

# School decisions and parenting stress during COVID-19

***Presenter – Erica Hanlon***

Hi everyone and thanks for joining this recorded webinar on school decisions and parenting stress during COVID-19. My name is Erica Hanlon, I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach and I'm also the mom to three school aged kids. I have two 10 year-olds going into fifth grade this fall and I have an eight year old who is going into third grade so I am very familiar, maybe too familiar with the stress that comes with having to send your kids back to school during these sort of unprecedented times.

Obviously, this is not where we wanted to be when we were kind of looking at COVID and dealing with COVID back in the spring but here we are. I hope that at the end of this webinar, at the end of this recording, you will feel like you have more information to help you navigate these really difficult decisions and cope with the stress that comes with them.

## Objectives

So, in this webinar we are going to talk about common struggles for parents right now, I think for a lot of us, we feel like we're the only ones having these problems. It's really easy to feel like everybody else kind of has it together even if they say they're stressed, maybe they're not really that stressed, we are really stressed I would like to dispel that myth, most parents are really stressed right now. We're all kind of struggling in our own ways so we'll talk about what some of those common struggles are. We'll also talk about three steps to move you forward through your schooling decision. A lot of parents I'm talking to right now are sort of spinning out in confusion about what to do, they're second guessing themselves so we will give you three steps to help you move forward with those decisions so that you're not wasting your energy and your time on being confused. We'll talk about why you're stressed, why you're worried, why you're anxious, all of those things right now it's completely common, it's totally normal. So you'll be able to better understand what that's all about and also get skills to help you manage those better. And then finally, we will review some of the resources and benefits that are available to help support you during this time.

## Options parents might have

So a lot of parents right now are asking themselves questions, I know I've been asking myself a lot of these questions. So this is by no means a comprehensive list but you know, some of the things you may be asking yourself right now, how do I know if I'm making the right choice? Am I putting my

child at risk? Either, you know, putting them at risk physically by sending them to in-person school? Am I putting them at risk academically or socially or mentally by keeping them at home? What are those risks? Am I putting my child at risk based on my decision? We may be asking ourselves, what are other parents doing? You know, when we feel confused a lot of times, we look to other people to see what they're doing to help inform our decisions.

If you're working right now, you may be asking yourself, how will this affect my job? How does it affect your job if you can't send your kid to in-person school? What if you're trying to, you know, arrange for online learning and trying to work full time as well, what does that look like? How will that affect your employment and affect your job? You may be asking yourself, how will this impact my child, either short term or long term? How will this impact my family? What is this going to look like? And you may be also asking yourself, what will people think about my choice? Maybe you have an option that you know, works best for you but you're really anxious and nervous and stressed out about what other people will think about it.

## Common feelings for parents now

So all of these thoughts create, as you can imagine, a lot of stress, a lot of worry, a lot of anxiety. You know, there's a lot of uncertainty in the future, we don't know what this fall will look like, we don't know what this school year will look like, we don't know what our jobs will look like, it's a lot of unknowns and when there are all these unknowns and we're sort of spinning in confusion and you know, all of that we often feel really stressed out, we feel overwhelmed with trying to have to do everything, we feel anxious, we feel guilty because we start to think that maybe we're not doing the right thing, whatever even right means we feel dread. It feels like no matter what we choose, it's not going to be good so you end up feeling dread about what's going to happen in the future and it's probably not going to be a good thing so our brains love to predict bad things in the future. And then a lot of parents I'm talking to right now are also just simply feeling exhausted, we're tired. We're tired of doing all of these things, we're tired of trying to manage our stress while we're doing all of these things.

