

## OPINION

## Why the Coronavirus Crisis Hits Teenagers Particularly Hard: Developmental Scientists Explain

Here's what parents and educators can do to help during social distancing

By Leah Lessard & Hannah Schacter

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Although unquestionably essential to “flattening the curve” and saving lives, school closures are limiting opportunities for close human contact, which can have harmful effects on student health and well-being. And, from a developmental perspective, teenagers may be hit especially hard.

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The introduction of social-distancing measures and stay-at-home orders to combat the novel coronavirus has left many young people feeling frustrated and robbed of highly anticipated opportunities. Imagine you just got your driver’s license. You’re starting to date. Your team finally clinched the playoffs. Prom is right around the corner. But now you’re stuck all day at home, within 100 feet of your parents, for conceivably months on end.

Yet, beyond the disappointment of canceled events and extracurriculars, social distancing can interfere with the basic developmental needs of teenagers—who are evolutionarily wired to become increasingly independent from parents and **increasingly dependent on their peers**.

Biological changes in adolescence, such as increased oxytocin receptors during puberty, heighten the pleasure of social company. And friendships, in particular, have been shown to excite reward systems in the adolescent brain. Thus, it is no surprise that, relative to other age groups, teenagers spend the most time with their peers. In fact, high school students’ time spent with peers is more than double the amount spent with parents and other adults.

Yet, COVID-19 cares little about adolescents’ social and biological imperatives. Instead, the unquestionable necessity of social distancing is likely to throw these developmental patterns out of whack in ways that could take a toll on teenagers’ health, behavior, and academic performance. Here are a few changes parents and educators may see:

First, adolescent isolation can increase psychological distress. Even without a global pandemic, adolescence is the typical onset for mental-health disorders, such as anxiety and depression. Adding stress and social isolation into the mix may **heighten psychiatric vulnerability and exacerbate existing** psychological difficulties.

Second, the absence of in-person peer interaction can **negatively affect youths’ social skills**, including reduced comprehension of nonverbal emotional cues.

Third, without friends to hang out with, boredom can give way to risky behaviors. In addition to providing a source of stimulation, deviance and rule breaking can function as an opportunity to exert independence from parents when physical distancing is not an option. For example, past research has shown that

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teenagers with controlling parents engage in **higher rates of risky behavior**, like underage drinking and cheating on tests.

Finally, without classmates within arm's reach to grapple with challenges collaboratively, school performance is also likely to take a hit. And given that spending time with friends is the primary reason teenagers look forward to going to school, academic motivation may significantly decline.

With no immediate end to social distancing in sight, it is important for educators and school administrators to think critically and creatively about how to meet adolescents' needs despite these constraints. As developmental scientists who study adolescent social and emotional development, we hope to offer some ideas.

First, technology and online tools can provide unique opportunities for teenagers to connect with friends and classmates while maintaining physical distance. Encouraging young people to create content on social media (the video platform TikTok, for example), rather than **using solitary video games** or passively **scrolling through celebrity photos**, can offer an outlet for teenagers to harness their boredom into collaborative efforts and self-expression.

To promote stability in students' relationships and encourage peer interaction throughout the virtual school day, teachers can capitalize on videoconference platforms for class discussions and small-group assignments. Similarly, students can use virtual study groups to fulfill social needs while making academic progress.

Of course, these suggestions presume that students have reliable and consistent access to technology, which is not the case for many. This means that **flexibility and outside-the-box thinking** are paramount for meeting the needs of all young people and promoting educational equity.

As the duration of shelter-in-place orders lengthens, it will also become increasingly important for teachers to monitor the mental and physical health of their students. While consistent communication can provide students with a sense of stability amidst the prevailing uncertainty of the future, recent evidence suggests that nearly a quarter of teenagers are connecting **less than once a week** with their teachers. Whether it be through regular check-ins or journaling assignments, making an extra effort to offer support and provide connection is likely to go a long way.

Finally, given that teachers' own stress can impede student well-being, it is essential that **teachers engage in self-care** and capitalize on existing, shared resources to promote **students' academic and social-emotional learning**.

Now may also be an ideal time to promote adolescent involvement in civic activities. Despite often being geared toward risk-taking, **teenagers desire opportunities to contribute** to the common good. Teachers can assign students to write about the social issues they are most passionate about and read about inspiring teen-activist groups that have emerged as powerful voices amid COVID-19, fighting against disparate access to child care, food, and technology. New York City's **Teens Take Charge**, for example, provides online read, watch, and listen opportunities for youths to stay informed and even get involved during this coronavirus crisis.

Teenagers are hungry for exploration, social connection, and independence—the kinds of developmental drives that have become directly threatened by the same measures that are absolutely essential for public health. Therefore, although adolescents are not considered high risk from a medical perspective, they are still facing very real social and emotional challenges. Despite widespread uncertainty surrounding the

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future, it is essential that we all look out for adolescents, be sympathetic to their frustrations, and make sure that they have the resources and supports in place for optimal development.

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