



10 TIPS FOR SUPPORTING TEENS DURING COVID-19 CRISIS



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RESOURCES BY DR KATHY WESTON

10 TIPS FOR SUPPORTING TEENS DURING COVID-19 CRISIS

1. FOCUS ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING FIRST

Parental mental health is highly correlated to children's mental health so, as hard as it is, we really need to try and focus on our own wellbeing at the moment. What does this look like? Firstly, surface your own fears and worries and make sure there is someone in your life who can be a sounding board. Perhaps set aside time each week to connect online with a friend who is happy to listen. List anything that is upsetting or worrying you and try to think of alternative thoughts to accompany each one. Maintain a diary or a journal for this time period. Perhaps talk through diary entries with your trusted friend or partner. Try and create 'boundaried' time for yourself each week and make a sign for the door if you have to (Mummy's reading time – DO NOT DISTURB). If you are living with your partner, try and show the children how you are supporting each other. Perhaps come up with a learning activity that you can both do together (an online dance class every week? Or exercising together?). At the moment, things are tough, but remember, mental toughness is about being realistic; some days you will feel down, others you will feel more enthusiastic and able to give 100%. Don't be hard on yourself and remember that everyone, across the country, is in a similar boat.¹

2. ENJOY YOUR CHILDREN

This advice was given to me by a very eminent academic, when asked what she considered the most important advice for parents to hear. It is an extremely simple tip, which, let's face it, can feel hard to implement at times. This may particularly be the case when siblings are squabbling and you feel under financial or emotional strain yourself. However, try hard over this period to celebrate your children for who they are and what they bring to family life. Look for the green shoots if they are moody or fed up. Try and let them come up with games or activities that they ordinarily find fun and that are likely to lead to laughter (itself a great component in resilience). Go back over old family photos and films to nudge the whole family into a sentimental space. Children of all ages relish the chance to talk about themselves as babies and young children.

3. BE ATTENTIVE TO THE SIBLING RELATIONSHIP

Let's face it, arguments between siblings are part and parcel of family life, and may escalate during lockdown. Currently, particularly when parents are

¹ If you feel you need more support, three great websites to support adult mental health are:

<https://www.psy.ox.ac.uk/covid-19-our-mental-health>
<https://www.rethink.org/news-and-stories/blogs/2020/03/managing-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

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trying to juggle a lot of other stuff at home, it is easy to take our eye off the ball and allow arguments to fester. First of all, try to remember how important that relationship is – we do need to recognise this before we actually work on trying to improve it.² For the present time, when they are getting along and being nice to one another, notice and praise them. When they argue, try and listen objectively to both sides and encourage them to find constructive ways through the argument to reach consensus (a useful life skill). Cultivating opportunities to have siblings versus parent(s) games can foster a new sense of cohesion between offspring. At the moment, we have no idea how long we might be cooped up for together, which is why emergency times require emergency 'getting along' rules. I would advise all households to do a little review (around the dinner table) of how we are getting along, where the flashpoints are (be honest) and how we might find constructive ways of reducing these, as a team. I think these meetings should be recorded for posterity! Or at least the agreed points should be printed out and everyone held accountable. As part of this family communication plan, it is important that the emphasis is put on balance; everyone needs work and study time, play time, time to meet with friends online, physical exercise and to participate in household chores. As I said, it is a team effort.

4. TRY NOT TO ARGUE IN FRONT OF YOUR CHILDREN

If you are living with your partner, or even talking to them online about your childcare arrangements, try to be as pleasant as possible. I know it isn't easy, but arguably nothing is as important when it comes to protecting our children's mental health and wellbeing. Pay attention to little interactions. Be kind and considerate and check-in on one another. Make each other a cup of tea, be affectionate and give compliments. Where you don't agree, try hard to have these chats out of earshot of your children. Parental conflict and tension can exacerbate children's anxiety and affect self-worth. For parents struggling to get on with each other over this period, or even those who are simply interested in this theme, I would strongly advise you watch the series of clips, created by www.seeitdifferently.org, which will provoke new thinking in terms of parental communication. They are extremely poignant to watch.

5. MODEL GRATITUDE

A big part of being resilient is being able to reframe any challenge as something we can both learn and grow from. Equally, practising daily gratitude is an extremely important exercise for family mental health and wellbeing. Each evening, kick off the chat by talking about what you are truly grateful for

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and take turns referring to what went well that day. Get children into the habit of doing this. As counter-intuitive as it may feel during such a difficult period, it is also a good idea to articulate any silver linings that you can possibly come up with. As a family, we have worked out that my partner is saving four hours a day avoiding a busy commute into London, we finally have time for home improvements, and we've all learned a great deal more about technology. Who knew that Grandpa would figure out Zoom? Moreover, we are enjoying learning about a whole host of careers in science that we previously knew little about. We now all know what epidemiologists and virologists do (and we appreciate science so much more). Other silver linings as articulated by my 10 year old have included: "nature is having a spa day" and "all the birds can finally have the skies to themselves". *What silver linings can your family come up with?*

I have created a few 'resilience' resources that you can download for free from my main website³, which should initiate very important conversations within family life and are designed to emphasise both personal and family resilience. Please try them out, adapt to your own needs and enjoy using them.

