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Returning to School After Cancer Treatment

When a child or teen is diagnosed with cancer, families and parents will face and need to cope with many problems, including the impact of a child's cancer diagnosis and treatment on regular school routines. A child's cancer diagnosis and treatment can interrupt regular school routines. Many children are able to continue their education during treatment and then will go back to school full-time at the end of treatment. See [Helping Your Child Manage School During Treatment](#)¹ for information on keeping up with school before treatment ends.

Most children are able to return to school full-time after they complete cancer treatment. Going back to school is a priority because it can give children a sense of normalcy and is an important part of their social and academic development. Some children feel excited about returning to school, while others feel upset or anxious. These are all normal reactions. Going back to school might be a challenge or a relief. It might give your child the comforting message that they have a future and potential for a full recovery from cancer.

- [Start planning early](#)
- [Common challenges when your child returns to school](#)
- [Managing physical problems at school](#)
- [If your child is having trouble with schoolwork and learning](#)

The transition back to school can be just as hard for parents. Parents might think school is going to be overwhelming for their child. They might worry their child will get infections, become overly tired, or be teased for being different. All of these concerns are normal. Most pediatric treatment centers know that families might need help to make sure the transition goes smoothly. Children's hospitals may have education coordinators and teachers that make sure your child has the right support at school.

This piece will guide you through key steps in planning for the return to school after treatment ends, some common problems after returning to school, and things you can do to help.

Start planning early

After your child is diagnosed and long before any plans are made for them to return to school, you might have talked your child's teachers, school principal, and school counselor about the cancer and the treatment plan. When your child is ready to go back to school, it is important to communicate early with the school and the cancer care team early. Here are some of the steps you can take before treatment ends to help get ready:

- Talk to the cancer care team about when they think your child will be able to return to school after the end of treatment.
- Once you have a planned return date, ask the cancer care team what resources will help plan for school re-entry. The school re-entry services might include nurses, teachers, psychologists, social workers, and child life specialists. If there is a re-entry program, ask them what they will do to support your child's return to school. They might be involved in meetings with the school, arrange visits to the classroom, or communicate special needs to the school and teachers.
- Reach out to the school principal, teacher, nurse (if there is one), and school counselor to let them know when your child might return full-time. They might have forms for you and the cancer care team to complete.
- Arrange a meeting with the principal, teachers, and school nurse to make sure everyone knows what to expect. The cancer care school re-entry team members might participate and help guide this discussion, depending on the kinds of support they provide.
- Some children might not be ready to return to school for full days the first week, so it could be helpful to think about how long their school day should be in the beginning. It may take them a few weeks or a month to build up their energy levels after cancer treatment. Talk to your doctor and cancer care team about these needs before you meet with the school leaders.

What the school should know

Meeting the teacher, principal, and school nurse (if there is one) before the child goes back to school is very important and can help everyone know what to expect. If your cancer care team offers support for returning to school, ask if they will be at the meeting.

If they will not be present, ask them to help you write a letter explaining any expected changes in the child's routine and future plans. You'll want to write down these things for the school's records:

- Any medicines the child will need to take and how to give them
 - Special devices the child will use and how to use them
 - What kinds of problems to watch for and report to you
- Any special precautions that need to be taken or information you need to know, for

part of going back there. If your child is tearful before and after school or every Sunday night, that might be a sign that they are having a hard time with the change. Older kids and teens might not want to go back to school because they look different, or because their long absences have changed their social standing with friends. If your child does not want to go to school, it is important to understand what is bothering them. Here are things you can do to understand the reason they are avoiding going back.

- Ask your child to help you understand what is hard for them about going to school
- Make sure they know that they do need to go to school and set limits on staying home from school
- If they stay home from school they may avoid what is upsetting them, but it isn't going to make things better
- Talk with the teachers and school counselor about your child's feelings, they may also have some ideas about what can help
- If the problem is physical, related to school work being too difficult, or other factors the sections below include information about solving common challenges like these
- Talk with the cancer care team if your child is saying they feel sick, it might help you and your child feel more comfortable to get checked out

Talking with other children about cancer

Other children may have questions for your child about cancer. It can be hard for children to know what to say in these situations. It usually helps to talk with your child before they go back to school about what to say, so they are ready if it happens.

- Some cancer care teams will send a team member to the classroom to answer these questions, so you might want to check with them first.

