



What if my
kid loves
being home!?



back to school 2020

BY AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

This year's back-to-school season is fraught with difficulty for parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Go back to school full-time? Go virtual? Go hybrid? Each option has pros and cons, depending on the individual, along with plenty of uncertainty.

Many children thrive in school. They love the hustle-bustle of a busy, noisy classroom and relish the opportunity to make new friends or try out different after-school activities. Some shine in the competitive worlds of individual or team sports, in bands and choruses, in Boys and Girls Clubs, and in other group activities. Some parents of children with special needs rely on the therapeutic elements of a school setting for their child's safety and development, as well as predictable and essential respite for the parents. Employed parents may also rely on their kids being away at school so they can focus fully on their jobs. Yet, according to a recent survey, just one in seven parents reported that their child would be back in school full time this fall.¹

Silver lining for some

As the months at home continue for many, some families are noticing their school-aged children are actually happier, staying busy with what interests them, laughing more, eating better, and logging in more needed hours of sleep. Parents have told me about their kids having less anxiety, no more tics or stomachaches, fewer headaches, more confidence, less crying, or shorter periods of clinginess. Natural curiosity, creative expressions, and spontaneous joy seem to have blossomed right before these parents' eyes.

For many of these kids, the constancy of demands at school, the need to be endlessly social, and the sheer intensity of a busy schedule can be overwhelming and exhausting. Some kids don't fit in. Other kids are bullied at school. Some have different learning styles and capacity in a school that cannot meet their needs. Some kids are painfully shy or don't have as much energy as their classmates.

Tough decisions

In deciding whether kids will go back to school, many parents are facing an important reckoning beyond the question of safety related to COVID-19. Rather, they are asking, "How can we send our child back to a place that makes them miserable?" followed quickly by, "Can we continue to carry on our life with kids at home full time?"

Of course, for homeschooling families, schooling is not so different during this pandemic time. And other families may have the time, flexibility, and resources to continue to welcome kids at home full time, though certainly many more families do not. But realizing that your child is happier spending time puttering, making things, cooking, being outdoors, enjoying a book, listening to music, or having some appropriate screen time—and seeing that they start to feel ill even at the discussion of going back to school—will be a hard reality some parents have to face.

Liana's story

Liana was a shy seven-year-old who had trouble reading. Several months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, her parents brought her to me to see if homeopathy might help her be a little less passive and a little more assertive. She was an emergent reader



who often didn't want to try; she became discouraged easily if she couldn't sound a word out or if she lost her place in a sentence.

Her parents felt they understood Liana's sensitivities and sensibilities, but if they tried to push her even a little bit, she would fall apart, withdraw, and shut down. Liana was the middle child in the family, with siblings who were louder, sturdier, and more outgoing than she was. "They take up all the air in the room," her father said. Liana's parents tried to make more space for Liana—having her go first or asking her what she wanted to do or what she wanted to eat. But more often than not, Liana said she didn't care and acquiesced to what her siblings wanted.

Liana struggled with chronic earaches as a toddler, developing an ear infection every month or two. At age three, she'd had a period of reduced hearing from a middle ear infection, or what her pediatrician called "glue ear." This is a critical time for hearing and acquiring speech, which probably explained Liana's less than age-appropriate speech articulation. She often dropped her "r" sound and had trouble with the "th" blend.

Liana was small for her age, thin-boned, and slight. She had wispy hair and wore an anxious expression most of the time. A chilly kid, Liana had always been a picky eater with a low appetite. The colds she caught each year lingered, but she had not been on antibiotics since she was a toddler. Compared to her older sister and younger brother, Liana had considerably less energy to run around all day and play. She spent a lot of time lying about, re-watching videos she liked, or reading picture books, which she seemed to find comforting.

Choosing a remedy

In considering a homeopathic remedy for Liana, *Carcinosin*, *Baryta carbonica*, and *Silica* came to mind. Kids who do well with *Carcinosin* really want to be taken care of. They do not like con-





flict or adversity, and they are often in need of extra affection and connection. They can be shy, anxious, and somewhat suppressed by the people around them. They can easily bend toward others' wishes and desires in an effort to ensure they have their emotional needs met. They may also be prone to ear infections. While Liana seemed to fit this description, she lacked the charisma, charm, and sweetness that often manifest in children who benefit from *Carcinosin*.

