

What Parents Need to Know About Learning Pods

As many schools remain closed, families are seeking alternatives to the virtual classroom.

By Dani Blum and Farah Miller

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This fall, as schools across the United States start with either partial or full remote learning plans, parents are forming learning pods, or small groups of children who can learn together at home. These arrangements have quickly become a popular and, sometimes, divisive topic. A Pandemic Pods Facebook group was set up by families in San Francisco on July 7 and it already has almost 40,000 members. Google search traffic for “learning pods” has swelled since the start of August. Here’s what parents and teachers should know:

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What is a learning pod?

Learning pods — also called “pandemic pods,” micro-schools or nano-schools — are small groups of students (typically three to 10 children) who learn together outside the classroom but still in person. Some pods are hiring tutors to teach a child’s school curriculum; some pods are sharing teaching duties among parents. Other families are opting out of their kids’ schools entirely and treating a pod like a home-schooling co-op with an agreed-upon curriculum.

Why are parents and teachers turning to pods?

In July, The Times asked readers who were planning to form a learning pod, why they were doing so. The major reason cited of the 100 readers who responded, was safety from the coronavirus. Many of the parents and teachers said they wanted their children to have social interaction and in-person instruction. Some parents with small children said they were worried their kids would not have the attention spans needed for online learning and they thought having a teacher might help.

Educators often tout a set schedule as the most effective way to help kids feel safe. In lieu of real-time instruction from schools, parents are also hoping pods can provide a bit more structure. For working parents, a pod may ensure kids can get online and complete their coursework in a timely manner. “For parents who need to work and can’t supervise their children’s learning, joining a pod may feel like the only way they can educate their kids and keep their jobs,” Clara Totenberg Green, a social and emotional learning specialist in Atlanta Public Schools, wrote in an Op-Ed for The Times.

Are learning pods safe?

The more people in a pod, the risk for coronavirus exposure increases. That’s why parents should keep the number of kids low, with experts suggesting five or fewer students. Once you add in a teacher, siblings and family members, the pod could end up being linked to dozens of people.

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Ideally, just like in social pods that people have formed during coronavirus, families in learning pods shouldn’t socialize with people outside the pod unless they wear masks and remain socially distant. Pod members should be open and honest about their families’ health and activities with each other, and set clear rules around wearing masks and washing hands when the pod meets. Pods should also have an agreed-upon plan for what happens if someone tests positive, gets sick or is in a high-risk situation.

How do I find or create a learning pod near me?

Many pods are forming online via existing parenting Facebook groups and neighborhood listservs. Some communities have created new groups focused specifically on pods, to share resources and post calls for tutors and pod-mates.

Private schools and businesses have also started offering services to create learning pods: a start-up called Learning Pods connects groups with trained instructors; The Manhattan-based independent Portfolio School, along with the independent Hudson Lab School in Westchester and Red Bridge school in San Francisco, will hire and manage teachers and even help families negotiate pod agreements; and a frenzy of new education technology companies say they offer similar solutions.

For some families, though, groups are forming the traditional way — based on networks they had before the pandemic, made up of their kids' classmates, family friends or neighbors with similarly aged children.

How do I hire someone to teach our learning pod?

If you use services offered by Learning Pods, Selected For Families or SchoolHouse, they'll identify and vet instructors. You can also search online for tutors offering their services or get recommendations from private schools, which may not be able to bring back their entire staffs.

Parents hiring teachers on their own should ask about an instructor's teaching philosophy and background. Meg Flanagan, an educational consultant based in the Washington, D.C., area suggested hiring someone with a bachelor's degree in education who also meets your state's teaching requirements and, if possible, run a background check. Parents should also check references.

It's also a good idea to ask about any costs beyond the teacher's rate — for prep time, materials, transportation and other expenses — before you commit to a teacher.

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How much does it cost to have a learning pod?

Pod rates can range from \$30 an hour to \$100 or more. A single semester at the Hudson Lab School, for example, can cost more than \$13,000. A preschool pod offered through Learning Pods charges \$2,100 each month for a student in a pod of four.

Why are learning pods so controversial?

Given the high costs of learning pods, they may exacerbate inequalities between those who have the time and resources to network with potential pod-mates or hire private tutors and those who can't. In her Op-Ed, Green argued that pods will further contribute to racial segregation. "Children whose parents have the means to participate in learning pods will most likely return to school academically ahead, while many low-income children will struggle at home without computers or reliable internet for online learning," she wrote.

Are there ways to make learning pods equitable?

Some pod-related Facebook groups have discussed inviting low-income children into pods and subsidizing their costs, but sociologists warn this practice could create friction and ill will. Instead, people could consider donating to one of the many fund-raising campaigns families that have started online to cover the costs of learning pods for lower-income families. Organizations such as the mutual aid fund Black Education Pods have been set up to provide tutoring services to lower-income students.

Like so many new practices that have evolved during the pandemic, learning pods are evolving. As schools continue to make decisions about reopening (or shutting down again) and researchers learn more about the virus, it's clear that parents will keep trying to find creative ways to support their children's education and development.

Dani Blum is a news assistant on the Parenting desk. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2018.