Helping kids manage stress and anxiety can be a challenge during the best of times, and spring and summer 2020 haven’t been the best of times. With the spread of COVID-19 and the shift to distance learning, students (and families) were quickly forced to pivot to online learning, a model most schools and teachers were not prepared for. It was an extreme—and at times, impossible—challenge for just about everyone involved.

Then the death of George Floyd in police custody sparked public protests, and sometimes riots, like students had never seen.

As of this writing (July 2020), many states are still waiting for word about what the 2020-21 school year will look like as schools reopen and implement COVID-19 precautions. While there are [reopening plans in the works](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/07/state_guidance_on_reopening_sc.html?utm_source=enl&utm_medium=eml&utm_campaign=savvypr&utm_content=bigstory), there are also many unknowns about what will happen.

It all adds up to a long list of potential feelings about going back to school. Kids may be afraid they'll get sick if they go to school or sad about deaths of people they know. They might be confused about all the ways school has changed from before, and worried about racial tensions.

Helping kids and families is what parent groups do, but how to even start with such a list of concerns? Acknowledging the enormousness of the situation is a critical first step, says Jill Cook, assistant director of the Association of School Counselors in Alexandria, Va.

“We’ve all experienced a shared trauma,” Cook says. Helping move students through that trauma, she says, “has to be a comprehensive conversation. It can’t just be what schools think students need. It has to be what everyone needs.”

Your parent group can play a key role in helping support families from a distance, even as (at least for the fall semester), many districts across the country won’t allow volunteers into schools.

The nonprofit WestEd.org has published a brief called [Community-Care Strategies During the Coronavirus Crisis](https://selcenter.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/05/Brief_Community_Care_Strategies.pdf) that includes helpful tips for schools and educators. The brief states that “just as schools play a large role in society’s response to the pandemic, every member of a school community has a part to play in maintaining a sense of connection and ensuring that those who need the most support get it. Remember that everyone in the community is in this challenging period together.”

**Here are ways experts say you can help:**

* **Prioritize communication with school staff** about district plans for reopening and for minimizing the spread of COVID-19, and ask how your PTO can help. Continuously “work with schools to determine needs and finding ways to help. Offer support in whatever ways you can,” Cook says.
* **Acknowledge to parents that current events are contributing to fear and anxiety**, and help them through any stigma that their kids could be experiencing mental health issues.

“[Parent groups] can be critical in helping destigmatize the need to support mental health and spreading the message that [their feelings] are OK,” Cook says.

* Last spring, many parent groups stepped up to support students with [virtual spirit weeks, Zoom meetings with school mascots, and more](https://www.ptotoday.com/pto-today-articles/article/5950-10-ideas-for-building-spirit-at-your-school). **Continue those spirit-builders**, or try new ones for back to school.
* **Work with the principal and school nurse** to help [encourage and implement healthy habits at school](https://www.ptotoday.com/pto-today-articles/article/1087-dealing-with-cold-flu-virus-what-ptos-can-do)—collecting and distributing disinfectant wipes, putting up posters encouraging handwashing, etc. Even if you can’t go in the building during school hours, you might be able to help with these healthy habits when kids aren’t in the building.
* If you have a room at school typically used for PTO business, **talk to the principal about using it as a place for quiet or reflective time if needed**, suggests Cook. You might even ask about helping turn another space at the school into a meditative room that teachers or counselors can use.

In that (virtual) vein, Cook also recommends sharing resources like [Virtual Calming Room](https://calmingroom.scusd.edu/), a collection of meditation exercises, puzzles, sounds and music, and more from Sacramento City Unified School District’s Student Support & Health Services Department.

* **Also make communicating within your group a priority.** It’s an overwhelming time for everyone, and adding intentional community-building and self-care strategies in your meetings can help relieve stress, which helps you keep going. For a parent group, this could mean making some time just for fun and decompressing—a happy hour meeting, for example, or one where everyone has to tell a joke or a funny story. (WestEd.org)
* Educational inequities like not having internet access at home were a significant issue during the spring school closings. If possible, **work with your administration or district on ways your group might be able to help families** who don’t have computers, internet access, or technology skills, to consistently engage online. (WestEd.org)
* **Ask staff who work with those students who need the most support in a typical school environment if there are ways you can help.** It is likely that these students will have even greater needs now. This could include ESL and special education instructors, and the school counselor; they most likely will have identified many students with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, students experiencing homelessness, students taking care of younger siblings, and undocumented students—many of whom will be under significant stress as they cope with existing challenges and new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. (WestEd.org)

Emily Graham contributed to this article