

Parenting a Teen through the Pandemic



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Why Are the Teen Years Different than Childhood?

Teenagers think and act differently than children for several reasons. Developmentally, teens have entered puberty, and with it the earliest phase of becoming an adult. Their bodies mature as does their brain. They are stronger and look like grown-ups even though they aren't experienced enough yet to make mature decisions. They begin thinking about others with enhanced empathy, but at the same time begin significant strivings for independence. They also experience a contrast between slower-to-develop self-control parts of the brain and the quickly developing pleasure-seeking portions of the brain. Socially, they break away from family connections to a certain degree, forming peer connections independent of family. They create their own personalities and values, which are largely based on what they've learned in childhood. But even though their values end up based on what they were taught, teens need to initially separate from those earlier taught values, in order to feel that they created their principles, and, ultimately, that they own their identities as individuals. They strive for social justice, defined by their own values system, more than perhaps any other time of their lives.

The Importance of Social Connections to Teenagers

As mentioned above, teens more highly value non-family social connections (e.g., friendships, romantic involvement) than family connections. Often, they seek a certain amount of privacy about these relationships to mimic the adulthood status they strive toward. As a result, social isolation becomes difficult to manage, despite the availability of technology-based connections. Their need for social connections can sometimes override their concerns for their own, and others, well-being and come into conflict with COVID-19 mitigation mandates.

Teenage Impulsiveness and Invincibility vs. COVID-19

A key feature of adolescent thinking is invincibility. Teens often believe they can take massive risks because they consider themselves able to handle any and all threats to their well-being. They typically consider risks to safety (their own or others) minimally, if at all. They don't consider they are mortal most of the time, and often seek thrills and adult independence without gauging the actual risks involved.

The impact of a teen's sense of immortality impacts on their choices regarding safety precautions. Just as they often speed too fast down the road, they haphazardly employ COVID-19 safety precautions, either because of impulsiveness, or due to outright defiance of authority. Regardless the cause, they are more likely to congregate in larger groups, forget (or refuse) to wear masks, and unlikely to maintain social distancing. Some teens will take on the role of social enforcer (telling everyone to socially distance or wear a mask) while others will argue that science isn't "conclusive," and they don't need to engage in safety strategies.

Helping Teens through the Pandemic

Rethinking the Idea of Independence: Often parents and teachers engage in conflict with teens, when a better approach is similar to the martial arts strategy of push-pull. Adults can more easily engage teens about safety strategies by agreeing with their resistance to conformity (e.g., "I get that it's an intrusion on our independence....") while also engaging ideas of empathy (e.g., "...but if we accidentally make others sick it can hurt so many people.") or social good ("...the good of our country and school depends on these sacrifices"). Helping them refocus from intrusion to their independent choice and instead on contributing to the good of others, the school or community, will resonate with their independent contributions to the common good and to their interest in social connections.

Socially Distanced Social Connections: Finding alternative ways to consider connecting to their peers will be important to maintain social distancing. For example, teens often text or call their parents while both are in the same house. Adapting that strategy at school or recreational settings takes advantage of technology and their tendency to use it as a convenience. Equally, creating socially conscious rules about group sizes can resonate with their need for social good and empathy. The key to creating social distancing values for teens is to model them as parents, couching the rules in empathic or the-good-of-all frameworks, and playing to alternative ways of connecting like technology.

Flexible Parenting: Parents often feel some degree of loss when teens turn toward peers and away from the family. That loss can turn into conflict over "following the rules" (in this case the Governor's rules). Parenting teens includes flexibility and capacity to compromise without allowing them to be reckless. Parents can help teach teens to comply with COVID-19 mitigation strategies by discussing the need for mitigation with their teenagers, couching in adult ways, and acknowledging the need to sacrifice some freedoms for the common good. Collaboratively engaging teens in setting their own boundaries and values helps promote good choices while honoring their need to feel independent.

Managing Isolation: The isolation of social distancing, loss of sporting events, and reduction in recreational opportunities negatively impact on teens in uniquely difficult ways. Their developmental goals of social connection hits many bumps during the necessary socially distancing requirements. Parents will benefit their teens by empathizing with the stress that isolation causes (rather than using phrases like "C'mon, grow-up and be an adult.") while problem-solving with teens to participate only in small group activities or Zoom-based social interactions (even parties or dances over video-conferencing platforms). Modeling polite ways to assert their safety needs (e.g., "Please don't come along to the store with me if you won't wear a mask.") also can be helpful. Ultimately, parents can more easily help teens to overcome isolation by accepting that their teens experience the separation more intensely than adults probably do as a basis for any parental suggestions they offer.

Resources and Referral

Resources: The CDC has resources at this webpage: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>, as does the American Academy of Pediatrics: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Parenting-in-a-Pandemic.aspx>.

Talk to your pediatrician if these tips don't help. Your doctor can refer your children to a behavioral health provider at CCBT if that next step is warranted.