

## **Suggestions to Manage Anxiety about Return to Modified School for Patients with Chronic Pain**

\*This handout is intended for clinician use (not for patient distribution) to help with brainstorming ideas about school return to support their patients during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It was created by the SPP Pain SIG Clinical Committee. We hope that this is a helpful resource for our colleagues to both affirm and expand your creative toolbox for supporting patients with chronic pain during this pandemic.

### **First, assess for level of readiness or anxiety regarding a return to school:**

- Typical: getting back on schedule, worry about health, worry about pain, worry about social engagement
- Impairing: Fears are not easily calmed, cause significant distress, impairing function
  - Consider the source of the impairing anxiety:
    - Social Anxiety
    - Extreme fear of pain/ desire to avoid return to school
    - Excessive fear of COVID-19
- Assess the family level of anxiety
  - Consider more parent-only work or family sessions
  - Provide resources to family
  - Encourage family to review the school's plan – how the school is taking their child's health in mind

### **Then, consider providing these recommendations and/or interventions:**

- **Normalize**
  - We are all living during an unprecedented time with many changes, unknowns, and frequent changes.
  - Some worry and anxiety during this time are NORMAL
  - If there is significant impairment related to anxiety or pervasiveness of worry:
    - Discussion of symptoms/modified diagnoses with patient and/or parents
    - Determine if you should consider additional treatment intervention
    - Consider psychopharmaceutical trial if indicated
- **Preparation**
  - Know the plan
    - Review the school's current plan & plan B (e.g., is the school starting with in-person with option for transition to online-only if needed)?
    - Review HOW and WHY the school's precautions will be helpful to stay safe/healthy
  - Assess the patient's specific school related worries/concerns
    - Remember, patients may worry about many different aspects of return to school, so ask about (write down/create a list) their particular concerns.
      - Some fears may lead to further education or problem solving or planning with the school.

- Worry about pain at school (or modified pain management plan)?
    - Worry about health/safety/family safety related to COVID-19?
  - Help youth anticipate the unexpected
    - Help youth remain secure, but flexible
    - There may be changes throughout the year
    - Different teachers and students may take different approaches
      - How to plan for different scenarios
      - Create a “rough Plan B” for the biggest fears/worries about return to school
  - **Correct any misperceptions**
    - Provide psychoeducation about COVID-19 and precautions as needed
    - See sources below to stay current with updated recommendations.
      - Also seek advice from your local health department & your hospital for guidelines specific to your community & talking points from your hospital/department
- **What CAN they control?**
  - Identify things the patient CAN control
    - E.g., choosing to follow recommended precautions, encouraging friends to follow precautions, scheduling fun activities for support
    - Self-care/relaxation
  - Review and modify their typical day and bad day pain coping plans to align with the current school plan
  - Take health precautions seriously.
    - If patients DO return to school, encourage them to follow health guidelines and the school safety protocols closely.
    - Encourage patients to encourage their peers to follow guidelines as well.
- **Create anxiety/worry management strategies:**
  - In the moment/quick strategies: breathing, counting backward from 10, taking a short break, relaxing muscles, mindfulness moment
  - Daily activities to manage anxiety: listen to music, art, reading for fun, taking a bath, exercise, social time, daily relaxation, challenging worry thoughts
  - Pain management plan for during school (in person or virtual)
- **Practice CBT – challenging “unhelpful” thoughts**
  - Be sure to check in about how their worry impacts their pain & their thoughts about their ability to manage pain
- **Gradual Exposure**
  - Creative approach:
    - Practice driving /walking to the school parking lot (patients may not be permitted inside)
    - Practice with alternative out-of-house activities:
      - Outside activities with friends

- Short errands inside
    - Gradually increasing time spent inside a place out of the home
    - Practice the precautions
      - Wearing a mask for gradually increasing time at home.
        - Other family members to practice wearing mask, too (so patient can adjust to seeing others wear mask, talking with a mask, listening to others with a mask)
        - Practice wearing a mask for increasing times while outside
      - Practice social distancing, not touching their face/mask, washing hands (thoroughly and for at least 20 seconds), practice proper use of hand sanitizer
    - Consider using imaginal exposure for exposures that cannot be done in-person due to physical distances restrictions/safety precautions
- **Encourage parents to lead by example:**
  - Parents to model social distancing, wearing a mask
  - Provide suggestive language for parents to talk to kids
    - Remind them to avoid discussing their own worries/fears around their kids
  - Provide online resources for parents about COVID-19
  - Provide book recommendations for managing worry/anxiety
  - Parents/Families can also practice asking for help and connecting with community
- **CONNECT with school community**
  - Identify trusted adults before transition that patient can access at school (who knows pain management plan and will reinforce the plan as developed with medical team; this can also be the person the patient knows to access during school if needed).
  - Confirm if school counseling or other supports will be available during school hours (encourage family to connect with identified school support person before school such as, school counselor or school psychologist)
  - If supports (OT, PT, counseling, etc.) are not available at school, then prepare for patient to have additional or increased mental health support or other supports outside of school. Increased professional supports may be needed at this time regardless.
  - Confirm if school nurse will be available (if this is needed for patient)
  - Try to have parents and school schedule meeting before transition to review how to best support patient at school OR at least have family connect with identified school support person prior to school
  - If patient has 504 plan or IEP, review and revise it as necessary during this time of transition. Consider additional accommodations necessary for health conditions during this time.
  - Try to get as much information about what child will have to expect at school to help them prepare and practice.
- **Sources for reference:**

- CDC Guidelines:
  - General CDC info: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
  - School related: from 6/30: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-testing.html>
- American Academy of Pediatrics Guidelines:
  - Return to school: <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>
  - National Association of School Psychologists – COVID Resources: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center>
- World Health Organization:
  - General: [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019?gclid=CjwKCAjwgdX4BRB\\_EiwAg8O8HVMIKYxWtkpc1qJvc2zwnIV\\_EJIAleJkjJdumzmWkjbQWPrwvxbayxoCm7QQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019?gclid=CjwKCAjwgdX4BRB_EiwAg8O8HVMIKYxWtkpc1qJvc2zwnIV_EJIAleJkjJdumzmWkjbQWPrwvxbayxoCm7QQAvD_BwE)
  - School Recs (3/2020): [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52\\_4&gclid=CjwKCAjwgdX4BRB\\_EiwAg8O8Ha0nju5gRaT8EKuiaKSMr5XEFTmTvzlxHbyijMLrDjZE6vwdc0t7cBoC5clQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4&gclid=CjwKCAjwgdX4BRB_EiwAg8O8Ha0nju5gRaT8EKuiaKSMr5XEFTmTvzlxHbyijMLrDjZE6vwdc0t7cBoC5clQAvD_BwE)
- American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/>
- Check with local public health department recommendations
- \*\*Ask your hospital/department/media department for guidelines and talking points