

Sarah Mitchell - Planning for Return to School – 9 July 2020

As a mother of a young child, I have witnessed first-hand the impact of school closures due to COVID-19. My six-year-old has gone from being keenly interested in school, to having no interest in being taught, especially by her parents. School, with its teachers and peers, provides the incentive to learn and play in a constructive, well-designed, caring, safe environment. I admit, my husband and I work during the week, and we do not have the aptitude, nor frankly the patience and time, to teach and "friend", along with "parent".

I understand that the Ministry of Education has released guidelines to the school boards on re-opening in September and that the hybrid model is favoured. It is not a sustainable solution: we are all tired and stressed. And most importantly: children are learning- and peer-starved.

Kids need to return to school full-time. There is enough evidence to suggest that the risk of infection to children is minimal, especially with proper precautions. What is being proposed overlooks the negative impact of not being in school. Beyond textbook education, there is critical social development being missed out on.

The hybrid model relies on children having easy access, and the motivation, to sit in front of a screen. My child's use of screens over the past four months has shown me that screens for learning don't work: kids don't turn up. And, research shows that screens adversely impact one's brain development, and can heavily affect sleep. Poor sleep can have a detrimental impact on one's overall well-being.

Yes, how schools reopens in September will require significant shifts in structure, design and delivery to protect the health and safety of students and staff. Starting with fear and the intention to limit in-person access is not the right path.

Unlike in March, our community is better prepared to test, trace, and isolate should someone be exposed. The Toronto's SickKids Hospital, our very own CHEO, and many other experts are advocating for a full-time return in September; taking a child's complete health into consideration. If the hybrid model is the path forward, most families will need to look elsewhere for care, which will mean many additional sources of potential exposure.

Is this what we really want for our children and our community?