

Supporting Teenagers and Young Adults During the Coronavirus Crisis

Having teenagers confined to home during the coronavirus crisis may not be as labor-intensive as being holed up with small children, but it definitely has its challenges. While younger children may be thrilled at the prospect of having parental attention 24/7, adolescents are likely to feel differently.

Here are some tips for parenting teenagers (and young adults suddenly home from college) during this time:

Emphasize social distancing

The first challenge with teens and young adults may be getting them to comply with the guidelines for social distancing.

Teenagers tend to feel invincible, and they are likely to be well aware that the new coronavirus is not as problematic for their age range as it is for older people. Parents are reporting a lot of pushback when teens are told they can't go out and get together with friends. The fact that data actually is on their side, that coronavirus is less severe for them, is a problem in terms of getting them to follow along. They want to see their friends, and don't see why the social distancing should apply to them.

Parents wonder what to tell them; simply reinforce that they may not get that sick with the virus, but not everybody. Some will get very sick and some may die. The most important thing is to not take the chance and avoid being a carrier of the virus which could be spread to others who are at high risk of severe disease, like their grandparents.

One thing to emphasize is: **"You just can't know that your friends are well.** And while you may be comfortable taking that risk, you're also bringing that back in your house and family."

Understand their frustration over not seeing friends

For teenagers and young adults, friends are hugely important, and they are supposed to be — bonding with peers is one of the essential developmental tasks of adolescents. If your teen is sulking about being stuck at home with parents and siblings, a direct conversation might be helpful.

Acknowledge that you know it's frustrating for them to be cut off from friends. Listen to what they're feeling, validate those feelings and then be direct about how you can work together to make this situation bearable.

Loosening rules about time spent on social media, for instance, will help compensate for the socializing time lost with school closings. Encourage them to be creative about new ways to interact with their friends socially.

Support remote schooling

Parents are reporting feeling pressured and confused about how to help kids with remote learning. With younger children, it's more a matter of finding fun activities that can be educational. But with older students, keeping up with expectations from school can be challenging, especially for those with ADHD, learning disorders or organization issues.

You can help teenagers — and college students who've been sent home — create a realistic schedule for getting work done in defined periods, building in breaks and times for socializing, exercising and entertainment. The key principle: do a session of work first, then reward yourself with something relaxing. Keep in mind that it's not going to be as effective as school, but it may get to be more effective over time as everyone on the school front, as well as the home front, works to improve remote learning.

Encourage healthy habits

Teenagers and young adults will do better during this stressful time if they get adequate sleep, eat healthy meals and exercise regularly. Keeping a consistent sleep schedule, with predictable times to wake up and go to bed, is especially important to maintaining a positive mood and their ability to fulfill academic expectations.

Healthy habits are particularly important for young people who may be struggling with anxiety or depression. Losing the routines you've come to rely on can be a big source of stress, so try establishing new routines. A healthy diet is always important and, with fewer trips to the grocery store, you can buy healthy foods and not have to compete with the omnipresent fast and junk food that kids have unlimited access to. Sleep is important too but be careful of letting late nights and late mornings become a habit. Once you give in it is harder to reign in.

Also, having all your family members around can feel overwhelming or create strain. There will undoubtedly be tense moments and it is important to work on finding ways to anticipate and calmly deal with it.

Validate their disappointment

For many the most painful part of the coronavirus crisis will be losing important experiences: high school sports seasons, proms, theater productions, high school and college graduations. Many of them have worked very hard to get into college and now that seems so uncertain. They may also be missing out things they like to do like visiting with friends, outdoor activities, experiencing the thrills the teenage brain thrives on.

Give them room to share their feelings and listen without judgment (or without reassuring them that everything will be fine).

Some will be worried about missing activities expected to help them with college applications and scholarships. Kids are understandably wondering how this will affect their futures. Again, give them room to share how they are feeling and acknowledge the real stress they may be under. Then express confidence in your child's ability to rebound.

Help them practice mindfulness

Mindfulness techniques can be very helpful in this kind of situation, where our routines are disrupted, and we may feel overwhelmed by frustration and disappointment. Mindfulness teaches us to tune into our emotions in any given moment and experience them without judgment.

In what's called "radical acceptance," we let ourselves sit with our emotions rather than fighting them. You tell yourself it's okay to feel anxious right now. It's okay to feel scared. It's okay to feel angry. You're accepting the feelings you have and validating them because we're all having those feelings. It's really important that you accept them as they are rather than fighting them.