

Teens & COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities During the Outbreak

Social distancing to slow the spread of COVID-19 can be especially hard for teens, who may feel cut off from their friends. Many also face big letdowns as graduations, proms, sports seasons, college visits and other long-planned events are cancelled or postponed.

Here are a few ways you can help your teen through this difficult time.

Work together to create a new normal

Help your teen create a healthy and productive routine:

Stick to a schedule that works with online learning. Set a time to wake up, exercise, shower, get dressed, have breakfast, or whatever they need to start the "school day." If it helps, allow your teen to sleep in a little later than normal. Like they would be in class, phones should be off while doing schoolwork. Keep the TV off during school hours, too, and limit time watching the news. Plan mini breaks and a 1-hour lunch break.

Make dinner a transition time between the "school day" and the evening. Dinner is a great time to gather the whole family together to talk and share a meal. Try fun conversation starters, such as, "My favorite part of today was..." or "Today I am grateful for...". This may be the time your family may choose to observe a quiet moment together. Help them keep their usual sleep time routine so they are ready for learning each day.

Allow "down time." It's normal for teens to crave more privacy from their family. Give them space for some quiet time, creative time, music time, or to virtually hang out with friends. This can help ease any feelings of being isolated from their friends or difficulties with routine-change.

Communicate honestly & openly

Share information about what is happening in a calm and factual way to help ease their concerns about the virus. Discuss facts about COVID-19 and correct misinformation when you hear it. Reinforce the basics, like the importance of frequent hand washing and avoiding touching their face.

Stress that staying home saves lives. Talk about how social distancing is an important way they are helping slow the spread of the virus and protecting those most at risk. Have a strict "no cheating" rule and stress that it is NOT okay to hang out with friends in person or play outdoor sports like basketball and softball.

Talk with your teen about how they're feeling during the pandemic. Watch for signs they are struggling and may need more support, or if they show any signs of increased suicide risk. Don't hesitate to contact your pediatrician with concerns. Read more here.

Help your teen look forward by helping them shift away from what was lost and identify ways to move on with plans and goals.

Stay safely connected

Reach out virtually. Allow your teen to stay connected to friends and loved ones during social distancing by phone, text, video chat, or social media. (Remind them to check their privacy settings so they are not posting too much personal information online.) Playing games online with friends can also be relaxing and enjoyable for your teen. But be sure to agree on screen time during school days.

Help others connect. Many teens have expertise in using technology and can teach parents or grandparents how to video chat or use social media. This is also an opportunity for them to bring you into their virtual world.

What about media use?

While limits are still important, it's understandable that under these unusual circumstances, your teen's screen time will likely increase. Work together to come up with a plan that includes both online and offline time. Our Family Media Plan tool can help. Allowing your teen to be a part of making a media plan can help them stick to it.

Support family & community

New responsibilities. Routines have changed, and your family may need extra help in caring for younger children or keeping the house clean. Talk to your teen about ways they can play a bigger role. For example, can they help plan or cook dinner? How about teaching their siblings a new dance or fun game?

Virtual guests. Ask your teen to help you come up with creative ways to stay connected with family and friends on a regular basis. Try hosting a "virtual dinner" by setting up a laptop or iPad at the table with the invited guests. Or use a video conferencing platform like Zoom to have an online party where everyone can see each other.

Family projects. Suggest your teen take the lead in projects that involve the entire family, like organizing family photos or recreating the family's history. This is a great topic for calls to grandparents, who may be able to describe challenging times in the past, and how the family coped with stress.

Declutter & donate. Encourage them to clean out their room, the basement, or declutter the garage and prepare items to donate to charity.

Volunteer within the community. Following social distancing and local regulations, suggest your teen look online for local opportunities to serve. Show acts of kindness by making someone's day better with a phone call, text, or social media post. Volunteer to help tutor children of neighbors or friends online.

Risky times for risky behaviors

As schools move to online learning, teens may have more unscheduled time. This can leave them more likely to experiment with risky behaviors. Be sure to talk with your teen about how this is an especially important time to avoid vaping and smoking, for example. Experts warn these habits may harm lung health and immune function, potentially increasing COVID-19 risk.

Mind and body health

Help your teen find ways to keep their mind and body healthy, such as:

Go for a walk or a run outside, either by themselves or as a family. Remind them of the social distancing rules and to stay 6 feet away from others.

Read a book or visit the library online where there are thousands of e-books, audiobooks, and musical recordings. Research new hobbies or skills to learn.

Do video workouts. Many can be found online, and some park districts are offering access to virtual exercise classes, too.

Watch movies or TV shows together as a family or virtually with friends.

Create a video blog of life during the COVID-19 outbreak. Or, start a family journal where each family member can take turns describing the day's happenings.

Take a virtual tour of a museum, or walk through the Grand Canyon with Google Earth. Challenge your teen to research 10 places they might like to visit someday and show you why.

Get plenty of sleep!