



Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

Developmental Milestones

The pandemic and other crises experienced by children and adolescents are superimposed on a child's normal developmental challenges. By knowing what to expect at different stages of a child's development, parents – and other caring adults – may be better equipped to respond to their child's particular needs during challenging times.

Teenagers (13–19 years)

Teens are developing new cognitive capacities, including the ability to imagine something from many perspectives and long into the future. They often feel intense emotions and may be idealistic, compassionate, and attuned at one moment and suddenly moody and self-absorbed. Recognizing that both versions of their teenager are normal can help parents manage their expectations through the ups and downs of adolescent behavior. Adolescents are establishing new identities and typically look to their peer group for connection and a sense of belonging. Romantic relationships may emerge and can be extremely intense. Even ending a short relationship can be very painful. Adolescents move back and forth between independence to dependence with the support of parents. Listen carefully to learn from your teenagers. Their experience is different from yours as a teen. Be mindful that children often experience worry about them judgment, which may shut down communication. Adolescence is a time when stress is common and anxiety and mood disorders – including substance abuse – may emerge. If you are concerned about your teen, talk with your pediatrician, school counselor, or a mental health provider.

Paula K. Rauch, MD

Video: *Teens*

📌 Introduction

This is a program about how creating opportunities for children to talk openly can help build their resilience. Understanding a child's experience and how to effectively engage with them strengthens a child's relationship with a parent or another trusted adult. A child's resilience depends on caring adults being tuned into them. In this video, we meet teens and parents who describe their pandemic experiences. We also hear from Dr. J.J. Jenkins, a child psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, and Dr. Daniel Dickstein, a child psychiatrist and pediatrician at McLean Hospital. Let's watch the video.

View *Teens* video Length: 15:21

📌 Begin discussion by saying

Let's talk about Megan's and Cedric's responses and how their parents supported them.

📌 Ask participants

- Many young people described feeling overwhelmed by their emotions. When Megan talks openly with her mom, it lightens her mood. How do you encourage your teen to be open with you?

Response: Asking open-ended questions can encourage a child to talk. You can ask, “What was the best part of your day today?” or, “What was rough about school today?” To help teens continue to process their pandemic experience parents can ask, “How did today compare to how things were in the beginning of the pandemic?” The key is to listen with genuine respect and curiosity and resist interrupting to tell your child what to think, feel, or do. And, as Dr. Dickstein says, consistently creating those opportunities to talk helps strengthen your connection between you and your child.
- Many children cited the social justice protests during the pandemic as a source of their worries. How did your child talk about the confluence of events around them?

Response: When children struggle, they may be responding to a combination of events. Helping children tease out the source of their distress can help them feel less confused and overwhelmed. Open communication provides an opportunity to identify what is front and center from a child’s perspective.
- What role does social media play for your child as he or she learns about current events and interacts with peers?

• *Response: Social media has both risks and rewards. Dr. Rauch says parents need to help children seek a healthy balance. Many children maintain important connections with peers through social media. But interactions are not always positive. Some teens recognize that at times they feel worse on social media and will benefit from parents’ encouragement to take a break from it.*
- Dr. Jenkins says teens need adults other than their parents with whom they can talk. Who are adults in your teens’ life you encourage them to turn to for emotional support?

Response: There may be times your child is more comfortable confiding in a neighbor, coach, or trusted family member. Helping your child create a trusted network of support is an investment in his or her wellbeing.
- Some parents believe their teen overreacted to missed milestones through the pandemic, such as a graduation, theater production or birthday party. Why is it important to treat these missed opportunities as bereavement?

Response: Teenagers have the capacity to imagine the future and often set long-term goals. Missing out on something they’ve worked for, such as a graduation party or important game, is an enormous loss. Track was an important part of Cedric’s identity. When we minimize their disappointment or trivialize it, we invalidate the teen’s experience. This can lead the child to feeling shame. However, when we honor their perspectives, we facilitate honest communication and increase their teenager’s sense that we “get it” and can be trusted and confided in.
- As young people process losses, it’s important to help them identify future milestones they’ll enjoy. How can this be beneficial?

Response: As Dr. Jenkins says, the trusted adults in kids’ lives serve as binoculars – helping youth see and be hopeful about opportunities ahead. This can help them develop a sense of optimism and prepare for the long game.
- Hard times present opportunities to learn new life skills. As Dr. Dickstein suggests, by creating new connections and figuring out new ways to do things, teens strengthen their resilience. Megan learned she’s resilient and can find the good in difficult situations. What would your child say were silver linings in the pandemic?

- How will realizing he or she found good in a difficult situation help your child navigate future hard times?

Response: Identifying unexpected positives in difficult situations helps children sustain hope. Megan learned to manage her time more effectively. Cedric grew closer to his parents and compensated for his losses by building a computer. Identifying silver linings gives children confidence that they can endure more than they may imagine.

- Have you ever talked with your child about experiencing a tough time and a surprisingly positive outcome from that experience?

Response: Intergenerational storytelling increases a child's resilience – particularly when a story incorporates a challenge faced, lessons learned, and a positive outcome. This prepares teens to persist in the face of obstacles.

👉 **Remind participants**

Resilience is not being unaffected by adversity. Rather, it's learning from your experience, gaining confidence to persevere through difficult times, and believing that good things can come from struggles. That's why it's important to engage with children to talk about – rather than try to forget – some of their difficult pandemic experiences.