

Parenting teens during COVID-19

COVID-19 represents a challenge to families around the world that is unlike anything we have ever experienced. Most parents when confronted with a highly stressful situation like this have a basic concern for the wellbeing and safety of their children, whatever their age. To care for children effectively, parents must also look after themselves.

As parents, we ourselves may be feeling a range of uncomfortable feelings (including anxiety, anger, sadness); as well as uncertainty about what to do and how we can cope. These feelings are entirely reasonable and normal. It is important to remember (and to remind children) that communities are working together to keep people safe (e.g. healthcare workers who are looking after people with the virus; supermarkets bringing in new rules to allow more vulnerable people to do their shopping safely). This guide helps parents to support their teenager and look after themselves during this difficult time.



Reassure your teenager that your family is your top priority

In all conversations with your teenager, stay as calm and comforting as possible. However, make sure to signal that you recognise their growing level of independence and include them in planning to support younger children in the family. Explain that they should tell you if they are feeling unwell. Make sure that they know — through your actions and your words — that it is part of your job as their parent to do everything within your power to keep them safe and that this is exactly what you are doing. For

example, say *I'm your parent, it's my job to keep you safe and we are doing everything we can*. This will help them to feel safer and better understand why you must observe the restrictions being placed on all families by government authorities (e.g. not going to the local skate park and keeping them away from social gatherings with friends).



Take care of yourself the best you can

It is entirely reasonable to feel anxious, distressed, confused and angry at times during the current situation. Dealing with your own emotions effectively means that you are better placed to support your children. In dealing effectively with your own emotions, you are also setting an excellent example for your teenager. Some useful general strategies for dealing with big, uncomfortable emotions include:

- paying attention to your emotions and your thoughts
- taking a break from interacting with family members if you are not in control of your emotions (e.g. you might say *I'm feeling upset at the moment and I can't be as calm as I would*

Parenting teens during COVID-19

like in this conversation. So I'm going to sit in my bedroom and read for 10 minutes to give myself a chance to settle down)

- talking to supportive friends and family
- deep breathing
- exercise
- practising mindfulness

There are many helpful and effective ways to manage uncomfortable emotions — singing, dancing, gardening and drawing are examples. Keep healthy and safe (good personal hygiene, exercise daily, eat well, get enough sleep, avoid using alcohol or drugs to lessen stress). Avoid behaviour that might increase your stress (e.g. it is helpful to keep informed about COVID-19, but constant checking for updates can increase stress). If these strategies do not work, you may wish to think about seeking professional help (there are a number of excellent [online support](#) options).



Make sure your teenagers know you are available to talk

Most teens won't be as preoccupied with COVID-19 as adults. However, it is essential that they know they can talk to parents about their concerns and have their questions answered truthfully. Let your teenager know that when it comes to COVID-19 and this difficult time, you are there for them (e.g. *If you have any worries or questions about what is going on at the moment with coronavirus, you can always come find me and we can talk it through*). It is a good idea to follow their lead. This involves providing only as much information as they have asked for. With teens who do not seek out a conversation, be on the lookout for signs of distress or changes in behaviour (e.g. a teenager who becomes more withdrawn or aggressive). Although there may be other reasons for these changes, keep in mind that they may be related to COVID-19.

When talking with your teenager about their feelings, stop what you are doing and listen carefully. Avoid telling them how they should feel (*Don't worry about*

that). Instead, let them know it is OK to be worried, sad, angry or disappointed. Talking and sharing can help teenagers better understand their own feelings and concerns. Common sources of concern, frustration or sadness might include worrying about grandparents' health and missing spending time with them, falling behind with schoolwork if they are not attending school, missing out on important exams or graduations, not being able to spend time with friends or not being able to play sports with others. Reassure your teenager that people around the world (healthcare staff and scientists) are working to help each other and to develop medicines that will help everyone.

Talk to your teenager about what is going on around them in relation to COVID-19. Teenagers may not obtain their information about the world from mainstream media so do not assume they are aware of current advice about such matters as social distancing, and social isolation. They may also not understand why following such advice is necessary. However, it is important not to talk to them too much about it — this can increase their fear and distress. As adults, it can be hard to focus on anything other than the current situation. But we need to make sure this does not colour our interactions with our teens. Follow your teenager's lead — this will help you to spend about the right amount of time talking to them about COVID-19, while also helping you to think about other things. You need to be thoughtful too about the conversations you have in front of your teenager.





