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COVID-19, Children and Schools: An Update for the 2022-23 School Year

This past summer, we continue to redefine our new normal. From sold-out concerts to social media sites feeling like a never-ending European montage, it is hard to imagine the quarantined summer of 2020. Yet headlines such as President Biden testing positive for COVID and the elusive BA.5 variant continue to highlight the overbearing presence of COVID-19 in our lives. As we soon approach the beginning of the school year, it becomes more important to recognize where we stand with COVID-19 as it impacts children and returning to school.

A Brief Introduction to COVID-19 and Pediatric Data

According to the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) [Pediatric Data Tracker](#), there have been nearly 14 million positive cases, 140,000 hospitalizations, and 1700 deaths in children and teens ages 17 and younger across the United States till date (July 2022). California, itself has reported 1.8 million cases within this age group. Throughout the pandemic, federal and state public health responses have touted commonsense measures such as maskwearing and social distancing as crucial ways for individuals to stay protected from infection. Beginning March of 2021, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved emergency access use of the Pfizer-BioNtech, Moderna and J&J/Janssen vaccines for all adults ages 18 and older. May 2021 brought vaccine access to all children [12-17 years of age](#). By November 2021, children [ages 5-11](#) became eligible for both doses of the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine. Most recently, the FDA expanded emergency access use of both the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNtech vaccines to [all children 6 months and older](#) in June 2022. The subsequent CDC recommendations means that all school-aged children are currently eligible for vaccines that "help protect from severe disease, hospitalization and death by COVID-19". Those who are 5 and older are also eligible for [booster shots](#) that aim to maximize protection against severe infection.

Children's COVID-19 Vaccines - California

California health officials have strongly recommended pediatric COVID vaccination since FDA/CDC approval was announced. Through the California Department of Public Health's [Vaccinate all 58](#) campaign, vaccinating infants, toddlers and children across the state has been aided by school vaccination programs and [My Turn](#), an all-in-one website for parents and caregivers to find the nearest vaccine appointment. California also became the first state to [announce its plans](#) to add the COVID-19 vaccine to the list of vaccinations required to attend school. However, these plans were recently postponed to be considered for the 2023-24 school year as the FDA has yet to fully approve the vaccine for neither the K-6 grade span nor the 7-12 grade plan.

Since November 2021, 36.4% of all eligible 5-11 year olds and 66.9% of all eligible 12-17 year olds in California have been [vaccinated](#)¹. Additionally, 0.9% of all eligible under 5

¹ One is considered vaccinated once their primary series is completed. This includes two doses of either the Moderna or Pfizer-BioNtech vaccines.

year olds have been vaccinated over the past two months. While California is doing better at uptake than the national average, it [lags behind](#) most other states. This stagnation is most strongly supported by parents hesitating to vaccinate their children against COVID-19.

Addressing Parental Hesitancy and COVID-19 vaccines

[Recent surveys](#) detailing vaccine uptake conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) reveal that nearly three in ten parents of 12-17 year olds and nearly four in ten parents of 5-11 year olds say they definitely will not get their child vaccinated against COVID-19. Similarly, more than four in ten parents of children aged 6 months to 5 years say they will definitely not get their child vaccinated against COVID-19. Those who chose to wait and see what they decide are also of similar numbers. [The reasons parents remain uncertain about the COVID-19 vaccine](#) include fears of serious side effects from the vaccine, not knowing the long-term effects of the vaccine and believing the vaccine will not protect their child from getting sick from COVID-19, among other reasons. While these concerns are understandable, they have been addressed and disproven by [multiple reputable sources](#).

Pediatricians, in particular, have emerged as the most trusted source of information on the COVID-19 vaccine for parents. [KFF research](#) shows that more than three in four parents (77%) say they trust their child's pediatrician or health care provider to provide accurate and reliable information about the vaccines as it affects children. However, most parents of children under 5 years old as well as most parents of children ages 5-17 have not talked with their child's pediatricians about the COVID-19 vaccine, most likely waiting for their child's regular check-up appointment. Thus, those parents who remain hesitant should consider approaching their child's pediatrician with any questions they may have about the vaccine.

The Role of Schools in COVID-19 Vaccinations for Children

Schools have also played an important role in child COVID-19 vaccination efforts [as shown by KFF surveys](#). Among parents of children ages 5-17 who attend school, about half (49%) say their child's school has provided them with information about how to get a COVID-19 vaccine for their child, and nearly as many (44%) say the school has encouraged parents to get their child vaccinated. Many schools and their respective districts have also partnered with local county public health departments, serving as vaccination centers and information centers.

How are CA schools preparing for the 2022-23 school year?

For the past year, school districts across the state have constantly updated and revised their district-specific guidelines as well as adhering to requirements established by state officials as schools transitioned back into in-person learning. The state's SMARTER plan prioritizes the preservation of safe, in-person instruction. This involves a [multi-layered mitigation approach](#), including childhood vaccination standards, testing, investigating outbreaks thoroughly and improving air quality in schools.

On June 30, 2022, the State Department of Public Health released [additional guidance](#) to support safe in-person learning. These involved various mitigation measures, broken down into required and recommended actions.

The most pertinent recommendations include:

- Students and staff following the [same masking guidance](#) that the CDPH has issued for the general public. Schools are also required to provide face coverings to any student who wishes to wear a mask but forgot to bring one.
- Effective ventilation and filtration systems as part of the CDPH's [specific recommendations for improving air quality in schools](#)
- The CDPH recommended antigen tests be considered the primary option versus PCR tests for detecting COVID-19 as schools aim to ensure access to COVID-19 testing for students and staff, particularly in vulnerable communities.
- [A previous health order](#) issued last August by State Public Health Officer and CDPH Director Dr. Tomás J. Aragón regarding staff vaccination remains in place for the upcoming school year. Under this ordinance, all employees in K-12 school settings will still have to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 or get tested at least once weekly with either PCR or antigen tests.

What does this all mean?

While the past two years have undoubtedly changed the traditional school-going experience as we know it, school districts continue to graciously realign an in-person learning experience with the realities of a global pandemic. California, in particular, continues to set an example when it comes to navigating one of the state's most vulnerable populations through in-person learning amidst COVID-19 infections. Through information databases such as the [State of California Safe Schools for All Hub](#), parents, students and staff have access to key resources and information to support safe, in-person learning in K-12 schools and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Now it is up to families to take positive steps towards mitigating COVID-19 infection by staying up to date with COVID vaccinations, avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces especially in communities with high COVID transmission levels and monitoring their health daily. But most importantly, don't forget to finish your back to school shopping!