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## Supporting Teenagers in a Pandemic

Six ways families and schools can foster adolescent development

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When it comes to supporting teenagers during the pandemic, schools and families need to work together to coordinate social-emotional as well as academic support — whether learning ends up taking place at home or in the classroom.

In a webinar (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRM9Nveaw5o>) for the Society for Research on Adolescence (<https://www.s-r-a.org/>), developmental psychologist Nancy Hill (/node/126192) observed that schools have always provided teens with a space to think independently, to experiment, and to form support networks with peers. Yet in the middle of a pandemic, this space to build their identities may be lost, impacting their overall wellbeing and development.

“While the focus is on academic learning, rightfully so, for adolescents, we should not ignore the significance of the loss of peer relationships and friendships on their mental health and wellbeing,” said Hill, who appeared in the webinar alongside adolescent psychologist Larry Steinberg (<https://www.laurencesteinberg.com/>). “Learning to navigate and find affirmation in the broader social context is essential. School closures and social distancing is especially challenging in this regard.”

Hill identified six developmental areas, in addition to academics, that schools have traditionally helped nurture. Here, we summarize her suggestions for how schools can work with families to continue to do so in a pandemic.

## **1. Peer Groups and Social Connections**

Schools provide young people with a chance to develop relationships with peers, and for teens, these relationships are often key (<https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/healthy-relationships/healthy-friendships/index.html>) contexts for their development of identity. Whether formed through affinities and alliance groups, interest-based clubs, or a group projects, these relationships help teens stay connected to school and enhance their understanding of who they are as a learner. The loss of these relationships can lead to increased anxiety and feelings of isolation.

*To support social connections both in and out of school, teachers should consider:*

- Engaging students in group projects that require them to reach out to and collaborate.
- Establishing routines and schedules that provide a sense of stability. Be especially sure to build-in time for teens to socialize in addition to doing academic work.
- Incorporating social media as a tool for students to connect with one another — though be aware that this is not a substitute for personal interaction, and many families are concerned (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/parenting-children-in-the-age-of-screens/>) about the amount of time their child spends online.

## **2. Opportunities to Feel Competent**

Teens feel the pressure to keep up with their peers both academically and socially. Falling behind can undermine their perception of themselves as a good student and as a community member.

*Boost feelings of competence by:*

- Providing the supports, both at home and in school, that students will need to succeed. In some contexts, this may mean access to Wifi, a computer, or tech support. Don't forget that families may also need similar

supports (<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25858/reopening-k-12-schools-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-prioritizing>) to help their child succeed at home.

- Keeping standards high. Lowering standards to help balance out competing demands sends the message to students and their families that they are unable to keep up. Instead, communicate expectations clearly. Provide the structure that allows students and families to stay connected to the school and its supports.

### **3. Being Part of the Solution**

In addition to feeling capable, adolescents like to contribute to and feel valued by their communities. Especially in a pandemic when powerlessness and helplessness are common, teens need to feel they have control over their lives and can make a difference.

*Empower young people by:*

- Finding opportunities for civic engagement, community service, or volunteering their time.
- Letting them know the work they're doing in the classroom is valuable and worthwhile by finding ways that it can connect to their own goals and interests.

### **4. Changes in the Parent-Child Relationship**

Teens and their parents often clash around questions of autonomy and control. The pandemic especially may have heightened these conflicts, as parents often had to oversee remote learning last spring. Research suggests that having parents directly instruct their adolescent children is unproductive (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00313831.2017.1324901>); parents are more successful in supporting their teenagers by helping to establish work habits, managing time, and motivating kids.

*Educators can facilitate the parent-child relationship by:*

- Providing scaffolding and opportunities for individual check-ins so the burden of instruction doesn't fall on parents.
- Recognizing that schools often allow kids to connect and build relationships with other adults like coaches or counselors. Find ways to connect kids with other adults who can provide support.

### **5. Mental health**

According to a recent study (<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3904/coronavirus-report-summer-2020-final.pdf>), 81% of students have said that the pandemic has made their mental health problems worse. Losing school routines can cause an increase in feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation. Schools provide mental health services and other supports on site, but the pandemic may make it difficult to identify students who are in need.

*Support student mental health by:*

- Connecting kids with an adviser or mentor who can think about student needs holistically.
- Recognizing students and their families are struggling to balance different demands. Don't react punitively to absences or place blame on parents.

- Reorienting schedules around what we know teens need — early classes may not be most suited for their development.
- Working to establish trust with families, recognizing that a legacy of discrimination may make this connection difficult. However, continue to reach out and offer support.

## 6. Safety

When schools are open, parents and communities know that teenagers are safe during the day. However, when schools are closed, Hill notes that inequities around safety and monitoring are exacerbated — particularly for young people whose parents are required to work, who have to care for younger siblings, or live in high density, urban areas where the risk for exposure is higher.

*To provide safe and supportive learning environments for all, think about:*

- Forming strategic partnerships with community organizations like the local Parks and Recreation Department that may be able to provide a supervised space.
- Talking to teenagers about their roles in their communities. Think about ways kids can provide a support network to each other and help each other stay safe.
- Forming social pods or partnerships with other community members that, when done thoughtfully and with an eye toward equity, could help families share resources.
- Setting clear schedules, routines, and expectations that can provide a sense of stability.

