Family Digital Wellness and Return to School 2020

Boston Children's Hospital | Center on Media and Child Health

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What's inside

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For a complete list of references, please visit:
https://cmch.tv/special-features/back-to-school/

Welcome!

Back to School! What has always been a time of excitement and nerves tinged with nostalgia for summer's freedom lost is, in 2020, an unknown. Many children and parents do not know what form school will take this fall, how well it will work, how long it will last, what it will evolve into (if it evolves at all), or whether they will feel safe and ready to learn in the educational setting their school offers. It is a time of confusion and concern, distrust and anxiety.
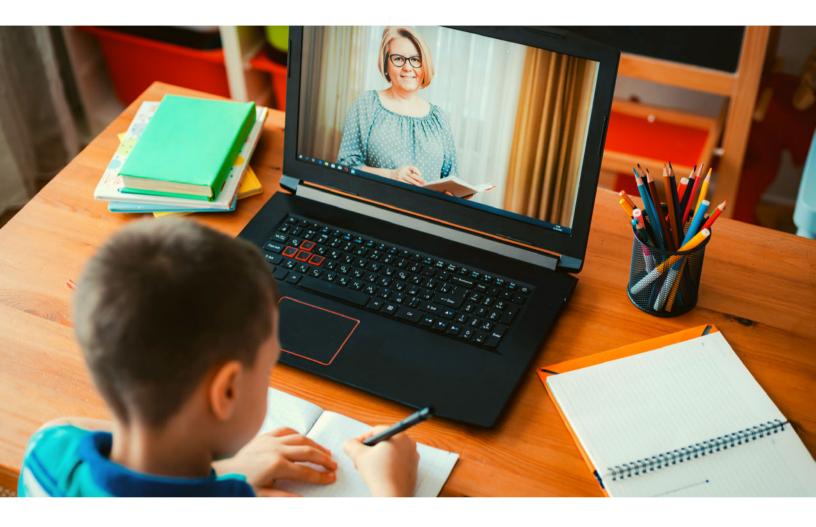
In March 2020, schools closed indefinitely due to the pandemic, affecting 90% of the world's student population.[1] Many US schools, believing the closures to be temporary, provided little or no direction for several weeks. When it became clear that schools would not be returning to normal, schools struggled to come up with workable solutions as they tried to address equity, students' access to learning tools, and the logistics of switching to remote learning. Considering the massive scope of this challenge, it is not surprising that in many cases attendance was spotty and students were difficult to motivate. 56% of teens were worried about keeping up with their homework while attending school remotely.[2] When asked "to what extent are you worried about how COVID-19 will impact your school year," nearly 72% of teens answered "very much."[3] Teens have been spending more time on social media than before the pandemic, 48% for more than 5 hours per day.[3] With COVID-19, parental concern about the time their children spend online and the content that they see and share there has been amplified. This fall, the normal anxieties around new teachers, peers, and schools will be intensified by the uncertainties of remote learning and the risks of spreading infection.

Reliable recommendations for safely navigating the pandemic are constantly evolving and many schools are still developing their plans for the fall semester. Because neither public health recommendations nor educational strategies are standardized, we cannot provide a universal guide for returning to school. However, we do know that 1) schooling plans now being considered for 2020 include increased use of digital devices and platforms and 2) educational uses of interactive screens will have to compete for attention with entertainment and social media.

Building on nearly two decades of research on screens and education and expanding on the fundamentals of the Family Digital Wellness Guide, we will examine together what we do know about the educational, distracting, and unhealthy potentials of digital media. We will explore and extrapolate from what we know now and help prepare you to be resilient and nimble. As the academic year 2020-2021 evolves, we will stand ready to provide you with the best information and strategies to keep your family well.

Share this information with your friends, your child's friends, your relatives, or anyone else you know that is trying to raise and educate healthy, happy and kind future leaders. Reach out to us with your observations, questions, and ideas as we venture into the year and we will do our best to respond in a timely, family-centered and forward-looking way.

Learning

From birth, children are continually learning. They learn from their surroundings, experiences, and people in their lives. While the upcoming school year is filled with uncertainty, what we do know is that learning will not be cancelled. Whether your child will be going back to the classroom, learning remotely, or both, you can be confident that they will continue their education. As the author Mark Twain advised, "Don't let your [child's] schooling interfere with his education."

