

A Model for Homeschool Pod Guidelines

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A Homeschool Pod is a way to share in responsibilities, joys and interactions with others safely. In order to do so, the Members have to be safe themselves and take responsibility for each other's safety. Before creating a Homeschool Pod, it is important to get together and work on safety guidelines every Pod member agrees to follow. Contact between people increases the risk of infection, so stronger precautions are needed in order to allow for contact without introducing risks that will certainly lead to infection over time. Therefore, Homeschool Pods are only for families who:

1. Already have created an environment for themselves that have a very low chance of infection

AND

2. Work even harder on their own safety for the sake of the safety of other Pod Members

Homeschool Pods are about sharing safety, not sharing risk. Shared guidelines should reflect this. There are at least 5 dimensions along which can be thought to address these points:

1. Behavioral dimension outside the Pod

How can my family act safer in everyday life?

2. Ambient dimension

Do we live in an area that is recording a surge in new cases?

3. Dimension of urgency

Is it really necessary to pod up?

4. Behavioral dimension within Pods

How can we help one another?

5. Dimension of the imperative to safety

How strong is our commitment to safety?

Consequently, it is expected that the following model of Homeschool Pod Guidelines serves only as an inspiration that is not just copied and laxly agreed on. We strongly encourage each group to develop their own guidelines. This model is an example of some that have worked for us these past few months.

Vision

This project was partly inspired by the concepts of COVID-safe spaces¹ and green zones². Creating Homeschool Pods is the attempt to establish small “green” networks between families.

It is not possible for a zone to become green unless bordering zones did not record new COVID-19 cases within the last 14 days, too. Therefore, it is up to all neighboring communities to help each other eliminate the virus. In the same spirit, Homeschool Pods should try everything to galvanize their communities to become green zones. The solution cannot be to do nothing; we need to start somewhere and build green networks and zones, step by step.

It is recognized that joining a Homeschool Pod will not be possible for everybody for financial, time and/or safety reasons. Additionally, there will be differences in how difficult it is to eliminate the virus from communities as well as to keep them safe afterwards. Known inherent inequities in our system will likely become more visible, disproportionately affecting minorities and marginalized groups, as well as BIPOC families.

We hope to encourage people to join us in our efforts beyond this document to support anyone who wants to be in a Pod, to provide each Pod with equal access to quality educational resources, to help every community end COVID-19 for good and to mitigate any potential long-term harm caused by creating Homeschool Pods.

¹ For more information, see [A Family Guide with Thoughts on Safe Spaces — EndCoronavirus.org](https://www.endcoronavirus.org/papers/a-family-guide-with-thoughts-on-safe-spaces) (<https://www.endcoronavirus.org/papers/a-family-guide-with-thoughts-on-safe-spaces>)

² [Green Zones](https://www.endcoronavirus.org/green-zones) (<https://www.endcoronavirus.org/green-zones>) are areas with no community transmission of COVID-19 in the last 14 days that have measures in place to protect themselves from a reintroduction of the virus, like travel restrictions as well as test, trace and isolate.

What is a Homeschool Pod?

A Homeschool Pod is a small group of families who want to come together in a thoughtful way during the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate community and peer connections for their children which are fundamental to their development and growth. While community and peer to peer connection are essential, the health and wellness of everyone is of the utmost importance during the current pandemic. It is understood that forming a Homeschool Pod and sharing resources equitably poses fundamental challenges at this unprecedented moment. This model is committed to finding solutions to these complex problems by inviting the voices of every community to engage in conversation. **While the safest option is to engage in regular virtual interactions, the purpose of this document is to discuss how to think about the option of physical meetings. Once Pods form, the Pod becomes a social unit that shares safety and risk together.**

Any social gathering--even with strict measures in place-- raises the risk of contracting or transmitting COVID-19. Any one person becoming infected is likely to cause other Members of the Pod to become infected as well. All Pod Families join a Homeschool Pod with this understanding and should take actions to reduce their risks so that they and the other Members of the Pod can be safe. Depending on specific life conditions, needs and preferences, it is recommended that individual Pod families determine factors in their lives that lead to risk of infection before connecting with other families and planning meetings and creating any shared rules the Pod may follow to promote safety. For this to work, a Homeschool Pod is based on trust and transparency among all Pod Members as well as the willingness to learn and hold each other accountable.

The level of safety also depends critically on current conditions of transmission in the community. High levels of transmission increase the need for stricter safety measures and limit Pod formation. This is due to an increased chance of coming in contact with rare cases that can be asymptomatic for an extended period of time.

