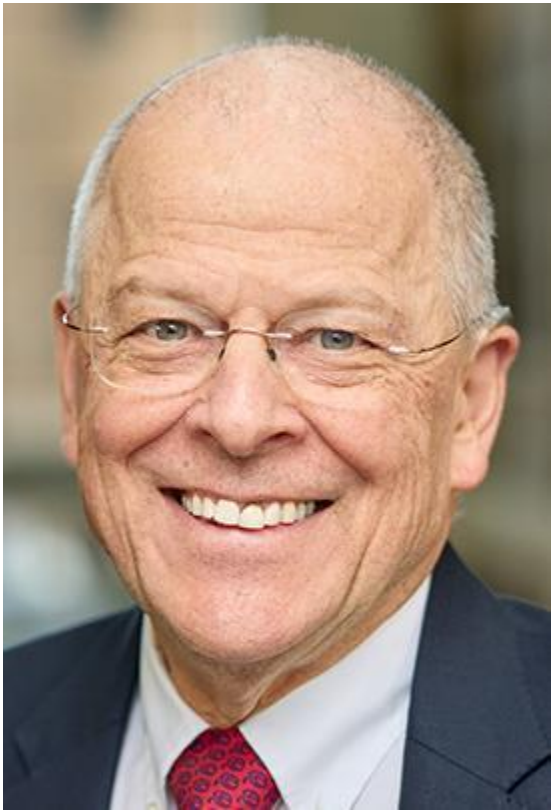


Commentary: Planning for a Healthier, More Active School Year

by Dr. Graham A. Colditz
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ALTON - It's not what many kids want to hear right now, but the new school year is just around the corner. Even while the long days remain filled with summer activities, families are starting to make plans for the first day of school and the coming year.



While it's hard to know what might happen with the ongoing pandemic, hopefully this school year will feel more "normal" than the last two. With this return to school comes

the chance to help our school-aged children to get back to more normal health routines. Some recent research highlights two areas families could focus on, including physical activity and youth vaccinations.

One paper, appearing this July in JAMA Pediatrics, put specific numbers to something many of us have suspected: that children and teens the world over were less physically active during the pandemic compared to before. Overall, the study's authors found that the daily level of activity in youth ages 3-18 dropped by 20 percent. That is a large amount, particularly for something that has such important health benefits for children. Regular physical activity can help with healthy weight and bone health, and provide a boost in mood – among other benefits. Plus, youth who are regularly active are also more likely to become regularly active adults, where such health benefits continue to build.

With most of our regular routines so upended during the pandemic, it's likely to take some effort to help the youth in our lives continue to get back to their pre-pandemic levels of activity. Family walks and regular visits to the park, playground and recreation centers are great approaches. Slowly cutting back on screen time is also likely an important part of helping kids re-build their overall activity level. Kids' screen time, including online games and video streaming, increased during the pandemic. Helping them cut back can open up more opportunities for them to engage in physical activity.

On top of the decrease in physical activity, studies have also found that the pandemic has had an important impact on rates of youth vaccination. One paper published this spring in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report looked specifically at vaccine coverage in kindergarteners and found lower rates of vaccination in the 2020-21 school year than the previous school year, which began before the pandemic.

The disruptions in health care and well-child visits during the pandemic make it understandable that rates of vaccinations would drop. Skipped vaccine doses, though, can make children more vulnerable to preventable diseases. This includes vaccines that are most commonly required to enroll in school, as well as the HPV vaccine, which protects against human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV infection can increase the risk of a number of cancers later in life.

If you haven't done so in the past year, schedule a well-child visit with your health care provider to make sure your school-aged children are up to date on all recommended vaccines. With the pandemic ongoing and new COVID-19 variants developing, getting kids vaccinated against COVID-19 remains important as well. It's recommended that children 6 months and up get the COVID-19 vaccine, which not only helps protect their health but also the health of friends and family members.

Though it may not always feel like it to our school-aged kids, the beginning of the school year is something to celebrate. It helps mark how far they've come and the promise of the new year. That also makes it a great time to help them get back on track with routines that help improve their health – now and into the future.

It's your family's health. Take control.

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