVID playbook

There’s no modern precedent for returning to school during a pandemic. So, Novant Health pediatricians have created a guide to help keep your family resilient and fortified as we all figure this out together. Whether your children are returning to school or learning remotely from the kitchen table, you’ll find strategies and solutions for everyone’s well-being.

**Structure the day**
During uncertain times, routines around schoolwork, mealtimes, etc., are more important than ever. They offer reassurance and order. Involve kids in decisions when you can, a sense of control makes us all feel better. If you can, have your child do school time and homework outside the bedroom. Preserve that sanctuary. For remote learning, get kids outside for 15 minutes before school starts to get the blood flowing and their brains going.

**Positive discipline**
Younger children who are anxious may act out while older kids grieving the loss of activities and special events may be more cranky than usual. Reinforce good behaviors and discourage bad ones. Don’t react with emotion. Pick your battles — ignoring poor behavior can be an effective way of stopping it.

**Embrace the ‘4 pillars’**
Explain to your kids that you expect them to do something that nurtures their **mind, body, spirit and social connections** every day and that you’ll be quizzing them. Be prepared to tell them what you did, too.

**Manage your stress**
Kids follow their parents’ lead. The more we control our stress, the more they’ll learn to persevere. Reboot with a few deep breaths. It works. Easy move: watch your tone of voice. For instance, “I don’t know” can be discouraging or inspiring/curious. Need a mantra? Try, “Kids are resilient.” Or: “Learn from the bad days, be grateful for the good ones.”

**Seize the moment**
If your kids are heading into school or group activities, arm them with a few catchphrases that will help them stay safe: Saying “Give me my 6 feet” in a positive way can help with social distancing. They can advise friends who get too close that “I’m keeping my germs to myself.”

**Don’t ignore mental health**
Many kids are grieving right now. So much has been taken away. Talk to your kids about their feelings. Watch for changes in behavior, attitude, sleep and mood that could be a sign of depression. Talk to your pediatrician, who may diagnose a medical problem or recommend therapy.