

- COVID-19

BACK TO SCHOOL IN A PANDEMIC? FIVE TIPS TO keep kids COVID-FREE

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AFTER living for two years with the perks and pitfalls of online classes (your Internet is spotty but at least the kids are safe from Covid-19), students in all levels are set to go back to school for traditional in-person classes this month. National Action Plan on Covid-19 Chief Implementer Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. made the announcement in February after noting that no transmission of the novel coronavirus was reported among the 10,000 children who participated in face-to-face classes held in pilot-test schools. All participating children were inoculated with the vaccine against Covid-19.

Naturally, this news leaves parents of school-aged kids with mixed feelings. “On the one hand, you are happy your children can finally go back to school. There is nothing like learning in an actual classroom setting where they can get instant feedback from a teacher and interact with classmates,” says Dr. Shirley V. Dy, MD, Active Consultant from the Department of Pediatrics of top hospital in the Philippines, Makati Medical Center (Makatimed, www.makatimed.net.ph).

“On the other hand, Covid-19 is still very much a threat and as a parent you cannot always be there to shield your children from classmates, teachers, or school employees who may have the virus and not know it.”

Still, you can prepare your kids for their inevitable return to school. Use this time to ensure your children remain healthy and Covid-free despite their exposure to the outdoors. Dy recommends the following:

- **GET your CHILDREN VACCINATED.** “No less than the US’S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that everyone ages 5 years and older get a Covid-19 vaccine to help protect against the virus,” she underlines. “The CDC reassures that the vaccines were developed using science that has been around for decades. They are much safer than getting Covid-19 and more effective at preventing severe diseases from Covid-19 and limiting the spread of the virus that causes it.” As proof, only four of the 10,000 inoculated children who participated in the pilot-test schools experienced “very, very minor side effects,” according to Secretary Galvez.

Vaccinations for kids aged five to 11 (which are given in a smaller dose that befits their size) began in February 2022, while jabs for ages 12 to 17 years old were given as early as October 2021. Vaccine rollouts for these age groups are found almost everywhere; selected malls, schools and hospitals offer them for free.

- **INSTILL HEALTHY HABITS.** By now, the pandemic’s health and safety standards are ingrained into our system: Wear a facemask. Observe social distancing. Hand-wash regularly. “Get your kids to practice them too,” says Dy. “Stock up on facemasks designed for their size and age. Remind them to stand a meter apart from people. And pack a small container of alcohol in their bags so they can use it to disinfect their hands when water and soap aren’t available.”

- **RAISE HEALTHY CHILDREN.** Minimum health and safety protocols protect you from Covid-19—but they are not enough. “Even with vaccines and facemasks, it is still important to build a strong immune system,” she points out. “Make fruits and vegetables part of your children’s meals. Expose them to the morning sun every day. Get them to be active through sports and play at least 30 minutes a day. And make sure they get at least eight hours of sleep at night.”

- **SCHEDULE AN ANNUAL CHECKUP.** Did your children skip a visit to their pediatrician, or, worse, miss routine immunizations for measles, diphtheriatetanus-pertussis (DTP) and other vaccinepreventable diseases during the pandemic? They are not alone. According to the Department of Health’s data on Fully Immunized Children, the immunization rate among infants and children in 2020 is 3.9 percent lower than the rate in 2019. “It’s a reflection of parents’ fear of exposing their kids to Covid-19 in a hospital or health center setting,” says Dy. “But do not put your children at risk for developing diseases that are easily preventable by vaccines.”

“Even strictly observing health and safety protocols is a big help,” she shares. “By now, your child’s doctor would have had vaccinations and booster shots, and he or she will most likely be wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) which should guard your kids against the virus.”

It helps to know that many hospitals have ramped up their efforts to maintain safe and sterile surroundings. For its best practices against Covid-19, Makatimed was recognized with the Excellence Award for Patient Safety in the 2020 Asian Hospital Management Awards, besting 89 hospitals in 16 countries. The International Hospital Federation also praised the institution for its timely and effective response to the coronavirus pandemic, particularly its prioritizing the health and safety of its patients and healthcare workers.

- **LISTEN TO your CHILDREN.** Are they afraid of needles—or of catching Covid-19 when they go back to school? Dy says, “Tell them that these are unprecedented times we are all trying to navigate together. Most of all, let them feel that they are always loved and that they can come to you for anything, whether it is because they’re afraid of something or are experiencing out-of-the-ordinary symptoms.”