In this section, we address how best to support your child's learning, whether in a classroom, online, or a mix of both. We've answered your BIG questions from an evidence base that combines scientific research on digital learning with the expertise and experience of the educators and clinicians on our team, which you can then apply to your own family's needs, values, and structure.

If your child's school offers in-school classes, what changes has the school made to help ensure the safety of students and teachers while in the building?

Schools that will be teaching on campus are restructuring their classrooms and campuses to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. While many will be following the constantly updating guidelines put forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, knowing the specific strategies your child's school will take to ensure safety before the first bell rings can help your child or teen feel better about beginning the school year.[4]

Whether your child will be entering pre-K or freshman year of high school, many schools are keeping their students and families informed by posting updates on websites or through newsletters. Be sure to read all updates that the school provides and talk to your child about new policies and rules. Some of the most important changes to prepare for are:

Handwashing: Research shows that cleaning hands multiple times a day is critically important to prevent spread of COVID-19.[5] A good rule is to clean hands with hand sanitizer that has at least a 75% alcohol content, or to wash hands with soap for at least 20 seconds each time a child transitions to a new place or activity: leaving home, arriving at school, changing classrooms, before and after lunch, etc. While many children and teens understand the importance of proper hand washing, younger children may struggle. Have your child watch one of the fun online videos that are aimed at teaching young kids how to wash their hands through play, music, and dance.

Mask wearing: One of the biggest challenges your child may face this fall is the requirement to wear a mask at school. Doctors recommend being patient, comforting, and playful when it comes to getting children used to wearing masks.[6] Start your child wearing the mask before school starts, so that they are not dealing with many new things at once. Because masks are needed now, it is a good idea for kids to get

into the habit of wearing a mask in public, like putting on a seat belt or bicycle helmet. Younger children may feel scared and unsafe when they cannot see a person's entire face, so be sure to soothe your child if they become upset, and give them time to get used to masks on others as well as on themselves. For older children, make mask-wearing fun by allowing them to decorate their masks however they'd like. Follow advice on how to properly wear a mask—especially on how to remove a mask safely.[7] Also learn how to wash reusable masks. Purchase or make several extra masks, so that your child has an extra one to bring to school, and so that they have a clean mask every day. Children are naturally empathetic and have strong, unselfish concern for others, so remind them that wearing a mask protects not only themselves, but also their friends, families, and teachers.

Distancing: Schools will likely require that students practice "social distancing," whether in the classroom or on the playground. Although some schools may, for space reasons, lower the required distance, your child should practice 6 foot distancing as automatically as they put on a seat belt until the rates of infection drop. Although it may be difficult for kids to socially distance at first, you can help them by explaining clearly and simply that putting extra space between themselves and others will help prevent the coronavirus from spreading. Children and teens are aware of the benefits; the top two motivations for practicing social distancing are "I do not want others to get sick" and "it is socially responsible."[8] With that said, young children and teenagers may struggle with the concept of social distancing, so o teach your child the importance of putting space between themselves and others during this time.

Socializing: "Social distancing" has become a common term for what is really "physical

distancing," or keeping 6 feet apart from others. Socially connecting is what children naturally do in school, and the social emotional learning that results is arguably the most important learning they do there. This is their first opportunity to function as individuals in society outside the family and it is where they determine who they are and how they will behave in the world. So "social distancing" must mean "socially connecting while physically distancing" or youth will ignore it.

In some cases, you may be able to take your child on a physically-distanced, masked tour or video tour of the school before the first day of school. Your child can see how the desks will be spaced out, where hand sanitizer is available, and what new rules will be in place for the lunchroom, dining hall, playground, or campus. Don't be afraid to ask questions to school staff, especially if you are concerned about the safety measures and how your child and their fellow students will be able to follow the new rules. Also remember to ask questions such as how to check out a book from the library, whether and how "hands-on" activities like art and sports will be conducted, or if there are rules about sharing school-related photos on social media. These questions can be general or very specific to your child's needs, especially if they have learning, medical, or emotional needs.

What devices and software does the school use, and what will students need at home?

