

Are at-home 'learning pods' the right fit for your family?

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(HealthDay)—Emily Davis and her husband started a 'learning pod' with

another family this summer, hiring a teacher for child care and now for the start of first grade. Their 6-year-old son is an only child, which was a big factor in the decision. The other family has two kids.

"It might be a full school year [of [distance learning](#)]. Then it's really just not OK for an only child to see no other [children](#) or interact with other children for a full year," explained Davis, who lives in Corvallis, Ore.

The families don't distance or wear masks with each other, but all four parents work from home and neither family is socializing with anyone else, Davis said.

"Because we are in an area with a pretty low [COVID-19] caseload, we felt like we could safely do this with another family," Davis said. "I don't know that we would have chosen this route if we had multiple children or if we lived in a place that was more affected, but it's been a really perfect solution for us and I'm very grateful for it."

For many families, the 2020 back-to-school season is anything but normal. While [school officials](#) throughout the country have worked to figure out how to safely educate students during the pandemic, parents have been coming up with their own plans.

For some, that includes learning pods—small groups of kids from different households who gather to learn and socialize while being led by a parent or a tutor. These pods might follow their [local schools'](#) online learning program, an independent program, or kids in the pods might just meet up to do homework together.

"A learning pod is like a cousin of homeschooling, in that parents and educators have come together to create an innovative solution to learning during the pandemic," said Dr. Priya Soni, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles.

One key to doing that successfully, according to Cedars-Sinai pediatricians, is to set firm safety guidelines before starting a pod and to have a plan for what happens if someone gets sick.

Pods can be kids of the same or varying ages. They typically have three to 10 kids, Soni said. Families should come to an agreement in advance about what types of social interactions are allowed outside the pod, if any. If students are all in the same age group and they have siblings, families should decide if they're OK with siblings being in other pods.

Set rules before starting a 'pod'

Following public safety guidelines for your community is very important, said Cedars-Sinai Medical Group pediatrician Dr. Karina Eastman. Children, teachers and any other adults who are in the home or building while the learning pod is in session should wear masks, she said. The pod should allow only as many kids as it can safely socially distance. It should have stringent cleaning protocols. Children should have assigned seats and their own supplies. If the classroom is indoors, families should consider how they can safely remove masks to eat, and whether they should ventilate the space.

"Even if everybody's doing all the safe things when they're in the school or pod setting, we have to make sure that people are maintaining those same safety precautions and quarantine precautions outside of that," Eastman said. "That child is bringing in all of the risk factors of their family to that setting."

Families should also plan for what they'll do if a pod participant or another person in the student's family has COVID-19 symptoms. Some pods might require that kids be tested for the virus if they have a slight fever or mild congestion, according to Cedars-Sinai.

The reason families choose to participate in a learning pod vary. It's good for kids to have in-person interactions with other children when they can do that safely, Soni said.

"I think, given that this is going to be an ongoing issue, we have to start thinking of creative solutions to allow for children to interact with each other a little bit more because in the long run that will really help their psychological and social development," Soni said.

Benefits of in-person learning

In-person interactions are an important driver of communication, critical thinking skills and emotional intelligence, Eastman added, and they benefit mental health. Eastman's patients are experiencing more anxiety and depression, which she attributes to the lack of socialization.

Pods also present a smaller-group solution for parents concerned about sending their children into large school settings. For some parents, the pods make it possible to do their own work.

"For a lot of families who are working, it's difficult to navigate homeschooling or guiding your child through their studies. Depending on the age, that may require more intense involvement while you're still working," Eastman said.

Still, pods are not the right choice for all families.

"If there are children or family members in the household that have high-risk medical conditions that put them at higher risk of developing severe symptoms from coronavirus, that may not be a good solution for that [family](#)," Eastman said.

For families who can't choose a pod, children may be able to do more

virtual socializing or socially distanced play dates outdoors.

More information: This nonprofit has more info on [online learning](#).

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