

Tips for Parents of Teens Struggling with Stay-at-Home Orders

Many teens are complying with stay at home orders and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many of us have also heard stories about teens who were seen hanging out with friends in large groups, celebrating birthday parties in person, as well as being upset with parents who are trying to implement rules to keep their families safe. For those cases where teens are struggling to understand the seriousness of the pandemic, and observe social distancing, the question is, how do we promote increased teen understanding and compliance?

Understanding teen brain development

To understand why teens may be struggling to understand the importance of these restrictions, it's important to remember that their brains are not yet fully formed. The human brain does not reach adult maturity until age 25. This is when the pre-frontal lobe — responsible for executive functioning such as decision making and the ability to plan ahead — is fully developed. This means that although your teen can talk like an adult, they're less likely to make decisions that reflect a broad and deep understanding of complex situations like the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of social distancing.

Developmentally, teens are shifting away from families toward a peer-based orientation. This means that they may highly value peer praise and activities as they focus on their peers in an attempt to gain individuality from their family unit.

Teens depend on their social connections. Socializing aids teens' development, teaches them to form meaningful social groups outside their family and increase their autonomy and independence. Knowing how important socialization is to teens' development, we can understand why teens might feel so constrained by [social distancing](#). It's natural for teens to feel disappointed that they can't see their friends in person right now. Here's advice on [talking to kids about disappointment](#).



Validate your teens' situation

Acknowledge the difficulties your teen is experiencing. The difficulties they are facing right now are different from their younger siblings or from you. To the teen, it may not feel like just a matter of putting things on hold, but rather more like interfering with future survival or being able to exist independent of their family. There is a biological process driving teens to want to spend time with their peers, no matter how much they love their family members. This is a normal developmental process.

The teen drive to socialize is in opposition to possible other values such as protect my family, try to do no harm, be mindful to others. As a parent, you can validate their desire to socialize while reminding them of their other values. How are their actions reflective of both sets of values? Work with them to find a middle path, a balance between the need to socialize with peers while upholding their other values. [Here's some ideas for how teens can get together virtually with friends.](#)

Help teens explore the “why”

There are graphics and virtual animations online and on social media that visually show how social distancing helps to decrease the spread of COVID-19. Teens like to explore and come to their own conclusions, so you can ask them to look at the animations and explain to you how and why social distancing seems to work.

Acceptance vs. change

An important balance to strike is between acceptance vs. change. When practicing acceptance, a parent may say, “The way you are feeling is ok. I understand how difficult this is for you.” When teens feel they are being forced to change, they may hear things like, “I want you to limit close physical interaction. Please wear a mask.”

If parents take time to genuinely acknowledge the challenges of being an isolated teen, it sets the stage for possible change messages. Validate your teen genuinely before asking for any change. If teens feel validated and that their parents are appreciating their sacrifices, they are more willing to change.

Helping teens make sense of sacrifices

It's important for parents to help their teens make sense of the sacrifices they are making. Although COVID-19 seems to affect youth less harshly than adults, they could be asymptomatic and unknowingly pass symptoms to their parents or grandparents – or their friends' parents or grandparents. Remind them that by staying home and social distancing, they are protecting those in their community who are at greater risk. Remind your teens that this pandemic – and their need to make sacrifices – won't last forever.



Praise your kids liberally

Studies show that rewarding desired behaviors is significantly more effective than punishing non-desired behaviors. Catch your teen being good and reward them through verbal praise or other tangible rewards. Let them know that you appreciate their willingness to limit social exposure and that you notice they are doing the right thing, even when it may not feel very rewarding.

Messages matter

Do your best to be consistent in establishing your family's rules. If the rule is you need to wear a mask when we are in a public setting like the grocery store, make sure that you enforce it every time you go out. Enforcing a rule only sometimes almost always leads to poor compliance.

Remind your teen of your family's choices

There are many differing views out there about how to best combat this pandemic. Validate the multiple points of view about the pandemic that your teen may be aware of. You could say something like, "Yes, some people are saying (this), and we are going to follow (this) because we are doing our part for (insert value/reason here)."

Reframe safety protocols as common etiquette

We teach our children proper ways to act from a young age. Wash your hands; say please and thank you. Doing these things helps us build the type of community we want to live, and communicates to others that we care about them, demonstrated in our public actions.

We can teach our teens that wearing a face covering and maintaining six feet of distance from others in public shows that we are mindful and caring, and that we value others' lives, too. Even if we don't think we have COVID-19, even if we are not personally worried about getting the virus, we will look out for each other.

Following this common etiquette communicates to those around us that just as we value each other's health and safety as much as we do our own, and that making sacrifices supports our community. Communicating these messages to your teen frequently will reinforce the meaning behind these safety protocols and increase the likelihood that they will be willing to make sacrifices and practice social distancing during this time.

Praise yourself as a parent

Remind yourself that as a parent, you are doing the best that you can! Remind yourself that this is new territory for everyone, and that each one of us is trying to get our needs met in the ways that have worked for us before. Give yourself a pat on the back that you have a teen who is listening to you as best they can, whose behavior reflects many of your same values. We are all doing the best that we can and you are doing the best that you can for your children.

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