

Helping teens navigate mental health in the midst of a pandemic

WRITTEN BY JENN MCCULLOCH

CHECK-IN TIPS PROVIDED BY SHANNON DEMI, M.ED, BCBA, LBA, OF FAMILYWISE BEHAVIOR SOLUTIONS

The onset of COVID-19 has added several layers to every day challenges faced by teenagers and many parents are wondering what they can do to help mitigate some of those issues. Shannon Demi of Family-Wise Behavior Solutions, with offices in Stonington and Colchester, has not only heard her clients express frustrations with issues caused by the pandemic, but as a mother of three, she has seen the social-emotional effects of COVID firsthand in her own home.

“With COVID, it was the perfect storm with not being able to see people in real life and the increase



Take them with you when running errands



in technology and social media use and it's changing our kids," said Demi. "My daughter has said, 'I can't do the things I want to do and feel like it's taking away my teenage years,' and I have to remind her this is something no one can control, especially with the changing restrictions. It's tricky because we want them to be busy as well as engaging with their peers, but still be safe."

The biggest challenge Demi is seeing teens face is the lack of social opportunities and face-to-face friendship building activities. With the rise in forced screen time due to COVID, the rise in



Go on a hike or take the dog for a walk to get fresh air and encourage conversation

communication via social media and building an online persona are at the forefront more than ever before.

JAMA Pediatrics published a study in November 2021 that found that screen time outside of virtual learning rose from 3.8 hours a day pre-pandemic to 7.7 hours a day during COVID. With so much time spent online for both school and socializing, Demi said that parents have reported that their children have seemed more withdrawn. In addition, she has seen more and more teens needing help in learning appropriate face-to-face social cues and conversation starters.

“In a way it is easier for some kids that are nervous about social interactions with peers face to face because, through technology, they can be anyone they want to be. However, this is making it

more difficult for these individuals to interact with others and resolve conflict in person,” said Demi. “Social media and all that it exposes us to has dramatically changed our kids and many are creating an online persona that is different from their regular persona.”

In addition to creating online personas, Demi has found that many teens are focused on numbers of followers and likes. They have also gravitated toward apps about their interests, connecting with others from across the country or the world.

When Demi remembers her childhood, she recalls pulling the telephone cord under her bedroom door for long phone conversations with her



Have them help meal plan and grocery shop

friends and spending Friday and Saturday nights together on the weekends. Now with many social opportunities shut down due to COVID restrictions and the increase in social media platforms, teens are seeing less in-person connections.

“They are more likely to seek out other teens online with similar interests and form a friendship via Discord, social media, or texting than face-to-face, which is leading to more withdrawal from face-to-face interaction with family members and friends,” said Demi. “The lack of physical interaction is really hard for them.”

To combat this, Demi encourages small group get-togethers or outdoor activities. She has found



Give them a hug and tell them you love them every day



Let them help you plan fun events with a few friends or family members weekly

that sports or hobby-based clubs have provided a good outlet for many of her clients.

With the increased screen time and many new apps, Demi suggests that parents monitor their teens' technology use and become familiar with the different platforms they are engaging with. She suggests becoming 'friends' with your teen on the different platforms or to view their posts.

"Many people have no idea what their kids are doing on there," said Demi. "Parents should also talk to their kids about the effects of what they put out there and who they are through their online presence."

For younger teens, there are various blocks and parental controls that help to filter inappropriate content. Demi noted that inappropriate content can be found anywhere—even apps that are geared toward younger kids such as Roblox, which is rated 12+.

The biggest tool for parents to make use of, though, is communication. Demi emphasizes the

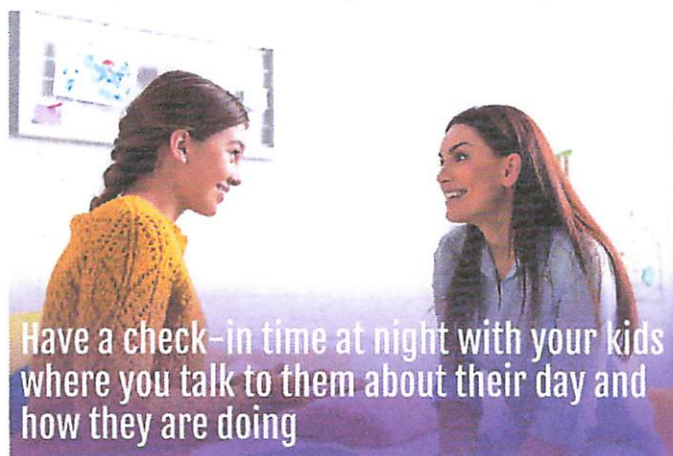


Encourage hosting their friends at your house and observe them interacting

importance of chatting with teens daily about their day and the simple act of giving your child a hug.