Kids who benefit from *Baryta carbonica* can have shyness and reading challenges, as Liana did, alongside many anxieties and insecurities.² Like Liana, they are often "young for their age" and seem to take a long time to develop a clear sense of themselves. Their self-agency takes longer to develop; they don't have clear desires, except perhaps for not wanting to be embarrassed. However, Liana did not have a history of swollen lymph glands accompanying her frequent ear infections or colds, as we'd usually expect in *Baryta carbonica* patients. She also did not have the indecisiveness of the typical person who would benefit from *Baryta carbonica*.

While immaturity is a central theme of children needing *Baryta carbonica*, weakness on both physical and cognitive levels is a central theme of children who benefit from *Silica*—and I felt that weakness was the central theme for Liana. *Silica* covered Liana's shy, receding nature, her slight stature, and her slowness in learning to read. Her chilliness, chronic earaches, and lingering colds were also strong confirmatory symptoms. *Silica* is a *psoric* remedy, meaning that those who need it often feel like they just "don't have enough." They don't have enough energy, time, smarts, or strength to get through what they have to get through. In order to conserve their energy, they don't put much out—socially, academically, athletically, or verbally. This described Liana well, so I prescribed one dose of *Silica* 200c.

Making strides

At our two-month follow-up appointment, Liana's parents said they saw some improvements in their daughter since she took *Silica*. She was waking up earlier and seemed ready to start the day, a definite increase in her energy level. She seemed, overall, more present. Her teachers at school had noticed an uptick in her reading and said she was showing more interest in interacting with classmates. Liana had not been sick with an ear infection or cold since I saw her, a good sign. And her mother said that Liana was eating more and making some adventurous food choices. Because Liana was doing well and making progress, I did not prescribe a remedy at this visit.

Another two months passed, and the report on Liana remained good. She'd had no ear infections; she did have one cold, but it did not last long, and she still went to school and didn't seem any worse the wear. Her teachers said she was continuing to improve in her reading, schoolwork, and socializing. Liana was playing outside with her siblings more often now, rather than lying around inside much of the time. Because Liana was still doing well and making progress, I did not prescribe another dose of *Silica* or suggest any other homeopathic remedies at that time.

Flourishing at home

And then the 2020 pandemic hit. After about two months of Liana staying home from school, with only a few hours a day of online instruction, we had a telemedicine visit, and Liana's mom shared some not-surprising observations: "Liana is more relaxed and more interactive than ever. And she seems even less tired. She can still act shy if we spend time with another family that we've become a 'pod' with, but she just seems overall happier. She has not been sick at all [*which is true for many kids at this time since they are having fewer exposures*]. And she finally seems to be putting on a little weight. But the biggest surprise is that her reading has really picked up, without a lot of help from us! It feels like a very different child is emerging ..."

I have heard this story in various iterations this year from many parents, which has me thinking about how the environment and how a person spends their day deeply impacts their vital force, their energy, their mood, and ultimately, their health. So, while I know that *Silica* was a good remedy for Liana since she improved substantially before the pandemic hit, I also appreciate that she may well need a different environment than a whole day in school, in order to really thrive.

Diversity of all kinds

In my practice, the kids who are thriving at home rather than school often fall into the category of "neurodiversity." This new-ish word describes a movement that accepts neurological diversity and encourages further understanding and respect across our broader communities for those living with learning differences and challenges, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorders, attention-deficit disorders, attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorders (ADHD), strong anxiety or depression, dyspraxia, and a lexicon of other neurological, psycho-emotional, and genetic conditions where a person is wired uniquely and unlike their more neurotypical classmates.



Some other kids thriving at home are those I'd just call quirky, who have not found their people or their stride in a full-day school setting. Others flourishing at home and following their own interests and self-agency in learning may be the super smart kids who were bored to death at school. Creative and artistic kids are also flourishing at home, experimenting with new media, learning to play a musical instrument, writing poetry, taking pictures, or writing computer code.

Like many of my colleagues, I welcome this population into my practice. As a licensed naturopathic doctor and homeopath, I know that every patient and every child is unique, and I aim to treat them with that fundamental understanding in mind. I have seen homeopathy help an awkward child feel less gangly, a child with ADHD focus better, a teenager with paralyzing social anxiety become more happily social, a child with low confidence and low self-esteem gain both attributes over time. I have seen kids on the autism spectrum grow in their ability to connect with others and create meaningful friendships. Homeopathy has a role here, and we should continue to do our best to help.