Some schools may be tech-free, and if your child or teen is returning to the physical building, these rules still may be in place. Other schools integrate tech into daily lessons, with some even encouraging or expecting students to use their own phones or school tablets to complete work and collaborate with classmates. Make sure your children know what is expected of them—everything from what they can and can't bring to school to the rules for using school-owned devices, both at school and at home.

If your child will be attending classes in person full- or part-time, be sure to ask what the education plan will be if the school needs to close due to COVID-19 concerns, or if your child needs to quarantine due to exposure to the virus. Ask what devices and software are needed and if there will be opportunities to test these out before a potential closure.

If your child's school chooses a hybrid curriculum, with some in-person instruction and some remote learning, meet with your child's teacher or guidance counselor (especially if your child is starting a new school where they do not yet know them). Children learn differently and it is best to have in-person instruction, where the teacher can read the student's level of understanding and the student can reach out for help.

A recent study found that many homes lack access to the internet and/or devices needed for students to attend online classes and complete assigned coursework.[9] If your family does not have access to a needed device or broadband internet at home, be sure that your child's school and teacher know that before school starts. Your child may be able to receive a school-issued device, portable WiFi hotspot, or modified lessons, so that they can complete their required coursework and learn all assigned material with the tools available to them.

For students attending school remotely, make sure that you and your child understand, try out, and master the processes for signing onto online classes, completing assignments, and getting feedback. Schools will provide this

information along with instructions on how to download, set up, and use any needed software or apps. If anything is unclear to you or your child, do not hesitate to contact your school's administration or tech support for help.

Once you and your child know and have what is needed, set up the required platforms with your child and write down their login information. This will help if a password is forgotten, and will also allow you to better support your child or teen throughout the school year. Many platforms have parent portals or other features that parents can use to remain aware of and support their child's progress. Ask your child's teachers or school administrator about what other free resources they may have available.

Help your children get comfortable with using the features of the devices and platforms. You can do this by watching online tutorials with your child, testing features such as muting audio, and adjusting camera and volume settings ahead of time. If possible, create a quiet workspace for your child where they can attend their online classes. If your home is busy (or just noisy), make sure that your child has headphones with a microphone, so that they can hear the lecture or lesson clearly.

Finally, once your child has their class schedule, create and use a calendar so that lectures or class sessions aren't accidentally missed. You can also use a physical calendar, poster board, whiteboard, app, or notebook.

Overall, it is important to set up household expectations around online learning. Some questions to ask your child's teachers include:

- How long will they be expected to be online during their school day?
- Do they need to attend every online session?
- Can they substitute independent work (such as reading or writing) for some online sessions?

What tools are available for direct communication with my child's teacher?

Your child's teachers will most likely tell you how to best keep in touch with them, whether by phone, email, a class web portal, or scheduling a physically distanced, masked meeting with them in person. Also let them know how they can contact you when they have questions or concerns about your child.

As the school year progresses, ask your child's teachers about how your child is doing, both academically and socially. When it comes to technology, make sure that your child is using devices, apps, and programs the way their teachers intend them to—as tools to help their learning. Knowing the goals that teachers set for the school year, and their plans for guiding students to reach those goals, can help you better support your children's schoolwork and tech use at home.

How can I help keep my child focused on their schoolwork or homework?

Many kids (and adults) of all ages get distracted by "technoference" or "media multitasking" which is when they watch videos, chat on social media, or surf the web all while doing their homework.[10] Although they may not realize it, using media that has nothing to do with their homework (such as watching online music videos) actually causes them to take longer to finish, make more mistakes, and remember less of the material.

When your child is attending online classes, help them stay focused by setting up a quiet "school area" where they can watch the lesson being taught without seeing or hearing background distractions. This will also help their fellow classmates, as they will be better able to concentrate on the instructor without wondering what is happening in the background of their peer's screen.

Outside of virtual lessons, classwork and/or homework can be done in a common room, such as the kitchen, where you can monitor your child's work and their media use. This will allow you to help them stay on task, and be available to answer any questions.

Working and Learning

How can I support my child's learning from home when I have to work?

Working when you have a child learning at home presents new challenges, but there are ways that you can prepare yourself and your family for this new school year.

