

Returning to Middle and High School Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Best Practice Recommendations to Support Teens Social-Emotional Development & Mental Health

Children 11-18 years old have unique social-emotional needs and the heightened stress of the pandemic has potential to directly impact their mental health. The adults supporting children in the education system have potential to significantly benefit children's social-emotional development and reduce the stress of COVID-19.

Expect big (different) emotions

Going back to school may bring up a range of big feelings for teens—worry, fear, sadness, anger, excitement. Teens may also feel self-conscious or embarrassed about their emotional responses, and may withdraw, shut down, or have a stronger-than-usual reaction. Increase students' emotional literacy by encouraging expression and identification of feelings. Be aware of changes in students' behavior or personality and offer opportunities for connection and support.

Partner with parents to prepare their teens

Partnerships between schools and families are even more essential than usual. This is not a typical transition, and parents' worries and concerns are valid. Elevate parent and family voice, as they are experts on their teen's individual strengths, needs, and resources during these challenging times. Develop a spirit of partnership by offering frequent and clear communication, developing shared goals centered around health and wellness, and by reminding youth that there is hope for the future and everyone is doing their best.

Be gentle with yourself

Self-care is the greatest gift you can give to yourself and your students.



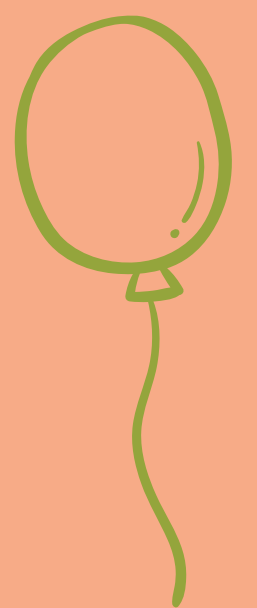
Adolescents are not made to social distance

Keep realistic expectations with regard to masks and social distancing requirements. Be prepared with visual and verbal reminders throughout your time together.



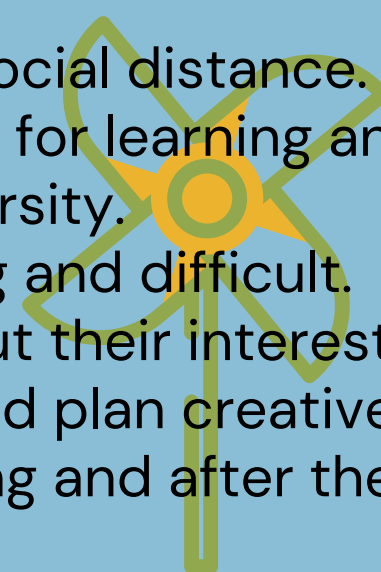
You mean more than you know

Many students miss their routine, their friends, and their teachers. You set the tone and pace of the learning in your classroom.



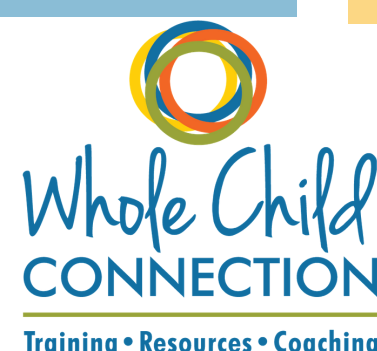
Relationships are important agents of change

Adolescents thrive on social connection, even during times of social distance. Teens' relationships with teachers and peers are the foundation for learning and motivation at school and can greatly improve resilience to adversity. Acknowledge that social distancing measures can be frustrating and difficult. Foster teens' relationships by spending extra time learning about their interests and temperaments: Create relational routines before lessons and plan creative or virtual opportunities for social connection with peers both during and after the academic day.



Utilize your resources

You are not alone. Connect with other educators in your area. Develop a list of trusted and reliable resources related to stress, wellness, trauma, resilience, and mental health. This list can be distributed to families as well as to educators and school staff.



