

How to Support Teens During a Strange and Uncertain School Year

Tips for Creating a Sense of Normalcy During These Abnormal Times

BY JENNIFER WINWARD, Ph.D.



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The coronavirus has made "back to school" a bit of a misnomer this fall with most students spending the majority of time learning from home. Regardless of whether students are attending school a few hours per day or learning completely remotely, the disruption to the traditional school experience is creating new challenges and constraints and toppling many of the forces that promote healthy social-emotional development during the adolescent years.

The pandemic has uniquely impacted teenagers, who are developmentally in the midst of a critical transition toward independence that involves loosening ties to parents and strengthening relationships with friends. With coronavirus preventing middle-schoolers and high-schoolers from socializing in-person, they are naturally feeling extra angst.

Luckily, it's still early in the school year, which means there's ample time for parents to figure out how they can help teens make the most of an unprecedented school year and support their emotional well-being in the process. Here are some suggestions:

Find Your Inner "Can-Do" Attitude

Understandably, it's not always easy to bring your parenting A-game when you, too, are worn down by the stress and uncertainty of life during COVID-19. But your attitude about distance learning will influence your teens, who are always listening and taking cues from their parents, even if they won't admit it.

While it's easier said than done, try to foster a positive "can-do" attitude towards your children's school experience this year (even when the Wi-Fi inexplicably goes out). Hopefully, this approach will inspire them to mirror your optimistic outlook. When all else fails, use humor to defuse tension—laughter helps deal with stress!

Set Reliable Routines

Routines are a powerful way to provide structure and a sense of control that is helpful for everyone, including teenagers. A reliable daily schedule with designated time for schoolwork, leisure, physical activity, mealtimes, and sleep emulates the comforting formula that the school week provides under normal circumstances. Routines take away the guesswork of how to structure school versus free time, and they help prevent unhealthy patterns that young people often fall prey to during long stretches of unstructured time, such as being sedentary, playing hours of video games, and falling into irregular sleep patterns.

While teens are unlikely to embrace an hour-by-hour agenda lovingly crafted by mom, you can set expectations of what should be part of their daily schedule—such as set times for studying, exercise, and chores—and then ask your teenager to come up with a plan that you get to approve.

One thing to add to the schedule is getting dressed! There's nothing like changing out of pajamas and putting on real clothes to help teens shift into a learning mindset.

Set Aside Time for Planning and Organization

Even in pre-pandemic times, young people were asked to manage a packed schedule of classes, homework, and extra-curriculars, which was often a stretch for their developmental stage and made them feel stressed. Now that schedules are more sporadic, creating time to organize and track calendars can help relieve anxiety and provide some reassuring predictability. Set aside a block of time to map out weekly plans together to provide a useful framework and make sure tasks are getting done.

While you're in planning mode, encourage your kids to pin passwords and Zoom log-in information right on their desks, where they can see it easily to avoid a mad scramble during school hours. And be sure they set up systems—binders, digital folders for various subjects, and workspace areas—to help stay organized.

Stimulate Intellectual Curiosity

Although the brain has attained 90 percent of its adult weight by the age of 5, there are still complex changes in its organization and functioning that occur during adolescence. Basically, during this time the brain is becoming much more efficient in the way neurons are connected and communicate with each other, so students become more adept at processing information. For parents, this means it's important to seek out opportunities to stimulate your child's intellectual curiosity in the name of healthy brain development.

When you notice your teens express interest in a new hobby or topic—whether it be fashion, the history of a musical style, constellations, mythology, or a woodworking project—listen to them and support ideas they have to learn more. Give special encouragement to new interests that don't have to take place in front of a computer!

Encourage Good Sleep & Nutrition Habits

Now that school is back in session and most schools are enforcing more structure during distance learning—such as scheduling classes from 8 a.m. until 3:30 p.m.—it's time

to shift those circadian rhythms, or sleep cycles, back for an earlier wake up. Teens and tweens need 8-9 hours of sleep per night for healthy brain development. Make sure kids are going to bed earlier now that waking up at noon is no longer an option!

It's also important to keep an eye on what your teens are eating to make sure they are getting a well-balanced diet. In particular, teens need Vitamin A for their immune systems and for healthy vision. Given the additional strains on our eyes with excessive screen usage, it's extra important to pay attention to eye health. Excellent sources of Vitamin A include milk, cheese, carrots, leafy green vegetables, and bell peppers.

Set Boundaries & Build Connections

This pandemic is a marathon, not a sprint. This is a time to take excellent care of yourself, so you'll have the energy and emotional space you'll need to take care of your family.

Research shows that strong, stable home environments help young people to manage—and even thrive—in the face of major life stresses (like living through a global pandemic). Give yourself permission to draw healthy boundaries so that home is a calm, safe space where teens (and their parents) feel supported and have room to decompress. While many of us started this pandemic with lofty ambitions involving sourdough starters and writing the next Great American Novel, what your kids need most from you is to be a steady presence to help normalize this admittedly abnormal time.

If you sense something is wrong, encourage tweens and teens to share what's on their mind by asking open-ended questions: "You seem upset. What's up?" Involve young people in identifying which support systems work well for them—such as virtual tutoring and online counseling—to help them feel invested in the solution and spark self-confidence in their own problem-solving skills. The pandemic has been emotionally taxing for all of us. Above all else, be kind to yourself and your teens recognizing that none of this is easy, but it will get better. ●

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