



Children Returning to In-Person School During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Impact on Mental Health and Well-being

*An official statement from the Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
(formerly the American Orthopsychiatric Association)*

Introduction

The Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice is committed to the mental health and well-being of children, families, and communities. We work to reduce disparities and advocate for environments and policies that foster positive mental health. The Global Alliance strongly opposes all attempts to prevent children from receiving an education in environments that are safe and humane, as is their constitutional right.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world have been faced with unprecedented times. The impact of policies enacted such as school closures, stay-at-home orders, and isolation from friends and family have all resulted in a significant loss of daily routines and social interactions that will continue to have a profound impact on children's lives. The entirety of the pandemic's impact will not be fully understood for many years.

Problem Statement

The Global Alliance is gravely concerned about the well-being of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the 2021-2022 school year commences, unequal and inconsistent policies on return to in-person school have been implemented across the United States. Some of these policies have threatened the fundamental constitutional right that all children have to equal educational opportunities.

Legislation has been introduced in 8 states that prohibits use of scientifically proven prevention strategies for the spread of COVID-19 and in 2 states that threatens limiting funding for public schools and platforms for virtual school, if necessary. Such steps are not consistent with best practices; they are willfully harming the well-being of children and their families. These policies also negatively impact the well-being of caregivers of school-aged children, who must weigh the potential health risks, education and socialization loss, and work-related ramifications of their decisions (Bichell, 2021).

Considering the surging Delta variant and the discovery of new variants (e.g., Lambda), we are all concerned about the safety risks of children returning to in-person classrooms this fall. However, we also recognize the importance of children of all ages returning to in-person school to fully support their cognitive and social development.

The evidence is clear that (1) it is possible to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 with strong prevention mandates; (2) children and their families have better outcomes (academically,

socially, emotionally, and behaviorally) when in safe, secure in-person school settings; and (3) the economy is stronger when children attend in-person school, as parents and caregivers are able to work more easily and feel fewer negative pandemic effects when their children are doing well (Lopes et. al, 2021).

Position Statement

The right to education is a protected human right, in the United States and internationally under the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The Global Alliance recognizes that schools are vital to communities. They provide pivotal physical spaces and access to relationships that provide safe and supportive learning environments for students, fostering academic, social, and emotional development. Schools also provide access to critical services and supports and can provide a sense of normalcy, safety, and routine subsequent to difficult shared events (e.g., Osofsky et al., 2007). Schools play a significant role in promoting equity in learning and health, particularly for groups disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (CDC, 2021). Children’s well-being is linked to engagement in school and the experiences that shape livelihoods (including academic, behavioral, and psychological outcomes) through the connectedness of activities and the development of trusted relationships (Boberiene, 2013).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has developed strong guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 schools (August, 2021), which includes indicators and thresholds for risk of introduction and transmission of COVID-19 in schools. Policies based on scientific evidence and data-driven guidance should be mandated across schools at the federal level. The CDC’s comprehensive prevention strategies – including promoting vaccination; requiring consistent and correct mask use; physical distancing; screening to promptly identify cases, clusters, and outbreaks; ensuring adequate ventilation; handwashing and respiratory etiquette; staying home when sick and getting tested; contact tracing, in combination with isolating and quarantining, when appropriate; as well as cleaning and disinfection – provide a framework that ought to be implemented by all schools.

In addition to this guidance, the Global Alliance supports mandatory vaccination of qualifying teachers, school staff, and children over the age of 12. For those individuals seeking medical or religious exemption to be vaccinated, we recommend weekly COVID-19 testing. Vaccination is the most potent means for preventing illness and death from COVID-19. As part of comprehensive contract tracing, it is also necessary that all exposures and confirmed cases in schools be reported to all families impacted, and that the information on cases (private details need not be included) is shared in a timely manner.

Attending in-person school is important for child development and having safe and humane school environments is critical for children’s mental health and well-being, particularly during a challenging time. Schools provide important infrastructure and community connection and can be safe, organized, and responsive to future challenges if they follow clear scientific guidance and evidence.

Science-based, data-driven decision making should be the priority, guiding the return to in-person school for children. Policy decisions should center child well-being rather than political dynamics and agendas. Children of all ages should return to in-person school safely. The Global Alliance believes following these recommendations is the only way to allow for the safe return of children to the classroom, mitigating the spread of COVID-19 to families and communities, and ensuring children attain their right to education.

References

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