"They're missing out on physical touch—dating has been difficult, and they're not supposed to hug their friends at school," said Demi. "Give them hugs, tell them what you love about them, listen to them, and be a good listener. It's hard to stay connected with teens—you have to make an effort as a parent to have family dinners, talk to them in the car, and keep that face-to-face interaction."

While the pandemic has led to isolation from friends, Demi has seen her family grow closer as they have been forced to spend more time together.



Have a check-in time at night with your kids where you talk to them about their day and how they are doing

The lack of other social obligations has given each of her children more time to explore other interests, such as learning to play guitar, researching crystals, and being inspired by TikTok to create their own clothes.

Demi encourages parents to reach out for help if they feel their teen is struggling. Signs that a family should seek help include withdrawal, sleeping more than usual, increased anxiety or depression, staying in their room most of the day, irritability, or drastic changes in appearance or personality.

She suggests reaching out to teachers, coaches, or others that engage with your teen. In finding a therapist, Demi stresses the importance of looking for a good match. Some teens also respond to different relaxation methods such as meditation, journaling, exercise, or pursuing hobbies.



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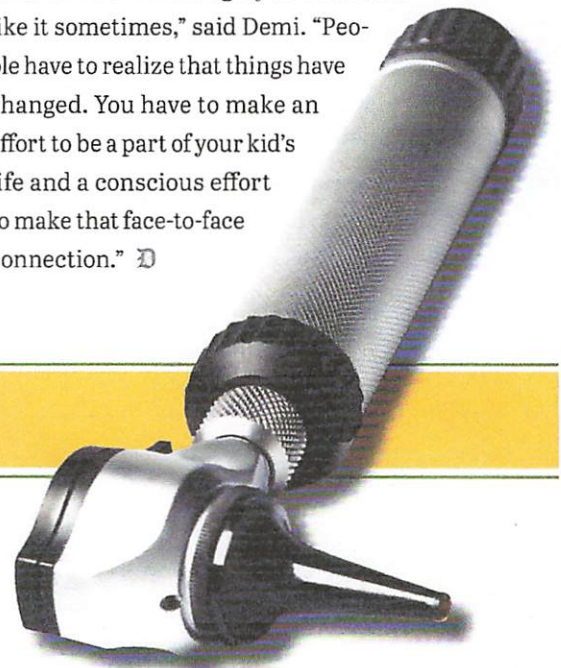
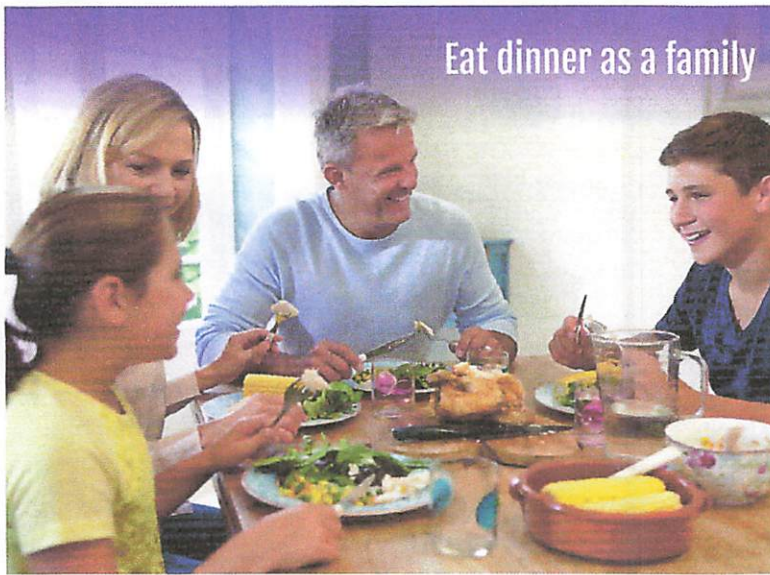
SHANNON DEMI

“You want to find a therapist that can specially address the concerns you have for your child whether it’s anxiety or depression, art therapy, or LGBTQ, or something else, it has to be a good fit so they feel comfortable talking to them,” said Demi.

“Parents should also encourage them to find other things they can do for themselves to relax or decompress.”

Setting a positive example for teens is also important. Demi suggests that parents check their own online presence, be aware of how often they are engaging online instead of in-person and take time to gather with friends or practice self care.

“We’re the most important people in their lives even though you don’t feel like it sometimes,” said Demi. “People have to realize that things have changed. You have to make an effort to be a part of your kid’s life and a conscious effort to make that face-to-face connection.”



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