

UW-Madison: Pediatrician offers tips for talking with teens about COVID-19

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MADISON – Children and teens may need extra support from caregivers as they react to and work through the unique changes and challenges of life during an outbreak. This is especially true as COVID-19 cases across the country and communities create, implement and adjust restrictions.

“Teens may react to changes in a variety of ways. It is important for parents to support their child’s emotions without judgement,” says Amy Stockhausen, a UW Health pediatrician, adolescent medicine expert and professor of pediatrics at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health. “Parents can use this as an opportunity to help their child build empathy and resilience.”

She notes:

-Some teens are excited to start seeing their friends in person again. Some are eager for school and school sports to resume. Some are excited to get back to working at their job. Others find the thought of in-person social and educational environments stressful and anxiety-provoking, and the thought of retuning to that environment is very uncomfortable.

-Talk with your teen about the emotions they are experiencing without judgment and help them know that whatever they are feeling is valid and understandable, even if it is different than how you as a parent are feeling.

-Help your teen to understand that everyone views this unusual situation differently. Some people will be happy when restrictions relax, and some will not be. Some will

wish to remain physically separated in public, and some will not. Some will choose to wear masks in public, and some will not. All these reactions are understandable, and shaming people who feel differently than you is not a productive solution.

Stockhausen says this is a great time to talk to teens about your family's values and plans when it comes to returning to "regular" life versus continuing to distance or quarantine, to talk about the people your family may want to be extra careful with, to discuss your expectations for how your teen will behave in public when it comes to physical separation and contact, mask wearing, and more.

"If there are things that you want to be sure your teen does when leaving the home, returning to work or school or social contact, make those expectations clear and set enforceable limits for them," she says.

It's also an opportunity to teach tolerance, acceptance and build empathy.

"Many teens are asking about how they can help those who are struggling during this time, whether from mental health concerns related to social isolation, domestic violence, or scarce resources from job loss or illness," Stockhausen says. "Helping your teen find volunteer or other service opportunities to raise awareness of these issues and help peers or others in need is a great way to help them build empathy and provide support for people and families who are struggling."

She adds: "If you are concerned about your teen's mental health, school avoidance, social isolation, or other issues, please reach out to your pediatrician for assistance."