Joining a Learning Pod?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some parents around Austin are joining or seeking to form learning “pods.” These pods may take a variety of forms, including but not limited to:

- **Facilitated Pods** - A facilitator, who may or may not be a certified teacher, supervises and assists children while they engage in their school’s remote learning activities.
- **Co-ops** - Parents from two or more families take turns hosting all the children in their homes for remote learning.
- **Micro-schools** - A certified teacher teaches the children who may not be enrolled in a formal school or using a school’s remote curriculum.
- **Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care** - An informal care arrangement with a family member, friend, or neighbor to care for school age children from one or more families during the day.
- **Community Learning Spaces** - Facilitated by community organizations, groups of parents, faith-based organizations, or public entities that provide in-person support to students during times of remote instruction.

Similar to COVID-19 health concerns with children going back to school, there are health and safety considerations for learning pods. It is not possible to reduce all risk of COVID-19 in pods. Thinking about joining a pod? Do your research and ask the following questions.

**Does the pod host have a COVID-19 health and safety plan that addresses the following?**

1. **At-Home Symptom Screening** *(See page 17 of [Austin Public Health (APH) Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Will each pod participant be screened for symptoms of COVID-19 before joining the pod each day?

2. **Face Coverings** *(See pages 14-16 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Are children and adults required to wear face coverings?

3. **Physical Distancing** *(See page 13 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Will participants in the pod be practicing physical distancing by remaining 6 feet apart?
   - Is the space hosting the pod large enough to allow for physical distancing?

4. **Healthy Hand Hygiene** *(See page 12 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Does the host have ample supplies of soap, hand sanitizer, and tissues accessible to children?
   - Is there a plan for frequent hand washing at key times throughout the day?

5. **Cleaning and Disinfection** *(See page 19 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Will there be increased routine cleaning and disinfection of high touch surfaces, including supplies and toys that must be shared?

6. **Meals and Snacks** *(See pages 24-25 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Will children bring their own food, utensils, and refillable water bottles? If not, will the host serve individually plated food?

7. **Isolation of Individuals with COVID-like Symptom(s)** *(See page 31 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - Is there a designated separate area for isolating individuals showing COVID-19 symptoms?
   - Will parents be immediately notified if their child shows symptoms so the child can be picked up and taken home quickly? Find out about COVID-19 testing [here](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/what-to-know.html).

8. **COVID-19 Positive Case** *(See pages 34-36 and 39 of [APH Interim Guidance for Schools]*)
   - If a pod participant tests positive for COVID-19, will all families be immediately notified of potential exposure and close contacts be asked to quarantine for 14 days?
   - If a household member of a pod participant tests positive for COVID-19, will the other pod families be immediately notified of potential exposure?
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- Find out about free lodging for those who cannot safely self-isolate due to COVID-19 here under the heading “Isolation Facility.”

Have you also thought about these health and safety steps?

1. Training and Safety Measures
   - Does the host have experience working with school-age children?
   - Do you know the host’s approach to promoting positive behavior, redirecting children, and responding to inappropriate behavior?
   - Does the host have current training/certification in CPR and First Aid?
   - Have the host and any adults over the age of 18 in the host’s home passed a criminal background check?
   - Do you have the contact information for the other families in the pod?
   - Is the host familiar with Texas Health and Human Services’ Minimum Standards for child care providers? Will the host follow the HHS Minimum Standards?

2. Environmental Safety
   - Are there firearms in the home? If yes, are they locked up?
   - Are there working smoke detectors in the home?
   - Are cleaning supplies and chemicals kept out of reach of children?
   - Are medications kept out of reach of children?
   - Is there a swimming pool onsite? If yes, is there a fence around it? What measures are in place to keep children safe around the pool?

3. Families in the Pod
   - Do you know the host?
   - Does the pod consist of a small, stable group of children and adults?
   - Outside of the pod, what steps are the families taking to avoid getting COVID-19? For example, are they using face coverings, physically distancing, avoiding large gatherings, and skipping outings that are not necessary?

4. High-risk individuals (See pages 10-11 of APH Interim Guidance for Schools)
   - Does your child have a condition that puts them at high-risk for severe illness from COVID-19?
   - Is anyone else in your household at high-risk for severe illness from COVID-19?

5. Outdoor Time
   - Can lessons, mealtimes, and playtime be held outdoors as much as possible?
   - Are there shady or covered outdoor spaces available?
   - Are pest control measures in place?
   - Is the outdoor area kept in good condition and clear of safety hazards?

6. Transportation
   - Will each family drop off and pick up their own child(ren)?
   - If hosts will be transporting children, are they equipped to do so safely (enough seat belts, car seats and booster seats, licensed driver)?

7. Child Care Regulations
   - Is the host a child care provider who is licensed, registered, or listed with Texas Health and Human Services Child Care Regulations?