6. FOCUS ON THE PILLARS OF WELLBEING

Anyone raising teens needs to be aware that the four pillars of wellbeing are sleep, diet, exercise and purpose. Sleep hygiene is important to maintain over this period, so make sure that good sleep habits are in place. Exercising, which we know is correlated with lower depression in teens, and even diet can play a critical role. An amazing new study just published in the *Journal of Nutrition* points to the importance of 'dark fruits' - like blueberries/blackberries - and a vegetable rich diet in lessening depressive symptoms in teens. Having goals is also a brilliant way of improving mental health and wellbeing. For those of you trying to work out if your child is depressed or simply down-in-the-dumps, aside from consulting your GP, I would recommend the book: *Teenage Depression: a CBT Guide for Parents*. If your child is interested in working through any issues and learning more about teen depression (and you feel it is appropriate), there is a book written for teens to accompany the latter publication.⁴ Lastly, please listen to my podcast interview with the Professor of Psychology and expert on teen depression, Shirley Reynolds.⁵

7. WHEN IT COMES TO CHATTING ABOUT THE DREADED VIRUS, TREAD CAREFULLY

Some children may take a keen interest in either the science associated with the Covid-19 virus or what is happening in terms of the government's

⁴ Please listen to my interview on this theme with Cameron Northworthy, available via: www.drkathyweston.com/podcast

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response. Others will show little interest. Either is fine, but it is important that we are mindful of what our children are hearing and where they are sourcing information from. In my mind, the mainstream news at the moment, with its daily death toll counts and images of bodies rolled into mortuaries can be anxiety-inducing for some. Some children will be delighted to be cooped up, off school and with their parents all day. Others may find it very difficult indeed. For the latter group of children, there is very specific (and recent) advice coming from the top anxiety researchers in the country which I would urge you to download and read.⁶

8. REVIEW HOW HOME SCHOOL IS WORKING OUT

As we move into a new school term (albeit virtual), it might be a good point to reflect on how things are working out on the learning front; consider what has worked well and not so well. Reflect on how organised it feels and how well the learning is actually going. Create a plan of action for the week ahead. Does everyone know what is happening and what they need to be doing?

9. BE PREPARED TO RE-WRITE SCREEN-TIME RULES

The general consensus in the research community is that now is not the time to ban teens from engaging with social media or games if they are helping to alleviate loneliness, isolation and low mood. However, it is very important that a **balance is struck**. It is unhealthy to be online for hours and hours on end (particularly for eyesight and posture) and equally, their digital diet matters too. *What are they watching or doing online? Who are they interacting with?*

Remember to try and stay as authoritative as possible. This will mean ensuring your child is only watching or accessing age-appropriate material. Equally, at night-time in our home, I ask my Year 9 son to place all electronic equipment outside the bedroom door until the morning. If he breaches this, he knows that it means he has lost digital privileges the next day. As teens interact more with one another online, make sure your children know what your **family digital values** are. Discuss these as a family and agree on them.

Now is the time for older teens to be using those great digital skills to build up a **positive digital tattoo** – perhaps they are brilliant at art and want to showcase it on their Instagram account or they wish to do something entrepreneurial and create a website for that purpose. Try and encourage them to think of ways in which they can help their local community or society at large through digital

⁶ Listen to the neuroscientist, Professor Adele Diamond make this point in my podcast interview with her available via: www.drkathyweston.com/podcast

⁶ According to the neuroscientist, Paul Howard-Jones, working memory is a good predictor of academic and professional success.

⁷ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/slp/sand-timers/uqu7kkcqw4n7ar>

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technology. The truly innovative are making podcasts about topics they are passionate about, offering their online skills to local charities, and even reaching out to academics or thought leaders in particular areas of study and asking them for future careers advice.

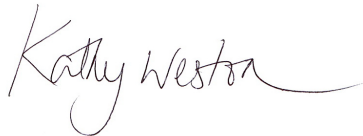
10. REMEMBER THAT THIS TIME WILL PASS

In years to come, we will talk about 2020 and the challenges that we abruptly faced in parenting, raising our children, maintaining our work and relationships. We will be able to look back and praise our own persistence, gentle determination and the resilience of our children and family members to get through each day. We are in it together and better together.

If you need more tips about coping during the current crisis, [have a listen to this](#).

I look forward to supporting Ashlyns parents as much as I can in the months that lie ahead. Please do not hesitate to get in touch by email with additional questions or queries, and I will always try my best to answer them, create a resource specific to your needs or signpost you appropriately.

With very best wishes,



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