### **While at Home...**

Caregivers have been asked to take on the responsibility of supervising their children's education during the pandemic, in some cases having to deliver direct instruction. But Hill emphasizes that with adolescents, **the most important thing caregivers can do is to help teens advocate for themselves and take greater responsibility for their schoolwork.**

"Rather than doing more, parents can hold youth accountable for getting the work done and encourage and guide them in asking for extra help when they need it," says Hill, adding that teens crave autonomy and independence, and this is a context where parents can cater to that developmental need.

### **Parents can help youth learn to be independent by:**

- Encouraging them to create a plan for getting their schoolwork done. This will allow teens to take ownership and responsibility for their schoolwork while practicing time management.
- Being sensitive to the fact that teenagers' biological clocks lead them to stay up late and sleep late.
- Recognizing that socializing is an important need at this point in a young person's life and helps them develop their own identity. Let them connect safely with friends.
- Knowing that teens often want to talk about how their interests factor into "the big picture" and want to know why a class matters. Parents can talk with them about their plans for the future and how school factors into that plan.

# Additional Resources

Resilience for Anxious Students (</news/uk/17/11/resilience->

Coping Skills for Anxious Times (</news/uk/17/11/coping->  
students)

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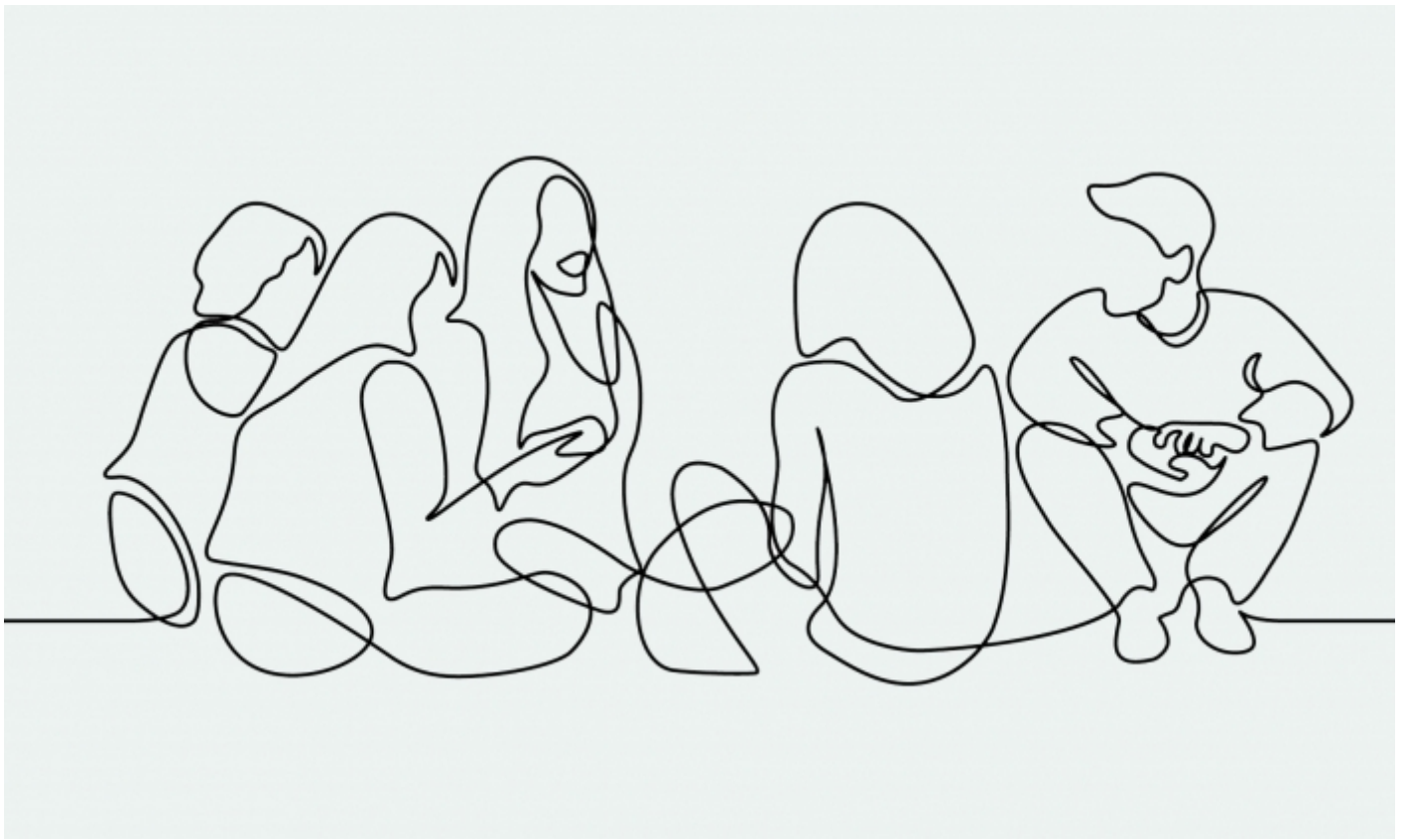
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