

# New Hampshire Chapter

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American Academy of Pediatrics

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## NH AAP Statement on School Re-Opening

As pediatricians, the health, well-being and safety of NH children are first and foremost in our minds. We applaud the efforts of teachers and educators during these challenging times and support the gathering of the Governor's School Re-Opening and Redesign Task Force. While we are relieved that COVID-19 has largely spared children, we have seen first-hand the effects on kids of isolation and loss of community, particularly stemming from the closure of schools and the important developmental, social and educational engagement they provide. With that in mind, we urge deliberate planning now for the physical reopening of schools in the fall.

In doing so we must take the full measure of children's health. In-person learning is central not just to education, but to a child's developmental, behavioral and emotional wellbeing. Sadly, over the past few months we have seen increases in anxiety, depression, and suicidality among our patients. Children rely on schools for community and for basic needs such as nutrition, physical activity, socialization, and the many small daily challenges and successes that help them grow and develop. Children with disabilities or special needs require services that are extraordinarily difficult to deliver remotely, and it is virtually impossible for younger children to learn remotely, even with an engaged adult at home to help.

No doubt there are elements of remote learning that we will choose to keep, and some children and adolescents have done well with it. But there is also no doubt that school closure has been extremely hard on many, particularly those with few resources such as single or working parents with young children. Prolonged school closures will widen the equity gap, harming those most vulnerable.

There is some good news about COVID-19. It is becoming increasingly clear that children are much less affected by the COVID-19 virus than adults. Only 5% of all NH cases have occurred in children ages 19 and under with only 1.5% under age 10. There have been only 6 hospital admissions in the state through the end of May, several of these precautionary and all discharged and doing well. At the same time, there is emerging evidence that unlike many other viruses, children are not 'super spreaders', transmitting the virus rarely with one another and even less to adults. The data show that adults are the primary source of household infection. Our decisions regarding school openings should be data driven and based on facts, and it is crucial to recognize that the epidemiology for children is not the same as for adults.

We should be prepared to follow the data closely through the summer months, and learn from the hundreds of millions of children worldwide who are back in school in Quebec, Britain, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan and other countries. We will also learn from the experience of summer camps and youth sports that are re-starting in the United States.

Similarly, the reopening guidelines for School Districts should be based on the best available evidence, with flexibility for local conditions. No two schools are exactly the same and there are important geographic variations. Reasonable safeguards will be necessary, and we cannot be cavalier. But blanket requirements for 6 feet of social distancing and universal face masks are unnecessary, particularly for younger children who are at the lowest risk and simply cannot learn with those restrictions. We urge a balanced, collaborative approach involving educators, public health officials, pediatricians, mental health professionals, and parents. In re-opening and mitigating risk, we need to give children schools that encourage developmentally appropriate curiosity, exploration, and learning.

NH schools should not be among the last to open. The time to plan for physically reopening NH schools in the fall is now.

Steven H. Chapman, M.D.  
NH AAP Chapter President  
Steven.H.Chapman@Hitchcock.org

AAP School Re-Opening Guidelines

<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/>

*The New Hampshire Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of over 300 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists and pediatric surgical specialists, and advanced pediatric nurse practitioners dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults.*