Get your family on the same page. Make a family plan for work and school. This includes staying connected and safe if you need to work outside of the home while your older child attends school at home. Make sure that

every member of your household can easily figure out when video or streaming services will be used. Create a weekly family calendar and keep it in a central location, or use a family calendar app, so that everyone can be mindful of others' needs.

Communicate with employers and teachers. Talk to your boss about your work schedule, and see what flexibility is offered and what resources

are available. Childcare is available for many parents who are essential workers and your employer may be able to connect you with these resources. Have a conversation with your child's teachers about your work situation. If your child will be attending school for part of the week in a hybrid curriculum, ask that your child be placed in a cohort or group where their in-person learning aligns best with your work schedule. Ask what tools the school is offering that can help you stay connected with what is happening, even while maintaining your job.

Determine tech needs. Make sure that your house has the devices and online bandwidth needed for you and your child to work and learn remotely, and that your child can easily operate the devices on their own should you be busy with work. Test your internet connection to see if it can handle multiple video calls or streaming services at the same time. If not, let your employer and your child's school know—they may be able to provide you with the tech tools needed and work around your schedule so that internet connectivity remains reliable and stable.

Build your bubble. Parenting is an important and difficult job, but even in a pandemic, it is not done in isolation. All of us need each other and there are many ways that we can be there to support one another. Take time to think about what you need, what the people in your life need, and how you all may be able to collectively help each other. If possible, set up virtual play dates, rotate childcare, or remote child monitoring with families you know and trust. Do not hesitate to ask for help when you need it, remembering that all of us will make it through this pandemic, this work year and this school year, but it will take all of us working together to make this experience successful.

Daily Routines

What do I need to know about daily routines?

Creating and maintaining routines during the pandemic has been a challenge for many families. Summer schedules often have more relaxed rules around media use, bedtimes, and activities. The start of a new school year is a great time for resetting house rhythms and expectations. Beginning a week or so before school starts, help your kids wake up at an hour that gives them time to eat breakfast, brush teeth and arrive at school on time, whether traveling to a physical school or to their remote learning space at home. This means that they'll also need to start going to bed on time to get enough sleep, stopping screen use an hour before that, making sure required summer reading is done, and getting some physical exercise during the day.

For the school year, you may decide that your child can use entertainment media, such as TV and video games during the weekends but not during the week, or you may decide to have

screen-free hours, or even days, using a media plan. Since extracurricular activities such as playing on sports teams, belonging to school clubs, or spending time with friends may no longer be an option for your child during the pandemic, make sure to allow flexibility in these rules. For instance, you may allow your kids extra time gaming online with friends, sharing on social media, or using video chat to share a meal with distant family or friends.

Be sure to make time for play and physical activity. Play is important for children's healthy social, emotional, and physical development at every age. Encourage daily outdoor time, whether visiting the backyard, or taking a walk or a bike ride around the neighborhood. Make sure your kids have ample time for free play and imaginative play such as chasing each around a makeshift obstacle course, to staging a rescue as their favorite superhero. While plans, schedules, and routines help kids (and the whole family) stay productive and happier, equally important is making sure to leave time that is unscheduled, unstructured, and can be filled by the imagination and creative whims of your kids.

Make and try hard to maintain play, sleep, and homework routines, and agree as a family on fair consequences for missteps. In spite of your best efforts, routines may be disrupted during the pandemic, so maintain as many family rituals as possible. Rituals are family traditions that create a strong bond among family members, and can help increase resiliency in children.[11] Having dinner as a family, walking the dog together, or coming up with fun nicknames for each other are a few examples of traditions your family can start.

Health

What do I need to know about my child's health?

Access to Food. Food insecurity happens when there isn't enough money to buy food for every member of the family.[12] Over 30 million children in the United States receive lunch from school, and 13 million receive school breakfast.[13-14] Closed schools have meant that some children and teens didn't have breakfast and lunch at all; however, many schools are still offering meals for pickup. If your child will be learning remotely, check whether their school offers meals to-go.

If no school meals are available for your child, investigate WIC programs (for children up to age 5), food stamps, and food banks in your area. Children who lack healthy, nutritious food and exercise have difficulties learning.

