Supporting Teenagers and Young Adults During the Coronavirus Crisis

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Tips for parents with older children at home

Caroline Miller

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, points out David Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, 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," says Dr. Anderson. "They want to see their friends, and don't see why the social distancing should apply to them."

Parents are asking what to tell them. "Our answer is that exposure to this virus is an exponential thing, and that it's not really about them," says Dr. Anderson. "It's not really about the fact that they feel fine or the fact that coronavirus doesn't affect them as much. It's the fact that they could be asymptomatic carriers and they could kill others, including their grandparents."

One thing to emphasize, he adds, 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."

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, says Rachel Busman, PsD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute.

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, notes Dr. Anderson, 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.

"I'm completely overwhelmed by trying to figure out how to structure a school day," one mom told us. "I was never planning on homeschooling my kids. I don't have training in this."

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 Jill Emanuele, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends establishing new routines. "Make sure you're eating properly and sleeping and being social and engaging in pleasant activities, " she says, while also warning that young adults should avoid sleeping too much when they're housebound. "There's more of an ability to sleep at home, and while rest is important right now you still need to be active."

Dr. Emanuele also notes that having family members around more often can feel overwhelming or create strain. "Families will need to diffuse tensions in the home with parents and siblings, because everyone is going to be stressed out more," she says. "How to do it will be different for every family, but parents are going to want to think about when to give young people more freedom and how to make sure that their kids' time is still structured. Everyone should be contributing in some way."

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. And while we're all missing out on very valued activities, adds Dr. Anderson, "it's especially problematic for teenagers who are wired in their brains to think about novelty and pleasure seeking and seeking out new frontiers to be limited in this way."

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. As Joanna Stern, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, explains, "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."

In other words, says Dr. Stern, "We say to ourselves: 'This sucks, and I'm going to be sad about it, and I'm going to be angry about it, and I'm going to feel anxious about it,' or whatever it is. This then allows us to move on and say, 'Okay, so now what needs to be done?' "

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