Obstacle to cure?

That said, some kids came into the world with a genetic or environmental predisposition to be more delicate, more sensitive, more reactive, more vulnerable, and more challenged by everyday occurrences, demands, and expectations. A friend of mine raising one such child has a quote on her fridge that says something like "raise your child to fit in this world, do not try to change the world to fit your child." I agree with this sentiment in a general way but also know that kids, just like grownups, thrive best when they don't have to endure undue stress on a daily basis.

In homeopathy, we often speak about "obstacles to cure"—things that can stand in the way of someone's healing, even with the best homeopathic prescribing—and how the environment plays such a central role in a person's evolution and ongoing health. This pandemic time brings up many questions related to how we educate, train, and prepare our children for lives of meaning, connection, health, and independence. I believe a re-calibrating is in order, where all kinds of learning approaches, activities, interests, pastimes, and hobbies are valued, encouraged, and de-identified from gender. Children's interests, talents, and capacities sometimes need a little more time and oxygen to come forth. I think lots of free time, even a little boredom, can actually be good. Taking devices out of kids hands and exposing kids to different environments, people, tools, materials, ingredients, the outdoors, and novel experiences might be just the spark for learning and feeling connected that little ones, and their care providers, need.



Of course, going to school does not preclude any of this, and I am not against school. I am personally a product of public school settings that gave me every opportunity in this life, many of which my family could neither have envisioned nor afforded. I am also listening carefully and learning from parents of patients who feel conflicted, as their work and life demands were accomplished to one degree or another, *because* their kids were in school all day. Now these dedicated parents are wondering how, in good conscience, they can send their very happy child back to school, to a fully structured day, and a jam-packed week of activities.

Whole person homeopathy

As homeopaths, we treat the patient in front of us. We try to help people feel better by addressing illness, diagnoses, and suffering in the context of the whole person. We encourage our patients, from the smallest to the oldest, to blossom, to find areas of interest, to create goals and work toward them, to contribute to whatever communities they care about. I always talk about environmental factors and choices with my patients, from those they can control to those they cannot, from who they live with to where they work, and where they spend their time. We talk about the biggest stressors in their lives and consider whether any are modifiable. Changing how a child spends the heart of their day deeply impacts their health, so thinking creatively about the role of school might well be on the docket for many families right now.

For Liana and her family, they are weighing many options. They do not have the liberty of keeping Liana home full time once school resumes. But they have learned that Liana is not the kind of kid who would do well being over-programmed. They are considering a different nearby public school with smaller class sizes, and we also talked about the idea of intermittent “mental health” days. Liana and her family will stay in touch with me going forward; I expect that Liana may do well with additional doses of the remedy *Silica* in the future, or a different homeopathic remedy down the line. And being a bit sturdier now, Liana may do better in school than she has in the past. The right combination of a constitutional homeopathic remedy and the best environment for each child, though not always possible, is ideal.

REFERENCES

1. Miller, CC. “I’m Only One Human Being”: Parents Brace for a Go-It-Alone School Year. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/upshot/coronavirus-home-school-parents.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>. Accessed September 10, 2020.
2. For more on *Baryta carbonica*, *Silica*, and other remedies that may be helpful when treating school-age kids in need of support, see my articles in past issues of *Homeopathy Today*—“Whole Person Help for the Anxious Child” in Summer 2020 and “Beat the Back-to-School Blues” in Autumn 2013: <https://www.homeopathycenter.org/homeopathy-today/>.

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Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP, practices in Connecticut and Massachusetts (www.nhcmcd.com) and by telemedicine. Dr. Rothenberg is the AANP’s 2017 Physician of the Year. With her husband, Paul Herscu, ND, MPH, DHANP, she teaches through the New England School of Homeopathy (www.NESH.com). A new NESH cohort begins October 2020 in Amherst, MA, and for the first time, with virtual attendance possible. Her writing can be found at *Medium*, *Thrive Global*, *The Huffington Post*, and more. When not working, Dr. Rothenberg enjoys spending time with her family, in nature, and putting in her art studio.

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