## Step 1: Gather data

So, let's talk about the steps that come with making a schooling decision. So the first step is simply to get as much information as you can, we're just gathering data at this time and one of the best places to start is asking your school, looking at your school district and finding out what their plan is, what is their plan if they're doing online learning? What is their plan if they're doing in-person learning? What kind of things are they doing to accommodate kids who maybe need more academic support? What are they doing for safety protocols to make sure that kids aren't getting each other sick? What happens if somebody does get sick? What are they doing about notifying everybody if you are going to in-person? Get as much information as you possibly can about what your school's protocols will be. You also want to look at the infection rate in your area so what most health

officials are saying right now is that if you have a positive test rate in your community that is higher than 5% then it is probably not safe for children to go back to school in person.

Now, what does 5% infection rate mean? That means that more than five out of every 100 tests that are being done in your area are coming back positive so keep an eye on what that infection rate is that will likely influence your decision. And then you also want to find out how long it takes to get test results, if you're able to get test results back really quickly, then that will inform your decision versus maybe if it is taking a week or more.

I had a friend who sent her daughter to summer camp, her daughter's camp counselor started to experience symptoms so she went and got tested and those test results did not come back for more than a week so that created a lot of stress and anxiety for my friend so find out how long it's taking to get test results back in your area that might also inform your decision. And then is anyone in your family high risk? This is high risk in all kinds of different ways.

I'll tell you full disclosure. My twins who are going into fifth grade both have academic needs that are special needs, they both have IEPs and get extra support academically. I will tell you in this spring with online learning that did not translate very well. I am not sure how much learning happened in the spring but it was not confidence inspiring, at least on my end, the teachers were doing the very best that they could, they were doing their best but online learning was just not the most conducive for my kids academic needs so obviously in-person learning would be ideal to address those high needs. Now, to kind of further you know, complicate matters one of those twins, my daughter, has pretty significant and severe asthma. We've been in the hospital three different times for week-long hospitalizations, one of those times she wrote in an ambulance, they wanted to put her on a helicopter, she was in the NICU not the NICU so she was in the ICU for a week so we've got a respiratory situation that is high risk as well.

So you need to weigh your family's individual needs, what are the risks? What are the benefits? What is the best fit to meet those needs? Now you also want to ask yourself, will your child wear a mask? This is different for different children. Some children are so young that they won't keep a mask on, some kids are really great about keeping it on, other kids have sensory issues and so wearing a mask is very stress, you know, stress inducing and anxiety inducing for them. So just simply gather as much information as you can. Some of this information might be kind of contradictory as far as which decision is the best decision as in like my situation where we've got high needs academically but we also have high risk medically so you just want to get all of that information together and then move on to step two.

## **Step 2: Make a decision**

So step two is where we make the decision. A lot of us don't love our options right now, I don't love my options but our options are our options. Arguing with reality is really not a good use of our time and energy so we just want to simply accept, this is the reality, these are our options, these are our

choices right now. Weigh the risks and then trust that you will do what's best for your family, you know what's right for your family. Now, just because the decision isn't going to feel good and it probably won't, doesn't mean that it's the wrong decision, it could just still be the best decision for your family and what's right for your family might not be right for other families, that's fine. Trust yourself, trust that you know what's best and if you're still kind of wanting to evaluate things the CDC has a really great back to school decision making tool that you can check out to help you kind of ask yourself some of these different questions and kind of figure out what's the best option for you.

## **You've made the decision. Now what?**

So after step two you've made the decision, I'd love to tell you that making the decision is the hardest part but that isn't necessarily true. Sometimes it's the aftermath of making the decision that's the hardest part, it is all the stress and anxiety that comes after you've made it and having to manage your mind and manage your feelings afterwards so let's talk about that.

## **Step 3: Manage your stress and anxiety**

So this is the third step, this is where we manage the stress, the anxiety, the worry, the second guessing yourself that comes after you have made a decision. So first and foremost know that it's completely normal to have this anxiety following any kind of big decision. Our brains love to second guess ourselves, if I like the idea that we sort of have like a little attorney in our brains who loves to raise objections, objection Your Honor, objection Your Honor, our brain will always come up with objections about why our decision is not a good decision. It's totally normal, you can choose to listen to that voice or not.

