

HELPING TEENS MANAGE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in stay-at-home orders, physical distancing, and other attempts to mitigate the spread of disease. While all Americans have been affected by the efforts to contain COVID-19, these effects have varied by age. Teens are at a stage in life in which they are trying to establish greater independence from their families and to strengthen social ties with friends. Though

the COVID-19 public health crisis can complicate these developmental processes, it also provides opportunities for teens to learn new skills from adults in their families and communities. This fact sheet describes the effects of ongoing physical distancing on teen health and provides recommendations for adults to help teens during periods of physical isolation and as communities reopen.

Challenges facing teens during COVID-19

- **Distance learning:** Many teens struggle with online learning. Not being in physical proximity of their instructors and peers can lead to difficulties becoming and staying motivated, organized and focused, understanding expectations, and completing work in a timely manner. These difficulties can cause teens to fall behind in their academic development.
- **Social life:** During physical distancing, teens are unable to hang out with friends, have sleepovers, or attend parties. In addition to causing general boredom, physical distancing can cause teenagers to feel disconnected from their peers.
- **Athletics:** Teens are likely to experience negative consequences from their inability to participate in organized sports. Physical health and wellness may decline as they engage in less physical activity. In addition, teenagers will lose a sense of camaraderie without their team or fellow team members. The cancellation of sporting events worldwide can also create a loss of connection to a sport they are passionate about, and attend or watch together with family and friends.
- **Online life:** Teens will engage more frequently with online social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although online life is an important way to connect during periods of physical distancing when meeting in-person is not feasible, it can also disconnect teenagers from the real world and lead to conflict with their parents if they spend too much time online and avoid other important activities.
- **Disrupted schedules:** Sleep and wake times, school hours, meal times, and extracurricular activities are an important part of daily routines that add structure and consistency. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in disruptions of schedules, which can cause fatigue, restlessness, disorganization, and irritability.
- **Transitions and losses:** Many important milestones and rites of passage in a teen's life (such as graduations, proms, vacations, internships, jobs, and starting college) have been postponed or cancelled due to physical distancing requirements. These missed opportunities can lead to a sense of disappointment and loss for teens as well as their family members.
- **Desire to go out when it might not be safe yet:** Teens are likely to get impatient when spending so much time homebound. They will probably want to go out without realizing they are unnecessarily putting themselves and others at increased risk.
- **Uncertainty about the future:** Given the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic and whether additional waves will occur in the future, teens remain uncertain about their return to school and/or future distance learning requirements, change in school schedules, loss of athletics, and disruption of other extracurricular and social activities. Teens are likely to have varied emotional and behavioral responses to such uncertainty, such as changes in mood, increased anxiety or depression, decreased motivation, or reduction in goal-oriented behaviors.
- **Boredom and loneliness:** When physical distancing leads to physical isolation, teens can feel bored or lonely. Under such circumstances teens may be more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including alcohol, marijuana or other substance abuse, or they may take unnecessary COVID-related risks (such as physically visiting with groups of friends) that can place their own health, as well as the health of loved ones in jeopardy. Boredom can also lead to irritability and conflict with parents and other family members.

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Supporting teen health and well-being during COVID-19

Many teens can use this time of physical distancing to seek out and interact with a variety of caring and helpful adults who can help them stay healthy, manage disappointments, and successfully adapt to current and future COVID-19 challenges. Whether they are parents or other family members, educators, coaches, or other members of the community, caring adults should focus on open communication with teenagers as well as developing and maintaining some consistent contact. Parents especially should work collaboratively with their teens to help them find safe, workable solutions to the challenges they are facing, and to practice flexibility—a skill that will serve them well as independent young adults. It's also a chance to create healthy habits and new routines. With interactions currently limited, adults should focus on personally modeling healthy behaviors and habits.

- **Psychological health:** [Take time to ask](#) teens what they know about COVID-19 and how they feel about it. Talk openly about their disappointments and normalize these feelings. Help teens develop [healthy coping skills](#) and offer support when possible. Regular check-ins can help caring adults understand changes in their teens [mental health needs](#) and when professional support may be required.
- **Technology use:** Parents should assess their teens' Internet use, while keeping in mind that teens will need additional time to “virtually” connect to their peers virtually. Prioritize screen time to complete school-related activities and to connect with family and friends. Parents should also monitor and adjust their own personal technology use to provide a good model for teens. Be alert to tendencies of family members to isolate within the home as their attention to online activities increases.
- **Physical exercise:** Help teens stay fit while at home. Families can engage in regular activities together, such as taking walks or going on bike rides, or sharing activities such as [yoga](#) gardening, or activities with pets. Trainers may be able to teach students online and work with parents to set up workout schedules and

gain access to athletic equipment. Coaches can check in with teens' training progress by tracking exercises on shared apps or by having teens send them stats after each activity.

- **Shared meals:** Take time to eat together. Whether as a [family at the dinner table](#) or with extended family via video call, eating meals together encourage a regular routine while supporting healthy habits. Cooking together is another way to teach teens new skills while spending time with each other.
- **Sleep habits:** Help teens establish healthy sleeping habits. [Teens need more sleep](#) than adults, ideally 9 or more hours each night. Not using electronic devices or watching TV in bed makes it easier to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- **New opportunities:** Create new routines that incorporate “normal” activities in different ways. For example, spiritual leaders could host weekly virtual teen groups. Community members and neighbors can find fun ways to acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments, special days (such as birthdays or graduations), and other occasions, while remaining physically distant.

Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics:

www.aap.org

Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine:

www.adolescenthealth.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:

www.aacap.org

For more information

For more information about supporting adolescents and teens, or how to cope during times of stress, visit:

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

www.cstsonline.org

Human Performance Resources by CHAMP

www.hprc-online.org