Be truthful in answering teenagers' questions

General guidelines for answering teenagers' questions include:

- 1 Find out what they think they know about the issue (e.g. through social media or their friends) before answering.
- 2 Clarify the question to ensure you are not making incorrect assumptions. Make a brief positive comment on the value of the question, such as *That's a really interesting question.*
- 3 Get your information from reliable sources (e.g. UNICEF, the World Health Organization and Government websites).
- 4 If you don't know the answer, offer to try to find it out for them or discuss ways they could do it themselves. If they say *It's not important*, you might say *I'm going to look up the answer myself because I'd be interested in knowing it.*
- 5 Don't make promises you can't keep (e.g. *Things will be back to normal by your birthday.*)



Maintain everyday routines

We all do better when we have some structure around us (particularly in times of stress and uncertainty). As much as possible, stick to your regular family routines (e.g. mealtimes, bedtime routines). You will also be introducing new routines (e.g. more regular washing of hands; keeping more distance than usual between yourselves and others if outside the home; managing a situation where you are working from home while your teenager is also at home). Involve your teens in the development of these. It is predictable that some of these new routines may lead to arguments between parents and teenagers (e.g. the need for more instructions and monitoring around personal hygiene). If there are disagreements, don't try to deal with them when family members are upset or angry. Agree on a time when everyone is calm and relaxed and then use a joint problem-solving approach to work out a solution together. It might take a little time

for the family to adjust to the new routines — be as kind and patient with both yourself and your teenager as you can.

It is useful to work out a timetable or schedule for each day to help you and your teenager cope with being at home during this time. Ensure you negotiate a good balance between online contact with friends, school work, and real-time interactions with family members. Keep the difference between weekdays and weekends. During weekdays when your teenager would have been at school, this timetable should include learning activities as recommended by your school. Keep in mind that home learning during this time will not be the same as a regular school day. Have realistic expectations (both for yourself and your teenager) around home learning. Drawing up a timetable for the day could be an activity that you do as a family each morning (you will most likely also benefit from having a timetable). If you are working

from home, you might think about scheduling breaks at the same time as your teen. You might also need to set some new rules about interrupting politely and waiting for your attention.

Getting the right amount of sleep is important for teenagers. Relaxing regular school time sleep patterns may be something that helps your teenager better adapt to the change in routine. An example timetable is shown below.



My Daily Timetable (a 14-year old)

Time	Activities
7.45	Get up; wash hands; get dressed; have breakfast; feed dog; wash hands
8.15	Check social media, find out what friends are planning to do
8.45	School work — Maths (online/workbooks)
9.15	School work — Foreign language (practise pronouncing words)
9.45	Free time (pick from activity list)
10.15	School work — Science (do an experiment with a parent)
10.45	Wash hands; snack time
11.30	Free time (pick from activity list)
1.00	Wash hands; have lunch
1.30	Free time (pick from activity list)
2.00	School work — Project (do some research on my school project)
2.30	School work — English (reading)
3.00	Pack up school work; wash hands; snack time
3.30	Do some exercise (e.g. have a game of handball; follow an online exercise program)
4.00	Relax — watch an episode of my favourite show
5.00	Play a game with the family
5.45	Video call with a friend or grandparents
6.00	Wash hands; help with preparing dinner; have dinner
7.30	Check social media
8.30	Shower or bath, brush teeth
9.30	Go to bed

The timetable might not always go exactly as planned. That's OK. Having a timetable is about providing some structure and guidance for the day. When things don't go to plan, be patient with yourself and your teenager; and work together to think about how to make it work better the next day. While it's a good idea to keep to a familiar structure, the activities might vary from day to day. Some teenagers may become upset or angry with opportunities for outside activities being reduced or restricted, and some may have difficulty following the rules. If your teenager has difficulty keeping to their schedule or following rules about staying at home you may need to consider putting some rewards and consequences in place to provide some extra motivation.



When teenagers have things to do they are less likely to be bored, anxious, sad or get into trouble.



