

# Teenagers and Reopening

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 [childmind.org/article/teenagers-and-reopening](https://childmind.org/article/teenagers-and-reopening)

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It's a trying time to be the parent of a teenager. After months of being cooped up at home away from friends, unable to attend school or go out, most kids are chomping at the bit to get back to the lives they had before the pandemic. Getting teens to take safety seriously is a struggle at the best of times, and as the nation moves towards reopening, it's never been more important to ensure kids are following the rules.

[Click here](#) to see all resources related to the coronavirus crisis.

How can parents respect their teens' needs while still helping them (and everyone else) stay safe? Even if reopening hasn't started in your area, it's never too early to start talking about what your family's approach will be. Discussing what's coming can help teenagers feel more prepared and increase the odds of smart, safe behavior when the time comes.

## Hear your teenager out

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"The first thing is always to try to understand where your teen is coming from," says Lindsey Giller, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. To adults, teenage worries ("I'd look stupid in a mask!") or priorities ("I *need* to go to the park with my friends on Saturday.") can seem a little ridiculous. But taking them seriously is key to establishing open lines of communication.

"Don't dismiss their concerns, even if they seem trivial to you," says Dr. Giller. "Their friends are their lives, and that's where their social development is supposed to be right now. Being 16 or 17 and not being able to see your friends or boyfriend or girlfriend for two months is a big deal."

Instead of handing down mandates (which, let's be real, teens aren't likely to follow), having a clear sense of what they want and need will make it easier to come up with rules that they can reasonably follow.

## Empathize and validate

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"It's not fair!" is a sentiment we're all familiar with. Most of us have felt it more than once since this started. But few feel it more exquisitely than teenagers, whose lives have been

disrupted right when establishing their own identities and pushing for independence are most important.

Teenagers are likely to feel the unfairness deeply, says Lindsay Macchia, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute: It's unfair that this happened at all, that it's still happening after months of quarantine, and that, even though they're not the people most at risk, they can't just go back to doing things the way they used to.

The more you validate your teen's feelings, Dr. Macchia says, the more you give them space to be open and expressive. In this case, you can explicitly agree with them. You might say: "You're totally right. It *is* unfair. I feel it too. It's boring and it sucks. But it's what we need to do to keep everyone safe."

That validation, adds Dr. Giller, "can get them to a place where they're more accepting of whatever you say next."

## Create perspective

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The quarantine has been a long slog. So long, in fact, that it can be hard to remember that it's really only been two months. "Those two months can feel like forever, especially in the minds of teens," says Dr. Giller. "But you can remind them that it really *isn't* forever." It might not be over soon, but it's not going to last the rest of their lives. Helping your teen remember that the restrictions really are temporary can make it easier for them to follow rules in the meantime.

## Stick to the facts

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Having seen the impact of the pandemic, we know how important it is to take precautions and we want our children to take them seriously, too. So it can be upsetting when the response to your urging safety is a deadpan "Okay, Mom" (without looking up from the phone) or the dreaded "Uh-huh." It's tempting to want to keep explaining until they seem to get it, or to "scare" them into compliance, but that can backfire.

"It's not so much what you say as how you say it," explains Dr. Macchia. Teenagers, she explains, are likely to push back against lecturing or overanxious behavior. Avoid catastrophizing, or focusing on worst-case scenarios, to make an impact. Saying something like, "If you don't take this seriously people will *die*" can just make your teen more likely to brush you off.

Instead, focus on being transparent and grounded with them, says Dr. Macchia. Emphasize that this affects everyone, that they have their role to play, and that you have faith that they're up to the challenge.

## Use trusted sources

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If teens are skeptical about the risks posed by the coronavirus, don't hesitate to turn to trusted, fact-based sources like the CDC, the World Health Organization, or NPR. You could even arrange a call with your doctor or your child's pediatrician, if they have a good relationship. "Enlisting others to say, 'This is real, this isn't just parental worry,' can help," says Dr. Macchia.

Teens may also be reading or hearing information that runs counter to what the scientific community is saying. To head off misinformation, ask your teenager about what they're reading and help them make sure information is coming from a trustworthy source.

## Personalize the situation

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If your child hasn't been personally impacted by the virus, it may seem abstract, unreal and unlikely to affect them. They also know that fewer young people have gotten seriously ill, which can make it seem even less relevant to their lives.

Help teens make the connection by citing the danger for older family and friends. You can also emphasize that what we do now can have a big impact on what our lives look like down the road. If we don't all use caution as we open up, we might end up with more outbreaks, which means more lockdowns and more disruptions in things like school, college and being able to see friends. The point is to help teens see that your fears aren't far-fetched, and that social distancing is important in ways that do affect them directly.

## Link independence with safety

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Sooner or later, your teens will be going out and seeing their friends, one way or another. "Parents really want to be able to trust their teens," says Dr. Macchia. "and teens want to get some of their freedom back."

When they do get out, Dr. Macchia recommends tying independence to compliance with safety measures. The more willing they are to take seriously safety precautions like

distancing, wearing a mask or socializing only outdoors, the more freedom they'll be able to have. Work together to brainstorm ways they can safely hang out with friends. For example:

- Measure 6 feet of distance and practice staying that far apart. (“It’s farther than you think!” says Dr. Giller.)
- Make a list of outdoor places where your teen could safely meet with friends, like a nearby park (if it’s not too crowded), the beach or even the back yard for a socially distant picnic.
- Make or buy cool-looking masks your teen is more likely to actually wear. You could even suggest they get matching ones for their friends.

## Prepare for tricky situations

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For even the most cooperative teens, challenges *will* come up. They may have friends who aren’t (or whose families aren’t) taking safety practices seriously. One way to prepare kids to stick to your plan is to emphasize your family’s values — and acknowledge that not everyone shares them. “Just like you would with a kid whose friends are engaging in other dangerous behaviors, like substance use, you want to validate how hard this is for your child to navigate,” says Dr. Macchia.

It can also be helpful to give your child practice dealing with difficult situations before they come up. Dr. Giller recommends being open with your teen about the fact that some of their friends might not follow the rules — and might pressure your teen to do the same. You might ask: What would you do in that situation? What are a few things you could say to your friend? “They can start to consider how they would stay true to their values even if there’s this new element of peer pressure or fitting in,” says Dr. Giller. Failing that, you can also offer yourself up as a catch-all excuse to deflect peer pressure: “I can’t. My mom is really strict.” Whatever strategy you use, preparation will make it easier for kids to find their voice when an awkward moment arises.

## Address lying head-on

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Teenagers lie. It’s annoying at best, dangerous at worst, and definitely something parents are concerned about, especially now. It’s never been more vital for kids to tell the truth about what they’re doing — and to be honest if they’ve made a mistake, so that you can be sure the rest of the family (especially older or more vulnerable relatives) stay safe.

“When kids are lying, they’re often just trying to escape the consequences,” notes Dr. Macchia. Parents, she suggests, can head this off by offering kids a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card for mistakes.

Make an agreement that if they'll be totally truthful, you'll put any kind of punishment or lecturing to the side. "What's most important is that they tell you if they've slipped up and potentially been exposed," Dr. Macchia says. Help your teenager understand that these are extraordinary circumstances, and that the consequences of lying could be much more serious than getting yelled at or grounded.

Above all, remind your teen (and yourself!) that though we're in the middle of a very difficult time, this crisis, like so many others, will pass. We're all on the same team and what we do now will decide what happens next.