

A Teenage Nightmare?

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Today

This week, some teenagers return to high school while others will set foot in a high school for the very first time, with all the complications and angst that the pandemic has layered onto their young lives. Today, we turn to the experts for advice.

– with reporting by *Fiona Tapp* from Ottawa, Canada 

Turbulent times



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Pandemic or not, this transition is a rollercoaster

The teenage years are traditionally a time for kids to spread their wings, test out their independence and rebel a little (or a lot). It's a transition that many parents and kids find difficult. Letting go and allowing your child to make mistakes as they edge closer to adulthood can be an emotional rollercoaster. Meanwhile, for young people, making this transition following COVID-19 is all the more complicated. The pandemic has allowed some young people greater freedom to learn in ways that suit them, while maintaining friendships online. For others, the enforced isolation has damaged social skills and increased feelings of anxiety.

Wherever your child falls on this spectrum, experts have insights into how to support them.

Renee Rosales, co-founder of two of Arizona’s first virtual schools, says that before the pandemic, virtual learning was typically a resource for those with learning challenges. “We had utilized online education primarily as an alternative education opportunity for kids, and when COVID happened, it became the mainstay.” In this way, it was an unintentional experiment in how kids learn best.

Every child is unique, and this meant that some teens excelled in online learning while others floundered. Rosales, who has launched [Theara](#), an organization designed to support neuro-diverse learners, explains that some students — especially those who are neuro-diverse — preferred at-home learning as they didn’t have to cope with teasing or bullying. Differences such as ticks or disabilities were not as apparent in online classrooms, which gave kids with exceptionalities the space to focus on assigned work rather than navigating social challenges and sharing space with others.

Psychologist [Sharon Witkin](#) says that was a distinct blessing for certain kids. “There’s less of a burden organizationally when you’re just at home,” she told OZY. “It’s actually been easier for some kids, because they’re not trying to track so many things and so many places, and aren’t constantly distracted by their classmates.”

Whether the pandemic made schooling easier or harder for your child, the return to “normalcy” is likely to be bumpy.

Call it like it is



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Let's be honest: Grief is part of this process

Even for kids who benefited from alternative education during the pandemic, there are setbacks associated with being physically cut off from the world. Rosales says that even if your child preferred being at home, it's important to acknowledge the losses and the associated grief. "They lost the ability to do a lot of the activities they loved," she explained.

As the world has largely returned to normal, there's a widespread tendency to simply say that we're OK now, alongside attempts to move on. But, says Rosales, "We need to look at our relationship with grief." We're all still grappling with what was taken from us when the pandemic began and it's vital, she noted, for young people to take time to process their grief in order to develop an awareness of, and literacy regarding, their emotions.

There's an additional layer of complexity for those young people who have their eye on specific academic or athletic aspirations. Many are now anxious about how the pandemic has affected their ability to matriculate to college.

"High-achieving kids worry about their AP classes, they're concerned about the impact on their future," says Witkin. "Parents and kids really don't know how colleges are going to adapt to this." This adds still more uncertainty to an already fraught time.

Amid so much change and uncertainty, how can teens and supportive adults make the most of this unique time?

What parents and other caregivers can do



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Face the future proactively

Colleges don't exist in a vacuum and many have adapted their entrance requirements and tuition fees to a world reshaped by COVID. At the same time, parents of kids who are focused on college admission can encourage their teen to be proactive. Students can boost their odds of acceptance by seeking new extracurricular and volunteer opportunities now that pandemic restrictions have lifted, by lining up recommendation letters as early as possible, and by getting a head start writing their college essay so they have time to seek input from an advisor or teacher. And while some colleges have made the SAT and ACTs optional, it's worth taking those tests if possible.

It also makes sense for students to use social media to research and stay up-to-date with their top-choice colleges and, whenever possible, to show an interest in those institutions, even if they can't visit in person.

If your teen adapted well to online learning and doesn't want to return to a traditional school environment, it might be worth assessing your options. Given that online schooling allowed kids respite from social anxieties, and in many cases a reprieve from dreaded early morning classes, there's good reason to consider a continued alternative model.

"Some teenagers actually found it easier to get the material and master it with an online curriculum than they did with in-person learning," said psychologist Witkin. "For many kids, it's a preferred way to learn. They can watch the lectures at their convenience and therefore not be stressed by the funny schedules that some schools have with early rising, that's really hard on teenagers. Plus, they were also less distracted socially."

If you think your child would achieve more with distance learning, speak to their school as a starting point to research the online learning opportunities that may be available in your district.

In making such a weighty decision, Witkin underscored the importance of considering all aspects of your child's life, including access to sports and social events. She also pointed out that some kids use the freedom of virtual schooling ineffectively or for unfair advantage. In an online classroom, she said, "it's easier to cheat when you're taking tests, because you can be on another device and look up the answers." Such factors should be weighed against the potential benefits and freedom of alternative education.

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Limit screen time?

Before the pandemic, many parents set limits on their teens' use of social media. With the lockdowns, however, it was one of the only ways teens could connect with each other. [Sanam Hafeez](#), a New York-based neuropsychologist, says that “teens derive most of their socialization from their peers and friends. Therefore, social media played a large role in staying in touch with their friends while staying safe. They turned to social media to maintain their connection to the outside world.” Whereas parents had often viewed social media as a social ill, in the pandemic, it became a social necessity.

That's no longer the case. Teens can once again get together in person, which means it might be time to re-establish digital boundaries.

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Get outside

All the experts we spoke with agreed that it's important for kids of all ages to spend more time outdoors being physically active. Encourage your teen to join a sports team, take up running or go on walks or hikes with you or their friends.

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Maintain what was working

The pandemic created opportunities for some families to spend more time together than they ever had before — and some of that bonding can continue in the present. “Lockdowns forced teens to stay home, so it was a good opportunity to bond with their nuclear family and perhaps participate in activities with them that they would typically not,” says Hafeez. If your family got into activities such as bike riding during the pandemic, try not to let those rituals disappear.

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They're stronger than you think

While it's natural for parents to worry about the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on their children's mental health and academic progress, Witkin reminds us that we are all stronger than we think. "We're afraid that we won't be able to cope, and we underestimate other people's coping abilities, especially our own kids. But most people are resilient."

Community Corner



**How are the teens in your life coping with a return to normalcy?
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