

It's back to school time.

Welcome to SBH. Bronx Health Talk, produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Steven Clark.

More than 1,000,000 New York City children will soon be returning to school. This is the first time this will happen during a pandemic that has killed more than 620,000 Americans and the availability of a vaccine that to date has been received by more than 200,000,000 Americans over the age of 12. It also comes at a time when Mayor de Blasio keeps insisting that school will be held in-person following a year when 80% of the classes were held remotely.

Understandably, this leaves for many anxious parents and children. With us today to discuss this is Dr. Ilana Stein, a pediatrician with SBH Health System. Welcome Dr. Stein, and thank you for joining us today and SBH Bronx Health Talk. So are you hearing concerns from your patients parents?

Definitely. Especially with the Delta variant now going around a lot of parents are concerned about going back in person, but as long as schools are taking the proper precautions then it's probably going to be a safe thing to do.

OK, over the last few weeks since the advent of the Delta variant, are you seeing many kids with more serious health issues?

Not so in our clinic we haven't seen too many. There are more kids ending up in the hospital than there were before, and there's something called multisystem inflammatory syndrome, which is kind of like a post-COVID autoimmune disease that happens in kids and we are starting to see that rise again with the increase in cases.

Did you think the parents of your patients are ready to send their kids back to to inpatient classes?

Uh, most of them I think are already virtual. Learning was definitely hard, not just the kids, but on the parents. A lot of parents had to juggle working from home and also being the teacher for their kids at the same time. And a lot of the kids that were staying at home were not seeing their friends. They weren't having those social interactions and the parents definitely took note of that. So I think although there are some concerns, parents are also really excited for kids to go back in person and so are the kids.

Is there anything parents can do in preparation for sending their kids back to school?

Uh, definitely I'm so number one is if your kid is 12 or up, get them vaccinated. That vaccine has been proven to be safe. There have been millions of people who have gotten it. There have been multiple clinical trials, so we know it's safe and it's effective. So that's really the best thing you could do to protect your kids. And in addition to that, any household members should get vaccinated because that reduces the spread within the household and then potentially giving it to the kid and they then bringing it to school and spreading it. But in addition to that really just teaching kids to wear their masks. Even if a kid is vaccinated, they should be wearing masks inside the school, so there should be universal masking for teachers as well. So parents, even if they're vaccinated and going out, should still model that behavior because if a kid sees their parent wearing their masks, then they're more likely to wear their masks. So modeling the mask-wearing behaviors is important and then another thing is just teaching hand hygiene, which hopefully we've been doing most of this time. Wash their hands, use hand sanitizer and they can even strap a little like hand sanitizer to their backpack or throw it in their backpacks so they have one on them at all times and then just encouraging them. Also, you know when they sneeze or cough not to remove their masks, 'cause that's sometimes like a natural reflex.

Is there is there a strategy that parents need to consider to get a three or four year old to keep their mask on during school?

Uh, again modeling behavior is super important because kids do what their parents do. So if a kid sees that their parent is not wearing their masks, it's gonna be very unlikely that a kid is going to be wearing their mask and then you know, even with that, it still can be kind of difficult. Positive reinforcement works really well in younger kids, so parents could come up with something like a sticker chart and like every day that they wear their masks, I get a sticker and then when they get a certain number of stickers and they get some form for award at the end.

Right, right how far away do you think we are from the vaccine for children under 12?

Yeah, so this is a little bit of speculation because we don't know 100% sure, but what the pediatric community is suspecting is that the five to 11 age group should get emergency use authorization from the FDA around September and then for the 6th month to the five year age group looking like November. So that's the expected timeline right now. Obviously that can be delayed and you know, changed, but for now that's what it's looking like.

What what do you think about a vaccine mandate for teachers? I know it's something being talked about. Is it a good idea?

Yeah, and that's something a little bit of a difficult question to answer, but in my opinion, I think for the safety of the kids and the teachers, I would approve a vaccine mandate. And you know, if someone doesn't wanna get it then they don't have to work at that job. They can go somewhere

else, or you know find another job. But really, especially when you think about the kids who are too young to be vaccinated and also immunocompromised children and teachers, not being vaccinated puts them at a really high risk.

