

How Teenagers Think and Feel

Teenagers' friendships are central to their lives. Their need for social connection is intense. Their worlds revolve around making short- and long-term plans with their friends and sharing joys and sorrows with them. Many teens have also developed passions for things like sports, music, science or art. They are discovering their talents, interests, and identities.



COVID-19 has interrupted teens' lives without warning. They're expected to stay home all the time – but much of their world exists outside their homes. They're disconnected from their friends, teachers, coaches and others who inspire them. They don't have access to things like soccer fields, science labs, musical instruments or art supplies. They're missing the places where they socialize, fall in love, learn about themselves and others, and discover their values. Suddenly, they're living in a state of uncertainty and isolation, losing their independence and privacy.

Many teenagers with jobs will have lost them due to the pandemic. They might have been saving for their education, travel, or something else important to them – or they might have been contributing to the family's finances. They might feel that their future is at risk, and that their dreams have been destroyed.

Students will have suddenly stopped going to school, without closure or saying goodbye. Those who are graduating or reaching other milestones will miss the celebrations they have looked forward to for years.

For many teenagers, this situation will create emotional upheaval. They might grieve these many losses, feel frustrated by a lack of privacy, or push back against the controls suddenly placed on them. They might resent having their homes made into temporary schools, and having their parents become their substitute teachers. They might be filling their need for connection by spending many hours each day on social media. All of this can lead to resistance, anger and conflict.



It's common for teenagers to feel invulnerable, like nothing bad can happen to them. This is because the part of the brain that assesses risk is not fully developed yet. Many teens don't fully understand that they could get sick – or that they could make others sick. They might try to meet these needs for social connection by meeting up with their friends or ignoring physical distancing advice.

This isn't bad behaviour or selfishness. It's a combination of very strong needs for independence and an inability to fully understand the risks.

Parents may feel tempted to punish by hitting, grounding, or imposing 'consequences' like taking things away. But punishment does not work; it will only make things worse. When teenagers are punished, they feel misunderstood, misjudged, and controlled. This creates resentment against their parents and intensifies conflict.

These are challenging times for all families, and everyone is trying to adjust. When you find yourself reacting to your teenager, try first to understand the situation from their point of view. It's easy to be continually drawn into arguments and power struggles over things that really don't matter. What does matter is protecting your relationship with your teen, so it remains intact through this very stressful time.

How we interact with our children at this time of heightened global stress can impact their thinking and our relationships for life. If we keep our eyes on our long-term goals, build on our teenagers' strengths, manage our own emotions and provide Warmth and Structure, we can help our teens find solutions to the problems they're facing today. At the same time, we'll build their capacity and strengthen our relationships far into the future.