Weight Gain. Children tend to gain weight during their summer break from school, especially children from lower-income households. Similarly, the time away from school during the pandemic can also contribute

to weight gain.[15-17] Try to provide your child with healthy meals, snacks, and milk or water, and make sure that they are able to get exercise. If there isn't outdoor space for your child to play safely, consider indoor activities such as dancing to their favorite music, playing physical games like tag, or finding online videos to practice anything from yoga to full cardio routines. While many children may default to using screen media as their leisure activity, try to mix in fun, energetic activities that don't involve screens.

Sleep. Getting enough sleep is an important factor in children's success at school. The National Sleep Foundation suggests the following:[18]

Preschoolers (aged 3-5): 10-13 hours of sleep per night

School age children (aged 6-13): 9-11 hours of sleep per night

Teenagers (aged 14-17): 8-10 hours of sleep per night

Even if your child is getting enough hours of sleep, it is important to determine whether they are getting quality sleep. Young brains need healthy sleep routines in order to develop, grow, and learn, and screen media can contribute to sleep problems in children and teens. When kids have a TV, smartphone or tablet in their bedrooms, they are more likely to fall asleep later, to sleep for shorter amounts of time, and to wake up during the night.[19] These types of poor sleep patterns can contribute to problems with learning and school performance.[20]

It may be extra hard this year with so many of us having used screens more than usual, but try to start healthy sleep habits before the school year begins. To help your child get the best sleep possible, have them:

- Stop using all screens at least one hour before bedtime
- Fall asleep without listening to music or watching a video on their device
- Use a real alarm clock (remember those?) instead of their phone
- Charge their phone/laptop/tablet outside their bedroom overnight

Depression and Anxiety. Before the pandemic, many children and teens were already struggling with mental health issues: 7.1% of children between the ages of 3 and 17 had anxiety, 7.4% had a behavioral problem, and 3.2% had depression.[21] With schools closed, children and teens do not have access to their usual support system of friends, teachers, coaches, and school counsellors. Given the unique situation of COVID-19, and the disruption to their structure and routines, it is common for children and teens to feel worried, helpless, sad, and scared.[22]

Whether your child has a history of mental health issues or not, it is important to be aware of how the pandemic can negatively affect how they think, feel, and behave. Early research from China, where the virus hit first, highlights that while young children aged 3 to 6 experienced milder symptoms such as clinginess, difficulties paying attention, and grumpiness, teens were more affected--43.7% experienced depression and 37.4% experienced anxiety.[23-24] Although less common, parents should be mindful that children and teens living through the pandemic are at a higher risk of experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.[25]

Because kids are spending more time on their devices during the pandemic, they are more vulnerable to being cyberbullied (bullied online). It is important to remember that teens who identify as LGBTQA+ and youth of color are more likely to be bullied because of their identity or race.[26-27]

Although research on the effects that the pandemic will have on children's mental health is still ongoing, stay in touch with how your child or teen is feeling.[28] Depending on the severity of their struggles, there are several things you can do to help:

- Be aware of your own feelings and how you show them. Children are very sensitive to our emotions and those feelings are contagious. Let them know that you and they are doing everything possible to stay safe.

- Be truthful about what we know and what we don't know. Help them learn critical thinking so they can determine the truth and those who tell it.

- If you notice that your child is experiencing mild feelings of fear, worry, or sadness, be sure to listen and comfort them, whether they are toddlers or teenagers. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything we have ever seen and we have no clear idea of what will happen and how long it will last. Your child's feelings and concerns are valid. Give them a safe place to vent, and when possible, follow the advice of Mister Rogers by pointing children (and teens) to the "helpers" such as doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, and delivery people.

- If you notice that your child or teen feels lonely or isolated as a result of the pandemic, try spending more time with them. Don't be discouraged if your children, as they get older, withdraw or push you away. Teens in particular may struggle with "social distancing," as getting away from family and spending time with friends is an important and healthy part of adolescent development. Help them connect virtually with friends and "cool" family (as in "not parent") in order to provide them with emotional support and validation of their feelings.[29] Reassure them that social distancing will not last forever.

- If you notice that your child or teen is doing poorly in school, having trouble sleeping, spending less time with their friends and family (virtually or in-person), or engaging less with favorite activities, talk to their primary care physician or school guidance counselor about getting a referral to a mental health professional. During the pandemic, clinicians are offering therapy via virtual visits (telehealth) in which they can determine what is going on and help your child with their feelings.