General Remarks

- Pods are based on trust and transparency. In order for the Homeschool Pods to be successful, Pod Members should be honest about their daily activities outside the Pod. Decisions made by a single Pod family member that break the contract of their shared community agreed-upon safety precautions can result in fatal or permanently damaging illness spreading through all families within the group.
- As an outbreak progresses, hard decisions will inevitably arise over whether a family should leave the Homeschool Pod in order to help family and friends not connected to the Pod (such as to care for elderly relatives). Families should be prepared to make these decisions.
- Pod Families may face life circumstances that require them to shift to a Pod with a different COVID-19 level of risk. Pod Families should be prepared to discuss whether the Pod as a whole will shift to a different level of risk or just the specific family. If only the family shifts to a different Pod level, they should recognize that there may be quarantine requirements or other rules to follow before officially joining the new Pod.
- It is possible that Pod Members may make poor choices or actions inside and outside the Pod (i.e., forgetting to wear a face covering when you go out for a walk). Since any one act can increase the possibility of infection, it is important that all Pod Members make a concerted effort to recognize errors and aim to minimize or eliminate future mistakes. Ensuring that lessons are learned is more important than accusation, blame or punishment. However, when multiple (e.g., repeatedly socializing without a face covering) or severe mistakes (e.g., attending a potential superspreader event) are made, the Pod should be prepared to handle a situation where a Pod member engages in high risk, high consequence behavior.

Suggestions for Pod Formation

A family participating in a Homeschool Pod will be referred to as a “Pod Family.” This includes **all people or pets sharing a household with the Pod Members, even if they do not participate in Pod meetups (i.e, a working spouse). Household Members will occasionally be called “Pod Family Members” within this document.** If Homeschool Pods consist of more than 2 families the risk of infection increases with every added family and trust and transparency become more difficult to establish over a long period of time.

It is recommended that Pod Families establish an understanding with one another, either through written guidelines or some other agreed-upon method, that clearly outlines any lifestyle adjustments that may be necessary before the first in-person Homeschool Pod gathering (e.g., all families must quarantine for 14 days prior to the first Pod meet-up).

COVID-19 Levels of Risk

Provided below are three COVID-19 levels of risk that can help define each Homeschool Pod. Each level of risk represents a group of families who face different challenges while navigating their daily lives outside the Pod during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Risk to COVID-19 virus exposure increases with each level of risk. The Low level of risk is defined as a Pod with families who participate in very low risk activities outside the Pod (see chart below for specific examples). Any Pod family with an individual belonging to the vulnerable population (e.g., an elderly parent who requires care inside or outside of the family) should only pair up with other families on the low risk level, or perhaps not join a Pod at all for the health and safety of that vulnerable family member. Any activities a specific Pod decides to pursue as a group may increase the risk of that Pod (e.g., attending educational activities within an enclosed public space with strong COVID-safety measures). Some activities (e.g., going to enclosed places with no COVID-safety measures) do not fall in any category because they are not considered to be in line with the idea of sharing safety in Pods and are thus not acceptable in Homeschool Pods. The reason is that if an individual is at a high level of risk of being infected, joining a Pod will almost surely lead to additional infections. This is just like healthcare providers at high risk choosing to stay away from their family members while treating patients. Other activities might require Pod Members to go above and beyond what other people do to stay at least in the moderate risk category (e.g., wearing eye-protection in addition to other measures when shopping inside a store).

IMPORTANT: All Pod Members, regardless of COVID-19 risk levels, recognize that participating in a Homeschool Pod does not mean there is no risk of contracting COVID-19. Pod Family Members who are asymptomatic with COVID-19 may unknowingly transmit the virus to the rest of the Pod. Families creating a Homeschool Pod should recognize that they have the responsibility for evaluating the risks they are taking and do so at their own risk.

Risk Levels-- What needs do families have outside of their Pod meetups?

	Risk Level		
	1 (low)	2 (moderate - low)	3 (moderate)
Work/Caregivers			
All Pod Members work remotely.	✓		
1+ Pod Members work outside the home or provide care for persons outside their Pod Family, following strict COVID-safety measures.		✓	
<i>Families that have one or more Pod Members who work at a location with frequent human interaction and/or heightened risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus: See note below.</i>			
Essential Travel			
None of the Pod Members travel for work or to provide care.	✓		
1+ Pod Members travel to work or to provide care by foot, bike or car.		✓	
<i>Families that have one or more Pod Members who travel to work or provide care by mass transit: See note below</i>			
Errands			
Delivery or curbside pick-up only.	✓		
1+ Pod Members pay infrequent visits to places with strict COVID-safety measures.		✓	
1+ Pod Members pay frequent visits to places with strict COVID-safety measures.			✓
Living Space			
Private home with separate entrance, including certain townhouses or homes with separate entrances and outdoor spaces.	✓		
Multi-families, townhouses, or other attached dwellings with separate entrances yet with shared outside space (common public area, trash facilities, parking lots or carports), with strict COVID-safety measures.		✓	
Apartment buildings or multi-families with shared entrance(s), shared laundry facilities, shared use stairwells or elevators, with strict COVID-safety measures.			✓