Have a family plan

Plans are very helpful in times of anxiety and uncertainty. Each family needs to develop its own plan. Give your teenager an important role in developing the plan. Encourage them to come up with ideas and suggestions, including how they can help younger siblings and do more around the home. This is an opportunity to build their skills and confidence as they develop towards becoming an adult. The plan should include regular handwashing; keeping a distance between yourselves and others; and physically staying away from vulnerable family members and friends. Teenagers have an important part to play by following these rules. Where possible, include kindness to others in your plan (e.g. offer to pick up and leave groceries for an elderly neighbour or someone with special needs). In this way, you are also showing your teens one of the qualities that you want to encourage in them. Given the rapidly changing nature of COVID-19 and government recommendations, this plan may need to be reviewed quite frequently. Keep your conversations around the plan brief and matter-of-fact.



Have plenty of interesting things to do at home

When teenagers have things to do they are less likely to be bored, anxious, sad or get into trouble. Work with your teenager to come up with a list of 20 or more activities that they can do if they find themselves bored and not sure what to do. Make sure that you include physical activities to keep them active — there are many that can be done inside as well as outside.

Activities might include cooking, completing an online exercise program, drawing, playing catch or handball, or listening to music or a podcast. Board games and puzzles are great for children of all ages. Put a copy of the list somewhere in the house where your teenager can easily see it (e.g. on the fridge). This may be a good time for you and your teenager to take on a new project together (e.g. learning a new language or making an online photo book).

Make sure the activities are not just variations on screen time. However, at times like these, it's OK to loosen up on your usual screen time rules and allow more than usual. Some screen time could include other family members or friends (e.g. having a family movie night; playing online games with friends; talking to family or friends online).



Take notice of behaviour you like

During this difficult time, think about the values, skills and behaviours you wish to encourage in your teenagers. There are many opportunities to teach them important life skills (e.g. being caring, helpful, and cooperative; getting on well with siblings; taking turns in conversations). Pay careful attention to their behaviour during this time. Whenever they do something you like and want to encourage, specifically name the behaviour and then use plenty of praise and positive attention to encourage it in the future — you will find this is a very powerful thing to do. For example: *It was so kind of you to suggest we phone Gran. She really appreciated it or Thank you for working quietly and waiting until I was off my work call to talk to me.*



Help teenagers learn to tolerate more uncertainty

The COVID-19 crisis is creating uncertainty for everyone. As parents, we need to find a way to accept this uncertainty ourselves. Then, through our actions and words, we need to help our teenagers meet this challenge (e.g. *We don't know when this is going to be over. I know it's hard to not know. We just have to remind ourselves that we are doing our best to stay well and safe, and that the whole world is working together on this problem*). Big changes to teen's lives can be hard and often scary. They can also result in major disappointments. They may show signs of sadness, anxiety or anger. These emotions are normal reactions to loss and change. After acknowledging and normalizing this, help them to learn the skills to adjust

and adapt and develop more of a positive mindset in regard to this challenge. Suggested comments include:

- *Sometimes we all need to make small sacrifices to help others in the community.*
- *What's something positive that's come out of this situation?*
- *What is something that you feel grateful for right now?*
- *How can we make the most of this time that we have together — is there something that you've always wanted to do but never had time to start?*

Help them think of ways to create opportunities for learning new skills (e.g. different ways of communicating with friends and loved ones). If you have serious concerns about your teenager's emotional health, seek professional support.



Reach out and connect with loved ones

Social/physical distancing does not have to mean that you, your teenagers or your extended family members feel alone or isolated. We are all in this crisis together. Make greater use of phones, online communication tools (group video conferencing) and social media to keep in touch with family, friends, and neighbours. Teenagers love being experts — maybe they can draw on their knowledge of social media to teach other family members how to use these tools to stay in touch.

Get more tips and strategies online to help during this crisis: triplep-parenting.net



Matthew R Sanders, AO., PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist, Founder of Triple P and one of the world's leading experts on parenting.



Vanessa E Cobham, PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist and an internationally recognised expert in child and adolescent anxiety and posttraumatic mental health (specifically disasters).

© 2020 The University of Queensland