- If you think that your child or teen is being cyberbullied, do not take away access to their devices. Not knowing what is going on will make them feel more vulnerable. Instead, review the messages with them in a supportive, empathetic way. Have an open, honest and non-judgmental conversation with them about the bullying. If they know the bully, contact your child's school for guidance and additional resources. If they do not know who is bullying them online, it is best to turn the information over to the police. Most importantly, do everything possible to reassure your child that they are safe, and reach out to a mental health professional to help them process the experience.

- If your child or teen starts experimenting with drugs or alcohol, disappears into the internet (see below), is talking about or showing signs of self-harm or suicide, contact a professional immediately.

Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU). Experts agree that many of us are using more media and technology during the pandemic, whether we need it for a specific task or as a means to distract or entertain ourselves.[30] While most of us can balance using interactive media with other activities, some children and teens who distract or soothe themselves by gaming, using social media, or watching videos online may be at a greater risk for developing PIMU during the pandemic.[31] To help your child or teen learn how to regulate their media use, act as a media role model by being aware of your own online behaviors, and model how you

would like your kids to use interactive media. [30] If PIMU is impairing them physically (sleep deprivation), academically (worsening school performance), mentally (anxiety, depression) or psychosocially (isolating themselves and reacting angrily to being interrupted), seek professional help from your child's doctor, therapist or the Clinic for Interactive Media and internet Disorders (CIMAID) at Boston Children's Hospital.

Family Violence. COVID-19 has created a "'perfect storm" for increased family violence: more time alone together at home, money issues, a lack of support systems, and increased substance use can all contribute to violence, abuse, and neglect.[32] Children most at risk include those in low-income households or foster care, with chronic disorders, existing mental health issues or traumatic pasts.[33-34] If you, a relative, a neighbor, a friend or a child you know may need help and support, use and/or share the following resources:

Crisis Text Line
https://www.crisistextline.org
Text HOME to 741741 or use Facebook Messenger to connect with a counselor

National Domestic Violence Hotline
https://www.thehotline.org
Call 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233) or use their online chat

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/talk-to-someone-now/
Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or use their online chat

The Trevor Project
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/
Call 1-866-488-7386 or use their online chat

Even if your family does not experience any violence firsthand, the unique challenges of the pandemic may leave you feeling more angry and frustrated than usual. If you find yourself yelling at your child in a moment of frustration, it is important to be honest with them about why you got mad, and to apologize and reassure them of your love.[35] It is okay to acknowledge your limitations and frustrations. We all make mistakes and we will never be perfect at parenting. But we can always work to perfect it. Remember to practice self-care during these stressful times in order to prevent parent burnout.

Parenting Resources

Parent Support

7 online support groups for parents during COVID-19 pandemic. Parents Magazine

Coping with stress. CDC

Coping in economically hard times. National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Coronavirus parenting: Managing anger and frustration. Child Mind Institute

Family Digital Wellness Guide. Center on Media and Child Health

Family Media Plan. American Academy of Pediatrics

How working parents can prepare for coronavirus closures. Harvard Business Review

Parent support group programs. Child Welfare Information Gateway

Parenting during the coronavirus pandemic. Boston Children's Hospital

Parenting in a pandemic: Tips to keep the calm at home. American Academy of Pediatrics

Self-care in the time of coronavirus. Child Mind Institute

Teens, social distancing, and anxiety in the time of COVID-19. Boston Children's Hospital

Learning

Family resources for remote learning. Child Mind Institute

How to wash your hands. Sesame Street

Wide Open School. Common Sense Media

Play

More Play Today. Center on Media and Child Health

Parenting Resources

Community Food Resources

Find your local food bank. Feeding America

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). USDA

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). USDA

Racism

How to talk honestly with children about racism. PBS

How white parents can use media to raise anti-racist kids. Common Sense Media

Racism and violence: using your power as a parent to support children aged two-five. ZEROTOTHREE

Resources to discuss racism. George Mason University

Safety

RAINN's National Sexual Assault Hotline. Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network.

Helpline. Samaritans.

For a complete list of references, please visit: https://cmch.tv/special-features/back-to-school/