My suggestion is that if you've done your homework on step one and step two, you just acknowledge that this is normal and don't listen to that voice because feeling confused simply isn't productive, feeling confused gets you nowhere, you just sort of spin around in circles, it's not productive at all so once you've made your decision decide to stick to your decision, you won't feel good about it. That's okay, that's normal, you won't feel good about it. Now, you're sticking to the decision based on the information you have right now. If the situation changes, if new information comes out, you can absolutely re-evaluate your decision and kind of go back to step one at that point. So, we're not going to spin out in step one and step two and step one and step two, we're going to do move through step three, where we have stress and anxiety and we manage it.

## **Your brain is designed for stress and worry**

So I think it's important to point out that biologically you are wired to experience stress and worry and anxiety, it is just how we're wired. It kept our ancestors alive when they had to survive lion attacks, it worked really well for them and our brains cannot distinguish the difference between a lion attack that is an imminent danger to your life versus what you see on the news that feels very

stressful, it all feels like a big threat, it all feels extremely life threatening so our brain is also designed to look for possible threats and zero in on them. This is why a lot of times we love scrolling social media, we love watching the news, we love watching all of that negative news, it's sort of like heroin for your brain that is addicted to finding threats and danger, it's totally normal but it also doesn't serve you to constantly be looking for those things so just recognize this is what your brain is wired for, it's wired to keep you alive, it's sort of like an over protective Mama. So when there is uncertainty, when there is a lack of predictability in your future, your brain is going to fill in the blanks with the worst case scenario and this creates stress and anxiety. It's completely normal but you it's important to have awareness about it so you're not letting that primitive part of your brain kind of run the show for you.

## Unproductive worry

So let's just kind of talk about what this tends to look like. So our brains love to look ahead to see if there are any problems that are coming. And then it likes to find those problems so that it can solve them. The problem is that sometimes our brains create future problems, they make them up and then we want to solve those and our brains do that because they think it's going to make us feel safe so what we're doing is we're going online, we're scrolling, we're looking for evidence that something bad will happen and we get all freaked out and we get really stressed and we get really anxious and we try to solve the problem in our minds but we can't ever get anywhere if it's unproductive worry and then we just end up going round and round and round so we don't want to do that.

How do you know if it's unproductive worry versus worry that will actually help you plan and help you feel safe? So unproductive worry focuses on events that are totally outside of your control. It imagines one bad outcome that will then lead to a series of worse outcomes, let me tell you how my brain has done this recently. So thinking about my daughter who has dyslexia and struggles academically and barely, barely makes grade level every year so I have been thinking, okay, she's not going to get the academic support that she needs this year, she's going to fall further behind, she is always going to be behind for the rest of her academic career, she won't be able to get into college, she won't be able to get a good job and she's going to live under a bridge. Or she's going to live with us for the rest of her life. So you can see my brain takes one piece of information and extrapolates a whole big catastrophe into the future, right? So this is what just what the brain loves to do, it's not factual, it's very unlikely to happen but it's what my brain loves to think, that is unproductive worry. Unproductive worry also tends to assume that our thoughts and our feelings are an accurate measure of the threat so if we're really freaked out about it, it must be really dangerous, but our brains aren't good at distinguishing the level of danger.

I mentioned before, you know, a lion attack, like I have a friend who's a couples therapist and she talks about arguing with your partner or with your spouse and that your brain can't distinguish between the level of threat when you're having a fight with your partner versus having a gun pointed at your head, our brains interpret it as the same thing so your feelings are not an accurate measure of just how threatening a situation is. unproductive worry also emphasizes the importance

of others approval. So again, our ancestors they lived in tribes they needed to belong, it was really, really important to fit in. So it doesn't matter if you know, Johnny Bob who lives down the street is making a different decision about their kids and is giving you the side eye because you're doing your decision with your kids and they don't agree with it.