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Expect big (different) emotions

Adolescents are known for their strong feelings – and going back to school during COVID-19 may make these feelings even bigger than usual. Teens may feel worried, sad, or angry; others may be excited and joyful about going back to school. Many will feel all of these at once! These “mixed” feelings are all normal – but they don’t always feel normal to a self-conscious teen. Adolescents, particularly during difficult times, may not always communicate how they’re feeling. It’s even difficult for adults sometimes! Instead of expressing their worries, your students may use behavior to demonstrate how they are feeling by becoming withdrawn, irritable, moody, emotional or by being more combative.

Promote growth by modeling emotional literacy in the classroom and incorporate opportunities to support development of self-awareness. Reassure teens with a simple and effective message: “Lots of people feel this way right now – You are reacting in a very understandable way to a very difficult situation.” Knowing that most people have similar thoughts and reactions to stress is one key to feeling calm.

Foster connections by offering opportunities for emotional “check-ins,” with options for non-verbal expression. This can be done through a dialogue journal, mood meters, daily check-in or quick notes. Maintain predictable routines and allow for young people to have voice and choice in different aspects of their daily schedule. Support regulation skills by offering or modeling strategies including music, journaling, physical activity, support from peers or mindful breathing. Remember that you and the students are experiencing a big change in day to day life, and more support is needed to manage it together.

Partner with parents to prepare their teens

After months of adapting to a new routine at home, more change is on the horizon with the transition back to school. Whether young people are learning at home, under a hybrid-model, or back-to-school full-time, families remain essential partners in ensuring students’ health and academic outcomes. Open and consistent communication is key: Reach out to families to determine the best way and time to communicate, discuss what kinds of resources and supports are most needed to ensure their teen’s success, and develop workarounds that might accommodate work schedules, technology concerns, or other home situations. Celebrating teens’ success and growth is also a key competent to promoting positive parent-teacher relationships – and consistent praise does a world of good! Communicate with families twice as often for the ‘good’ as you do the ‘bad’. Educators can also offer ideas with parents for how to best support their teenagers during this transition. Consider sharing information about how teens might respond to stress, and strategies for promoting resilience and hope. Encourage parents to review the good things about their teens’ day, and reinforce the message that they are not alone. While many things are still undecided, providing families with ways to navigate conversations of uncertainty will foster their teen’s resiliency.

Be gentle with yourself

Remember, you are also working through a pandemic - and are likely to experience personal and professional stress as well as secondary trauma responses. Our feelings and behaviors related to the pandemic are natural responses to the global trauma and loss going on around us. Focus on what’s in your control; acknowledge and accept your thoughts and feelings; and identify resources (colleagues, friends/family, exercise, or mindful moments) to help you cope.

Be aware that secondary trauma may also arise when you are teaching those who have experienced hardship, suffering, and crisis - which we know kids and teens have experienced disproportionately during the past several months. The following are potential warning signs of secondary trauma exposure response in adults: Feeling overly hopeless or helpless, angry, fearful, or guilty; having difficulty empathizing; feeling a sense of chronic exhaustion or like you can never do enough; experiencing a sense of persecution, hyper vigilance or dissociation; having an inflated sense of importance related to your work; or avoiding or over-engaging with your work. If you notice these feelings, please be gentle with yourself, activate your self-care plan, and consider reaching out for professional support.



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Adolescents are not made to social distance

Our new world is full of new challenges such as social distancing, masks, guards and new safety precautions. Social distancing guidelines are recommended for the health and safety of all of us. Teens will have mixed and varying feelings about face masks, and some may find them frustrating or overwhelming. Masks can be a visual and tactile reminder of how the COVID-19 crisis is affecting our life at school and in our communities. Teens may also have difficulty reading teachers' and peers' facial expressions, which can be particularly unsettling for adolescents who are just getting the hang of the complexities of teen relationships.

In places where face masks and social distance are required, teens will usually adjust. It can be helpful to explain the reasons behind social distance or masking, and to talk about how their sacrifices are playing a part in protecting their grandparents, teachers, friends, and school community. Elevate youth voice by encouraging students to voice their thoughts and feelings and express their social and emotional needs while remaining socially distant at school. Tune into and validate those feelings, and let your students know helpful coping strategies. Give teens choices when and if you can – for example, by taking a mask break in a designated area when needed, or by phoning a friend during lunch time. However, also be clear about what you can and can't compromise on and set enforceable limits when needed.