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Most children adjust well to school after cancer treatment. But cancer and its treatments can cause emotional and cognitive (ability to think and reason) changes, which can affect your child at school. You can help your child by watching for problems, so they can be dealt with as soon as possible, before they become hard to manage. Some changes after treatment that affect learning can last a few months, others may last longer. Children can experience something called [chemo brain](#)³ that can make it hard to focus, complete tasks or remember things. Some treatments have long-term effects on learning, so it is important to get help as soon as problems with schoolwork come up.

- Talk with the teachers and cancer care team about what is happening and get referrals for support, if needed.

Ask your child if they are having a hard time with friends or other the social

school and the education their child is getting, they have the right to request a third party mediator to settle disagreements.

After getting all the results, the school can develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan for your child.

Individual Education Programs and 504 plans

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans both help people with disabilities get services that support their learning. They both are part of federal laws that apply to all public schools.

What are Individualized Education Programs?

IEPs are for students who have disabilities and need special help with their education. They are available for students ages 3 to 21 years and end at high school graduation. An IEP falls under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There are certain requirements that must be followed with IEPs, such as planning meetings at least once a year and evaluations every three years.

To qualify for an IEP:

- The student must have at least one of the covered disabilities
- The disability must affect the student's ability to learn

While cancer isn't listed as a covered disability, cancer and cancer treatment can cause problems that might affect a child's ability to learn. Some examples include:

- Anxiety or depression
- Problems with eyesight or hearing
- Problems with memory or focus
- Bone or joint problems

Sometimes, cancer qualifies as a covered disability listed as "other health impairment."

If a child is eligible for an IEP, a team that includes a parent work together to create a special education plan and learning goals for the year. This team may include:

- At least one of the child's teachers
- At least one special education teacher

- A school district representative (to approve the needed resources)
- A child expert such as a teacher or school psychologist (to help explain the child's evaluation results)
- A translator or interpreter if the child or parent does not speak English

They may also talk about accommodations, or the services and resources needed to meet the learning goals. Accommodations don't change **what** student learns, but they can change **how** the services or resources will help the student get their work done. Learning plans, goals, and accommodations are specific to each student.

Some examples of accommodations are:

- Technology like audiobooks and videos
- Class seat location or quiet testing areas
- Extra time for schoolwork
- Breaks
- Tools to help with sensory problems
- Alarms for time management

What are 504 plans?

504 plans are for anyone of any age with a disability to protect them from discrimination. They apply to schools, colleges, employers, hospitals, and any organization that gets money from the government.

A 504 plan in a school is meant to make sure students have fair access to education by removing barriers that might limit their ability to learn. They are different from IEPs because they have a different definition of what a disability is. Unlike IEPs, 504 plans do not include a specific education plan or learning goals. A child that doesn't qualify for an IEP may still be diTm /F2 1 0 1 72 259.61 Tm 0 0 0 tg310on b7tcn rS6 b7tamination.

- General and special education teachers
- The school principal
- A translator or interpreter if needed

Like IEPs, 504 plans provide accommodations that are specific to the person.

How do I know if my child needs an IEP or 504 plan?

Here are a few tips for deciding if an IEP or 504 plan is right for your child:

- **Can your child do the same schoolwork as other students if certain accommodations are provided?** If so, a 504 plan might be right for you. Learning goals are the same for students in a 504 plan as the other students who don't have a 504 plan.
- **Does your child have trouble doing the same schoolwork as other students even when accommodations are provided?** If so, an IEP might be the right choice. Learning goals are created based on your child's evaluation results and decisions made by the team who is working with the parents to set the goals. For example, an IEP goal might be for a child to improve their reading skills from a 1st grade level to reading a 2nd grade level with 90% correctness by the end of the school year.

Here are some resources for more information on IEPs and 504 plans:

- The [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#)⁴ helps people with learning and attention issues through advocacy, research, scholarships, and community partnerships.
- [Understood](#)⁵ is a non-profit that provides information and resources about education for people who think or learn differently.
- Find [your state's department of education](#)⁶ for more information.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/during-treatment/keeping-up-with-schoolwork.html

2. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/children-with-cancer/late-effects-of-cancer-treatment.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/changes-in-mood-or-thinking/chemo-brain.html
4. www.nclد.org/
5. www.understood.org/
6. www.ed.gov/contact-us/state-contacts

References

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Children's Oncology Group. *School Support*. Accessed at <https://childrensoncologygroup.org/index.php/home/48-coping-with-cancer/school-support> on May 18, 2023.

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