A Note for families with Pod Members who work in high risk COVID-19 environments or find it necessary to take Mass Transit. For families who have one or more Pod Members required to be in high risk COVID-19 enclosed spaces (such as hospitals or nursing homes) or travel by public transportation, it is not recommended to have in-person meet ups. Communities are encouraged to help these families create and fund the best possible virtual solutions that meet their needs for connection and learning.

After determining their risk category, it is then suggested that Pod Families decide and agree upon any additional rules or guidelines that will regulate their specific Pod. For example:

1. At work or in enclosed spaces, at all times:
 - a. Wearing of face coverings
 - b. Social distancing of at least 6 ft
 - c. Handwashing / hand sanitizer
 - d. Ensuring good airflow (open windows or air purifiers)
 - e. No touching of frequently used surfaces
 - f. No touching the face
 - g. Wearing of eye protection
 - h. No long interaction (< 5 min with non-Pod Members (especially if uncovered))

2. Outside, at all times:
 - a. Wearing of face coverings
 - b. Social distancing of at least 6 ft
 - c. No touching of frequently used surfaces
 - d. No touching the face
 - e. No long interaction (< 5 min with non-Pod Members (especially if unmasked))

3. Upon returning home from any indoor or outdoor activities:
 - a. Decontaminating shoes or keeping them outside the living area
 - b. Washing clothes or putting them aside for outside use only
 - c. Showering (potential exceptions: bringing the trash out, etc., then Handwashing)

4. Anything that is brought into the house (groceries, mail, etc):
 - a. Quarantining (3 days) or disinfecting purchased or delivered items before use
 - b. Transferring food takeout or food prepared by grocery stores to another container
 - c. Washing perishable food, containers or other items that must be brought in shortly after arrival with soapy water.
 - d. Heating food takeout or food prepared by grocery stores before consumption
 - e. Handwashing

5. Exercise, walking dogs and leisure travel:
 - a. Contained to nearby towns and open spaces with low COVID-19 cases
 - b. No unnecessary entering of indoor places
 - c. By foot, bike or car only

In certain cases, a Pod Family could be faced with a situation where they cannot follow their Pod's specific measures (such as if a family member is hospitalized or a Pod Family Member assumes a caregiver role to an extended non-Pod family member). In this situation, it is highly recommended that the Pod Family agrees to quarantine from the rest of their Pod for a minimum of 14 days after their situation resolves, and follow all of their Pod guidelines before rejoining the Pod.

In Between Risk Categories?

Shifting to a different level of risk may be uncomfortable, frustrating or confusing in these very unusual times. Lifestyle adjustments are likely to be necessary, however, to help your Homeschool Pod be a success for all participating Pod Families. With that in mind:

If families think they are between risk levels, perhaps they can form a Pod in which every member agrees to follow laid-out guidelines for their specific combination of categories.

For families who think they are at a level of risk that exceeds Moderate Risk and/or find themselves with many exceptions to the guidelines outlined above, and cannot or choose not to adjust their lifestyle accordingly, it is strongly recommended that these families consider homeschooling on their own following CDC guidelines to the best of their ability, until the following occurs:

1. The family's residential area/town/city is designated a Green Zone, which is defined as:
 - No community transmission within the last 14 days in this zone
 - No community transmission within the last 14 days in a directly adjacent zone
 - Effective testing and contact tracing
 - Travel restrictions from zones with community transmission
2. A vaccine is developed that is proven to be reliable and safe and is administered on such a large scale that it reduces or eliminates transmission of COVID-19
3. Other scientific, verifiable proof that the virus is no longer a threat

