

Many Teens Live Online, Alone. Here's How To Stay Connected In The Pandemic

A sense of disconnectedness and inertia

As the months wear on, a sense of complacency, disconnectedness and inertia has overtaken many of these teens. Kids who were alert, bright-eyed and attentive during our therapy sessions a year ago are now often listless, lethargic and sometimes literally in bed.

The ones who are struggling suffer a great deal of anxiety, depression, hopelessness, disappointment and fear in solitude. Kids tend to express these feelings to friends and like-minded peers on Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram, leaving teens to act as de facto therapists for one another, an unfair and sometimes dangerous situation.

Why kids are hitting the pandemic wall

For parents, the opportunities we used to utilize to connect with our teens are few and far between: Driving to and from school or practice, recapping the swim meet or grabbing a pizza after the show or recital are less frequently available during the pandemic. Even when an opportunity does present itself over dinner or around bedtime, kids are more checked out than usual, with low energy and precious little to report.

Parents are getting scared for their teens

The lack of interaction, information and insight into the lives of their teenagers understandably drives a great deal of fear and anxiety in parents. These are the years, after all, those experimental years, when things can go very wrong.

Marijuana abuse by youth with mood disorders linked to suicide attempts, self-harm and death, study finds

Teens tend to wade into the waters of trying various drugs and alcohol, engaging in sexual activity and pushing the limits in other ways as well. Because of a desire to be close to others socially, our teens may cross lines of safety and propriety online.

And for those adolescents who do spend time with friends during the pandemic, they don't always share the details of their plans and activities, for fear they will miss out socially, that their freedom will be limited for the sake of safety.

Turning to tracking software

As their children remain silent, parents naturally tend to turn toward the tools at their disposal: grade portals and online trackers and software to sneak into a Snapchat account.

I understand the inclination to gather information when little or none is provided. But overuse

of these tools creates mistrust between parent and teen, and trust in this relationship is crucial.

No, your teenager's boyfriend or girlfriend cannot come over during the pandemic

Yes, these tools are tempting, and their very existence suggests their use, but I encourage you to use them sparingly, if at all. I will always encourage a direct, open and ongoing conversation over these online tools.

After all, the goal here is that you be a trusted ally, guide and consultant to your teenager. No parent I have ever known really wants to police their kids.

What tools can we use?

If these tools are off-limits, and your child's emotional life remains in the shadows, what can you do to bring some of it to light? The following are some options you can put to use right away, and it's good news:

- First things first: Lighten your load immediately by releasing any harsh self-judgment. Then, let go of any judgment you have of your child. This will prove both challenging and incredibly liberating. Take a beat and find the empathy for you and your family in these difficult times.

20 board games and puzzles for the best family game night (CNN Underscored)

- Consider the vibe in your home. How does it feel in there? Is it loud, too quiet or too messy and chaotic? How does it feel to you? Take an inventory and create space that feels good to everyone in the family. Draw your kids into the common areas of your home, providing more opportunity for connection. Families that spend more time together in the same space are more resilient during disagreements, arguments and other difficult times.

- Consider the vibe your child receives from you. Is your affect toward her flat? Frustrated? Hostile? Or do you light up when you see her? Remember that, these days, your child receives precious little positive regard from most anyone, including herself. It's critical that you provide that for her.

- Remember to laugh. Life these days is far too heavy for ourselves and our kids. Make sure it's light and easy at home, with an air of levity, in-jokes and humor.

Fitness video games can break your Covid pandemic exercise slump

- Ask open-ended questions. Find out not just about your child, but also her friends or the culture at school. Ask out of genuine curiosity. Servers is savvy enough to know when you carry an agenda. Ask for her thoughts about what's going on in the news today. Ask how Snapchat works, or grab an earbud and listen to whatever she is listening to. Learn to play Minecraft or Fortnite. You'll learn a lot, as teenagers like to be teachers.

It's fine to seek professional help

The disappointments and losses are adding up as the pandemic lingers. If you are unsure whether your child might be suffering from depression or anxiety, or experiencing suicidal ideation, it's reasonable to simply ask. I find that teenagers tend to open up when they are asked and given permission to answer honestly.

It's incredibly important, whatever the answer, however dark or frightening, that you provide them the space to say it all. And do not overreact. This is one of the most important things you can do as a parent. And please do not hesitate to seek out professional help if you have any inkling that your child may benefit from it, especially if they ask for it.

Get CNN Health's weekly newsletter

Sign up here to get The Results Are In with Dr. Sanjay Gupta every Tuesday from the CNN Health team.

Remember, you are not expected to be fully aware of every aspect of your child's life. None of us can be. Just be mindful of the opportunities to connect, learn and laugh, and take advantage of them when you can.

Keep in mind that none of us will ever forget this time. Create memories that will strengthen your bonds not only through adolescence, but for a lifetime.