Really in the end, that makes zero difference, right? But our brains love to think about what other people think about us, loves to focus on other people's approval but that's not productive and here's the real key, unproductive worry offers no course of action, there's nothing you can do about it. So if you're thinking all about what are other people doing, are they being unsafe, you can't do anything about that, that is like prime unproductive worry material.

## **“What if...” syndrome**

So when we are having all of this stress, we're having all of these worries, a lot of times our brains are coming up with all of these what ifs, What if I make the wrong choice? What if someone gets sick? What if this is bad for their mental health or their academic future? Or you know, what if this is bad for me? What if this is bad for my job? What if I'm a terrible parent? Our brains love to go to worst case scenario and come up with all of these terrible what ifs.

## **A simple (but not necessarily easy) solution to worry**

So this is a very simplistic reductionist way of solving your anxiety here on this slide but this is obviously easier said than done, right? It's simple but not necessarily easy. So first we just want to ask ourselves, can I control the thing that has me worried? Can I control it? If the answer is yes, then you make a plan and then stop worrying about it, right? So this is our step one, step two, step three, right? Make a plan, stop worrying about it. Now, is the thing that has you worried outside of your control? If the answer is no, then it's important to manage your thinking so you can move on, if it's outside of your control it is not a good use of your time and energy and let's be honest, you need your time and your energy right now.

So Let me give you an example of this, what other people are doing safety wise, I think I just mentioned this before, right? What other people are doing safety wise, do you have control over that? No, you have zero control over that so you want to manage your thinking about it. Do you have control over your family's decisions about safety? You know, washing hands, wearing masks, social distancing, yes you do have control over that so you want to make a plan that works for you and your family and then stop thinking about it so that is the most simple way of figuring out your worry a little bit.

## Write it down

So I said manage your thoughts, what does that look like? One of the best things you can do is simply write down your thoughts. We tend to think thoughts and thoughts are just sentences in our brain, that's all that they are. We think thoughts and then we just believe them and then we just operate off of those thoughts like they are facts. Now when you write down your thoughts, you can see them just thoughts, they aren't necessarily facts and then you can look at them and you can figure out which ones are facts, which ones are useful, which ones will help you make a plan versus which thoughts are just thoughts, just your brain being on autopilot coming up with worst case scenario, you know, my daughter living under a bridge. Right? That's just my brain doing what it does, it's fine. So you can figure out which ones are helpful, which ones are a good use of your time and which ones do you just want to dismiss and let go of and this also is an opportunity for you to gain insight and see patterns in yourself about which things your brain really loves to worry about so that will raise your awareness.

## Watch your self-talk

And you want to watch yourself talk, watch your brain, become an observer of your thoughts, this is one of the most powerful things you can do. So your brain will love to ruminate, and by ruminate I mean it loves to think about the same thing over and over and over and over so you want to notice when your brain is starting to do that so that you can interrupt it and start to address those thoughts. So maybe like I said, write them down, you can also start to work toward solutions for issues that are within your control. When you really focus on things that are within your control, you're going to get a lot more traction, you'll feel a lot more empowered, you're going to feel a lot more confident and less anxious. And remember just how resilient you are.

Chances are you've been through some tough stuff in your life and you've gotten through it, you are tougher than you think, give yourself some credit. And then if your thoughts are really negative, if you're noticing yourself talk, you're noticing your thoughts, you've got that awareness and you're noticing that your thoughts are really, really negative and are not helpful, you can start to choose thoughts that are either neutral or less negative. Now you'll see I'm not saying go think something positive. I know we live in a society that's all about think positive, I think that that can actually be toxic sometimes. Sometimes, you know, you just need to think negative thoughts, right? We don't want to be positive about COVID, right? No, you don't need to think positive thoughts about that. But if your thoughts are not serving you, you can move them to be more neutral or less negative, let me give you an example.