Meetups

- If at least one member of a Pod Family gets sick with COVID-19-like symptoms such as those listed below AND has potentially exposed other families in the Pod, it is highly recommended that the entire Pod agrees to quarantine for at least 14 days and pivot to virtual meetings and resources. Each Homeschool Pod decides when it is safe to reconvene in-person (i.e., once ALL families in that Pod are symptom-free for 14 days.)
- It is highly recommended that a Pod Family agrees **NOT** to attend a Pod meetup if:
 - At least one Pod Family Member (i.e., child, spouse) experiences or experienced one or more COVID-19 like symptoms within the last 14 days. **Please note:** Early symptoms of COVID-19 tend to be mild (i.e, a runny nose and/or sore throat; sporadic diarrhea without a known cause) and can occur approximately one week or a few days before the symptoms become more severe. Symptoms of COVID-19 include:
 - New loss of taste or smell
 - Nausea or vomiting, or
 - Diarrhea without a known cause
 - Abdominal pain without a known cause
 - Flu-like illness
 - Elevated body temperature/fever usually combined with any one or more of the following symptoms:
 - Chills
 - Dry cough that becomes persistent
 - Shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or rapid respiratory rate
 - Persistent pain, constriction or pressure in chest, particularly when lying down or on your side
 - Fatigue such as inability to stay awake or climb up/down stairs
 - Muscle or body aches not due to physical activity
 - Persistent headache/migraine
 - Sore throat
 - Congestion or runny nose not relieved by allergy medication
 - Feeling unstable on your feet/dizzy
 - Loss of appetite/rapid, unexplained weight loss
 - At least one family member has traveled out of state or to a zip code area with local transmission within the last 14 days. (For Massachusetts see [COVID-19 Updates and Information](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-updates-and-information) (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-updates-and-information>))

- At least one Pod Family Member³ has obtained a test for COVID-19 infection and is waiting for results OR has tested positive for COVID-19 infection and hasn't been symptom-free for at least 14 days. Note that even negative test results are not a guarantee that an infection is not present due to many false negatives. So precautions should be taken even if a negative test result occurs until there is a clear resolution of these symptoms.
 - For Pods with workers who are required to take a COVID-19 test by their employers, if at least one Pod Family Member has obtained a test for COVID-19 infection and is waiting for results **AND has tested positive for COVID-19 infection within the last 14 days.**
- At least one Pod Family Member has interacted directly with someone within the last 14 days who has tested positive for COVID-19 infection.
- It is highly recommended that all Pod Families create a questionnaire specific to their Pod's COVID-19 risk level to help hold themselves accountable for the safety of their family and the rest of the Homeschool Pod. Ideally this would be a screening tool to help families decide if they should skip or attend a meet up. Families can use their own specific guidelines to make a questionnaire or find one online that comes close to their community agreements. The Pod needs to agree on how to handle situations where a family realizes that something may have changed or could be of significance to the rest of their Pod.

³ Pod Family Members also include family pets. If your family pet has a confirmed case of COVID-19, it is highly recommended that the entire Pod Family should not attend a Homeschool Pod meet-up.

Resource Recommendations for Pod Meetups

- Pods can have virtual calls with curriculum planners or instructors and then lead the children as a group with that guidance.
- Large Open Spaces, with no physical participation from any non-Pod Member.
- Families are encouraged to use their own Pod Members' outdoor spaces (i.e., a member's backyard) for programming led by Pod Members. Remote participation of non-Pod Members, including instructors possible through virtual calls.
- If instructors of programming in Open Spaces are not Pod Members, they need to take extra precautions before and during the meetings.
- Indoor Spaces must follow strict COVID-safety guidelines and not contain public toys and materials. Programming **only** with Pod Member instructors⁴.
- In general, the safer the Pods are, the more physically they can get together during programming and other meetups,

Note that bathrooms are a locus of transmission so either returning home might be necessary or special arrangements must be made for bathroom use.

An Example

The Benson Family wants to be part of a Homeschool Pod. One parent works remotely while the other parent homeschools the children full-time. When they go shopping once every 10 days, they enter a grocery store rather than get deliveries for financial reasons. They always enter a grocery store with strict COVID-safety measures. They find themselves in the Level 2 - Moderate - Low category.

However, to minimize risk, they would prefer to pod up only with families that can fully work remotely, so they determine that they are actually between the Low and Moderate-Low Risk categories, with some additional exceptions to the recommendations: They wear face coverings and practice social distancing in enclosed and outdoor spaces, but don't want to do this when it comes to meetups with Pod Members.

They want to trust the other families in the Pod so that their children can interact with other children in the Pod without face coverings or social distancing. They find two other families with the same preferences, and they all agree to form a Pod together and write their Pod agreement to their very specific guidelines, which are a combination of both Low and Moderate-Low Risk categories.

⁴ Those include (volunteer) instructors who are trusted by all Pod Members and who agree to follow the Pod's guidelines as if they were a Pod member. This entails that they cannot instruct other groups in the same time period.

DISCLAIMER

Even if all recommendations outlined here are followed by all Members of a Pod, they may only mitigate but never completely eliminate the risk of infection--plus possible serious or fatal consequences. All Pod Members join a Homeschool Pod with the full understanding and acknowledgment of the Homeschool Pod recommendations set forth in this document and agree to create a Homeschool Pod, with their own ideas and rules, at their own risk. It is highly recommended to collectively agree in writing on the specific guidelines any Pod will follow.

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