You mean more than you know

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all of us socially and emotionally. However, we also know that young people can develop resilience with the right support. As adults, it is our job to foster a sense of safety and security; promote social connections; model calm and comfort; and set a tone of empowerment and hope. Be mindful of how quickly your content is paced, as teens may need more time to process new information during times of crisis. Have consistent routines and structures for recording assignments and turning in work.

Students may also display increased levels of fatigue and exhaustion; in such cases, stimulating and creative activities can help peak engagement and learning. Starting off with daily questions (e.g., "If you could fly anywhere where would you go?"), virtual games and competitions, or project-based learning opportunities can foster that sense of connectedness with teachers and peers.

Foster a sense of calm and comfort by starting each class with a minute of breathing or a quiet song. Promote self-empowerment and hope by regularly acknowledging students' accomplishments and creating opportunities for appreciation and specific praise. This can become a daily virtual practice in the classroom where youth acknowledge their peers, teachers, or self. This can also be done anonymously, in which you can contribute to that praise. And finally – remind everyone that this is temporary and they are not alone.

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Relationships are important agents of change

Find opportunities to foster teens' relationships with teachers and peers, even during these times of social distance. Adolescents thrive on social connection, and need quality time with their families, friends, teachers, and other important people in their lives to stay healthy. Friendships are especially important, and they are supposed to be — bonding with peers is one of the essential developmental tasks of adolescence. Foster these social bonds by offering concrete opportunities for young people to connect with peers, develop new relationships, and engage in play (yes, play!) on a daily basis. Infuse relationship skills into content through virtual or physically distant games, scavenger hunts, music, or role playing skits. Educators can also encourage relationships in a socially distant classroom by simply talking through youth-driven topics of interest or providing opportunities for young people to discuss our current times with one another. Covid-19 and the Racial Justice Movement has had a profound impact on all of us and youth are no exception. Creative writing opportunities, discussion circles, or daily check-in are structured, yet safe ways teens can unpack the world around them.

Teens' relationships with teachers are also critical for promoting resilience. Teachers who experience close relationships with students report that their students are less likely to avoid school, are more self-directed, more cooperative and more engaged in learning. Foster relationships with students by hosting socially distant lunch groups, asking about interests and experiences, initiating dialogue journals, and holding morning meetings even if it takes away from content time. Create and utilize relational routines before beginning lessons, or by checking in on distance learning assignments (e.g., highs and lows of the week; identifying three good things about today). Acknowledge that social distancing measures can be frustrating and difficult, and be direct about how you can work together to make the situation more bearable. This can be done as a weekly practice in which students identify "Like it, leave it, need it" in which they can voice what is working, what they could do without and what their needs are. Teens have great ideas, and may have creative suggestions adults haven't even thought of yet.

Utilize your resources

You are not alone! There is a whole community holding you in mind and hoping to share how much we care about the unique experience you are having right now.

Work as a school team to develop a list of trusted and reliable resources related to stress, wellness, trauma, resilience, and mental health. This list should include a mental health emergency hotline, disaster distress hotline, domestic violence hotline, school mental health staff available by phone or video, and community mental health resources. This list can be distributed to families as well as to educators and school staff.

There are so many resources being provided, it can be really overwhelming. Sometimes it's helpful to talk things through with someone else instead of sifting through all the new tools in your inbox. Children's Institute offers a series of supports to expand your toolbox, access resources and connect with other educators. Likewise, the University of Rochester Medical Center has a set of resources for families who are interested in learning more about ways to support their children with mental health needs

Pediatricians and local mental health professionals can also help children or caregivers to cope with COVID-19 related stress, often from the comfort of families' own homes via telehealth platforms. Kids Thrive 585 offers Parenting Help and links to other community resources. United Way/211 can provide school teams with personalized support in navigating these many resources.