If I'm having the thought, I have too much to do, I cannot do this, this is too much, I can't work and homeschool and do all the things, it's just too much, that thought is not helpful, it just creates more stress and anxiety for me, it does not provide any solutions but if I think the thought, you know what, other parents are doing this right now, you know, everybody is having a hard time right now

and we're all going to get through it together, that is not necessarily a positive thought, especially the like all parents are having a hard time right now. That is what I would call a less negative thought, but it makes you feel better, right? It actually helps reduce some of that stress and anxiety. So instead of trying to move from a negative thought to a positive thought just choose one that's slightly better than what you're thinking right now.

## Own your feelings

So here's an exercise to help you manage your anxiety and your stress and your worry and it's a little counterintuitive because again, we sort of live in a society that's like stop thinking the negative thing and think positive things and so we are always sort of pushing away all of that stress and anxiety and worry and what tends to happen is that when you push feelings away, they don't go away, they stay there and then as soon as they have an opportunity to get some air time, they're going to be really loud. A lot of times for us that shows up when we go to bed, it's finally quiet, you're finally unplugged, and your brain gets really loud about all of the terrible things that could go wrong and so it interferes with your sleep. So, a better way to actually process your feelings is to process them. Let them happen, give them space, allow for them so this exercise lets you do that. What you decide to do is ruminate on purpose, you decide to worry on purpose. So, carve out like 10 minutes, 15 minutes for the day and then spend that entire time focus on the things that are worrying you and think only of the negatives. Now you'll be tempted to have your grownup brain, you know, pop in and say, that's not really that big of a deal, you're being irrational. No, make that grown up voice be quiet. We're getting as uncomfortable as we can, we're giving all of our worries all of our attention right now. And if you run out of things to think about, just go back, recycle the same thoughts over and over but then enforce your time limit, go through the entire time when the time is up, the time is up and then you process out of it by taking some deep, calming breaths and let go of your worries until maybe tomorrow when they will get their air time again. So, what does this do? One it helps you process through the feelings instead of pushing them through. Two, it empowers you to see just how much control you can have over your thoughts and feelings so this is a really great exercise that can be sort of counterintuitive, but it works really well.

## Use technology to help with your stress and anxiety

So obviously, there's a lot of technology that's available to you right now and there's some really great apps that can help with managing stress and anxiety and this is, you know, not a comprehensive list but we really like these apps so these are the ones that we recommend right now, Breathe2Relax takes you through guided breathing exercises, Insight Timer offers different guided meditation exercises, you can choose which one you want. Headspace is a meditation and mindfulness app, I believe that you can sign up for 10 free days or 10 free exercises so that's a good one to check out and Calm is a very popular app that has different guided meditations for things like sleep, meditation, relaxation, stress management so those are all pretty good apps you might want to explore.

## Try this “what if” instead

So, we talked about all of those what ifs that create a lot of stress and anxiety, so I'd like to offer up to you some other what ifs. What if the best-case scenario happens? Our brains love to think about the worst-case scenario but what's the best-case scenario? And what if that happens? Try to give that equal airtime with the worst-case scenario. What if your kids are stronger than you think? What if your family comes out of this even more resilient and closer and stronger? And what if you can handle whatever happens? You can see how using those what ifs creates a whole different feeling.

## You're doing a great job

Now, if anybody hasn't told you, I would like to tell you that you're doing a great job. Things are really uncertain right now; the options are not great. You will probably make a choice and then not feel good about it but that doesn't mean that it's the wrong choice. Trust that you know what's best for your family, you know what's right for your family and stick to your decision. Don't second guess yourself, that's a waste of your time and energy. Instead show compassion for yourself and spend your time and energy around making plans to implement your decision instead of second guessing it.

## Thank you for attending!

So, thank you for attending today's webinar, I can't reiterate enough that you are not alone during these difficult times, help is available, reach out to us, we are here for you 24/7. So, thanks again for attending, I hope it was helpful, call us anytime.

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