Should immunocompromised children be back to school?

There's a really wide range of what, uh, immunocompromised means, and that's different for every child depending on what their disease processes. So I think that's really a conversation that should be had with their pediatrician, who knows their medical diagnosis and their needs. But in general, if they're vaccinated and they've been proven to have our response to the vaccine, that's definitely a lot safer for them to go back than if they were unvaccinated.

What do you say to parents when it comes to having their kids play sports or extracurricular activities? Or should they be cautious?

So certainly you know sports and activities would be a little bit higher risk than others. Obviously, context for it's like you know football where they're like going head-to-head would be a little bit more risky, but most of them, I think could be done pretty safely, preferably in extracurriculars. They should be spaced out, you know, six feet apart. Continually continue to wear mask in their extracurricular activities. Continue all of the protocols that would be throughout the normal school day and they actually have made a mandate that any child 12 and up that is going to participate in sports actually needs to be vaccinated. It's a requirement. As long as things are being done safely, extracurriculars are super and part of a kids like school environment and their psychosocial interactions. So it I think it's something that should be OK if precautions are taken.

What are you finding was the emotional and mental impact of spending the last year and so many months not in class regularly and trying to learn remotely and not seeing their friends.

They did. You see, it was an issue for a lot of kids. It was kind of detrimental, a lot of them completely regressed in their academic learning. A lot of the kids are not necessarily going on to the next grade because they either didn't show up to their virtual classes or they just weren't able to complete the school work. But in addition to the academic aspect of, you know the social aspect school is more than just academics for kids. It's learning how to deal with conflict resolution and having empathy, and you know, interactions with other kids, and that's how they you know, grow up and become smarter adults. Unfortunately, there's been a lot higher number of kids with depression anxiety, a lot more suicidal attempts. We've had a lot more hospitalizations for those kind of things. Because for a kid you know their friends are their life and not being able to see them is really hard on them.

Yeah, and I guess the parents like you said earlier, they feel it too because they're juggling work responsibilities as well as parental responsibilities. It's gotta be very tough and I'm sure they're

sighing with relief that hopefully this works, and that is a full year of in person classes.

Yeah, definitely. And you know the data has shown that school transmission is very low when proper precautions are taken, so you know all of the schools have been mandated to have certain types of ventilation in New York City. You know all the schools are required to have mask mandates. You know there should be certain cleaning protocols in place, so there's a lot of different ways that we can help out, and at first some reason apparent sees that a school is not doing that. They should bring it up to the school. The Department of Health, and even their pediatrician can maybe help and write a letter in order to encourage them to do the proper public health precautions.

Are you finding in the Bronx that you still have to push parents to get vaccinated and have their kids over 12 vaccinated? Or is it an easier sell now?

I have to say it's a bit of an easier sell than I expected. A lot of it is just correcting misinformation because the social media there's so much misinformation circulating, people who have no scientific background or public health background, or saying things. And you know that spreads and that has power, so they hear these things and see these things. And understandably, so. They believe a lot of it. So every patient that comes into my office, even if the child isn't, uh, of age to get vaccinated. I discuss COVID vaccinations and I ask the parents what are your concerns about it or what are your questions. And then I address those concerns and questions and a lot of the parents have, you know, been a lot more open minded. After having that conversation because they didn't realize that you know the truth is what is actually what it is because they've heard all that the false conversations about it.

I know at St. Barnabas Hospital, vaccines are being given across the street at the new Health and Wellness Center, at the Urgent Care Center there, and they're averaging like 40 additional vaccines daily. Now, when you know three or four months ago, it was a handful, so I think that's good news. Hopefully people are getting the message.

A lot of my parents were saying, you know, once it's FDA approved all get it and now that it is a lot more people are going out to get it because of that.

Right, let's hope let's hope so. Dr. Stein, thank you for your time today on an issue I know that you're very passionate about. I want to thank our listeners for joining us today for information on services available at SBH Health system, visit www.sbhny.org until next time.

