

So will it be in-person or remote learning?

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

If you're the parent of a school-aged child, whether they're going into kindergarten or college, you're probably a nervous wreck during this very unique back-to-school period. Do you opt for keeping your children safe at home when child care and online learning may be problematic? Or do you go with the social stimulation and optimal learning experience they are more likely to get in the classroom at the risk of exposure to a potentially deadly virus? In an age of Covid it's a dilemma that is being played out in living rooms here in the Bronx and throughout the country. With us today to discuss this is Dr. Carine Hedari, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at SBH in the Bronx. Welcome Dr. Hedari.

Wow, so this is really a tough time for school-aged children and their parents. Are you finding that many of your patients with school-age children are struggling with this?

Yeah, for sure. I mean it's a difficult decision for both parents and their kids in terms of you know deciding whether to send their kids or not and it depends on a lot of factors and we can talk about these.

Again, I know you're not taking a poll but do you have a sense on which side your patients in the Bronx are leaning?

Yeah, so a lot of them I think here are leaning more towards going in person and doing this hybrid learning although a few parents have reservations on sending their kids to school.

You know I saw a couple of things in the news recently. During the summer the state of Rhode Island allowed 666 child care centers to open for

around 19,000 kids and during that time there were just 30 cases of covid19 that appeared in these children which is around 0.04 percent, which is nothing. Yet, at the same time, at a camp in Georgia test results for Covid were available for 350 camp attendees and 76 percent tested positive. So when you consider that I guess you know from a data perspective we really don't have much to go on.

We don't have much to go on and the most important thing is you know these are different settings so that camp was a living camp so kids were exposed to each other for a long period of time so it's really a different factor at played than in Rhode Island it's you know a more like school-like setting where like kids are in and out so that's why these factors are so different. You cannot really compare them

So what advice are you giving your parents?

So the advice that I always give so first of all it's a very personal decision and it depends on a lot of factors. The first and most important factor is the rate of infection in the community. We've been lucky here in New York State to have an infection rate of less than one percent for like three weeks in a row and more than that already so that's one important fact. The second factor to consider is really who lives with you at home. So if you have immuno-compromised patients at home, if you have a pregnant person at home, if you have elderly with comorbidity at home so these are all things that are you know different in each family and are important to consider. Other things are the needs of these children. School is very important for a lot of children, especially here in the Bronx. So if a child is struggling at school and you really needs school to you know improve academically I think that's another important factor. So when you weigh in all these factors I think that every family should make that decision on their own and decide whether to send them.

Are there certain questions that as a parent you should ask the school to give you a sense that it's safe?

Right, that's also a very important factor actually. So make sure that the school is ready. Ask about what is implemented. Are they able to implement social distancing and things like that. And also the cooperation of the child so it's important to see if your child is willing to cooperate so that will depend on his maturity level and on his age. So really it's a personal decision based on all these factors.

Now again if you have a young kid going to school, say to kindergarten or something, are they really going to wear masks?

If they can keep it on for the whole time and if they have that maturity I think that's okay but if not if they're going to be like touching it and not be able to keep it on consistently I think that is not useful. We don't know if kids you know at a certain age have the ability of infecting other people like adults. We don't have that data but we do know that they can get sick and they can get very sick with the virus. So again social distancing wear mask when they can.

Are you more concerned with children passing on the virus to those who may be more vulnerable or are you concerned also about kids coming down with you know disease that we haven't seen too much to date?

Yeah definitely those are the two things to consider. So one you know we know that they probably get less infected, the infection is milder in children that are young that we know for sure but some of them a subset of them for some reason can get very sick from the virus so that's something to consider and the other thing to consider is as you said the rate at which they can infect other people and that will be very important to control the disease.

Which kids should not go back to in-person learning?

A child who is immuno-compromised. There's some data around there

definitely can be more susceptible to the virus so I would not send a child like that to school before this is safer. A child who has like you know significant obesity, significant diabetes mellitus, those are kids that will be more prone to the infections. So I would be cautious. If it is a possibility those kids I would prefer for them to do remote learning as opposed to in-person learning.

Now what about if you have a child who's older, say going to college, would you be nervous about sending them away to school versus doing virtual learning from home? How do you feel about that?

Kids who go to college, the problem with these kids is that often time you know it's very hard for them to socially distance because you know they're going to attend parties. As much as possible I think for that age group in-person learning is less important than a child that needs to learn math or reading or learning so I think that those adolescent and young adults I think for them remote learning is better than in person for the time being.

You know I wonder as a pediatric infectious disease specialist I recently heard about I forget who it was someone said that if kids become infected on campus on college campus they should stay there. They shouldn't come home. How do you feel about that?

Every child, every person really, that is exposed to the virus should really isolate for 14 days so that is the case here so if they are exposed to a known case of coronavirus or there is a suspected exposure then they should really isolate for 14 days or for 10 days if they develop symptoms in an effort to contain the virus

So it doesn't matter if they stay on campus or come home from your perspective?

But they should stay isolated and it's harder if they come home.

So okay so now we're moving into flu season, which is a scary time in past years, especially at a time like this are you advocating that parents get vaccinated, have their children vaccinated?

So for sure I mean flu can be as deadly as the coronavirus and you know there's not really ways to compare both but flu can be very deadly and you know we do have a vaccine for the flu. It's not perfect but it can give protection especially you know in terms of protecting a child from getting very sick from the virus and needing to go to the hospital or even dying from the virus. So we know that children who are vaccinated tend to end up in the hospital or die from the influenza virus a lot less than other children so that's why we definitely advise every parent to vaccinate their child for the flu to not compound this pandemic.

Would they become more susceptible to Covid if they get the flu?

We don't know that and we can certainly assume that they have the potential to be co-infected but we don't know and my suspicion is that yes they can and they can probably get sicker.

Let me ask you one more question. Again there's a high anxiety level with parents whose kids are going back to school the next couple of weeks. Is it important for them to mask that anxiety from their kids? Is it something that if you are nervous about maybe you should not have that played out in front of young children?

Yeah and I mean again it's all like your comfort level right so I think a very important factor is if you're comfortable with what the school is doing in terms of you know, respecting social distancing and are they able to take measures in order to contain the virus so that has a lot to do with how you know confident you are with what the school measures and you know if you're not comfortable then or sure keep your child at home and remote learning is the better option for you.

Okay, but again just to sum up what we've been saying you're advocating on the side of sending your kids back to in-person learning for the simple reason I guess you feel that will be a better experience for them?

Well for sure as a pediatrician I think that school is very important for kids in person learning and you know social habits and you know meeting persons is very important for bringing up children. Having said that again these are factors that you have to weigh in so yes and we have the luxury in New York State to have an infection rate that is low enough that if we keep practicing social distancing it shouldn't be an issue. But again it has to be weighed with all the family factors that we talked about and the comfort level of the family so it's a lot of things to take into consideration to make that decision.

But in general you have confidence in what the New York City school system is doing?

Yes, I mean I think that there's an effort and you know even we're trying to use more outdoor spaces, you know we're mobilizing a lot of resources to do that but I think we should be able to do that it depends on each school and parents should really check and see if they're comfortable with the school list.

So they should do their homework?

Right

Okay well thank you Dr. Hedari for joining us today on SBH Bronx Health Talk. For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.org and thank you for listening until next time.

