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How can I protect my kid's mental health during this pandemic?

Our kids have had to be troopers as we find our way through the pandemic. But as they spend more days in isolation, take in more bad news, and adjust to distance learning, it's clear that life in quarantine is taking its toll. Depression, anxiety, fear—they're not always easy to detect in tweens. And that's what's agonizing: How do parents protect kids' mental health during this uncertain and scary time? Our latest poll uncovers clues to the answer. But first it reveals some hard truths.

Common Sense and Survey Monkey polled over [800 U.S. teens](#) to find out how they're coping with having their lives upended by the coronavirus, and what they do for connection. Not surprisingly, they're stressed out. They also:

- **Worry about school.** Ninety-five percent of 13- to 17-year-olds have had their classes canceled, 41% have had no school at all, and more than a quarter say it's hard to find a place to study at home.
- **Fret about their families.** They not only fear that a loved one will become infected, they fret about finances, especially Black and Latinx kids.
- **Feel lonely and disconnected.** About four in 10 teens feel "more lonely than usual" right now, nearly the same number as those who say they feel "about as lonely as usual." And, even with texting and social media—which they turn to even more now—they miss close association with friends.
- **Follow the news.** Compared to pre-pandemic times, more kids are going directly to news organizations for information instead of learning about it from friends and family.

It makes sense that tweens would have similar stressors; school, family, friends, and staying informed are also super important for this age group. And those feelings are heightened for kids who are already prone to negative feelings. The few bright spots in the survey offer some ideas for what you can do to support kids' well-being during rough times:

- **Family is more important than ever.** Teens say they feel more connected to their families than usual. You don't have to do anything special. Watch a show, play a game, or take silly photos and decorate them.
- **Texting and social media are lifesavers.** Teens say these activities are helping them get by. If your kids aren't texting or using social media yet, you can let them use your

phone to FaceTime with a friend or relative. You can even set up regular times to video-chat with important people in their lives. Keeping these connections is vital.

- **Talking helps.** Teens say they're connecting with family or friends by talking on the phone. Whoever thought that would come back into style?

Feeling anxious is a natural reaction to having your whole life upended for an undetermined period of time. At the same time, we can't underestimate the role of news and social media on our kids' emotional states. A certain amount of Snapchat and Instagram makes kids feel connected, and being informed makes them feel knowledgeable about the world. But when their worlds are reduced to these sources—and it's all corona, all the time—scary feelings can result.

If your family's been healthy, and lucky enough to avoid some of the collateral damage the virus has inflicted, then you're in a unique position to help relieve some of that pressure kids are feeling. You can set the emotional tone, talk to them about their media, and dig into their feelings. Here are ideas that can help:

Create new routines that provide a sense of stability. Schedule regular family movie nights, game tournaments, and video chats with family and friends. Make mealtimes fun to look forward to with themed nights like breakfast for dinner, meals based on puns and songs (the internet has no shortage of ideas), or food that's all one color. Let kids pick ideas and help plan them.

Foster a connection to learning. There's no question that schoolwork is taking a back seat right now. If your kid's classes are continuing, find out whether the school is offering more resources for learning and connecting. Some teachers are holding "office hours" (video chat sessions kids can log into).

- For quick ideas of stuff kids can do, check out our list of [free online events and activities](#).
- For more online learning options, including tech resources and daily homeschooling lessons, visit our brand-new offering [Wide Open School](#).

Acknowledge loss of important milestones. Kids are missing out on many occasions they were excited about, from graduation ceremonies to dance recitals to birthday parties. These are the things that define a kid's life! Reassure them that this will end at some point, and promise you'll celebrate when it does. Put a date on the calendar for something to look forward to in the future.

Tell kids how you feel, and ask how they're doing. Tell your kids when something on the news makes you mad or sad, and connect your emotion to the specific trigger. You can even narrate your reactions. This gives your kid permission to identify and express emotions, plus the vocabulary to do it. Listen actively. It's natural to want to make your kid feel better, but it's important to just hear them. Say, "You feel sad. I understand."

Look for positives. There may not be a silver lining to every cloud, but try to be optimistic. Say, "A lot of people are acting like heroes to fight the coronavirus." Or, "Let's find ways that we can help." Or, "At times like this, I like to think of what I'm grateful for."

Encourage discussion. Kids are going to pick up a lot of information and misinformation (especially if they're getting their news from YouTube and social media). Ask, "Have you heard anything on the news today?," "What did you hear?," and "What do you think about it?" If you think the information is dubious, say, "Let's verify that by checking other sources."

Set an example by taking news breaks. Model self-care by avoiding news for a while. Explain to kids why it's healthy to just say no for a while. It'll all still be there when you get back. When kids take breaks, ask them how it felt.

Revel in warm-and-fuzzy stuff. Celebrities are doing their part by reading bedtime stories on Instagram (@savewithstories), releasing new music (Daniel Glover and Lin-Manuel Miranda), or just sending some positivity into the world (watch *Some Good News* by John Krasinski on YouTube). Soak up the good vibes.

Just ... be.

Honestly, all your kids really need from you right now is to be their parent. You don't have to be superhuman. Emotional support goes a really long way toward helping kids feel safe, secure, and loved. School, friends, good news—it'll all come back in time.

—Caroline

On our radar

- **Sing!** Tune in to ABC Thursday at 8 p.m. for a Disney sing-along featuring all your fave songs and tons of celebs. [Let it all go](#)
- **Free Apple TV originals.** For a limited time, Apple is waiving the service fee for some of its content (like *The Elephant Queen*). [Cool deal](#)
- **Risky new app.** Slide Up - Games for Snapchat is an add-on featuring an iffy mix of professional- and user-created games and other content. [Just say no](#)