

## Protecting your teen's mental health in a pandemic

With the amount they push you away, you'd be forgiven for thinking that your secondary school aged child were no longer interested in being close to you. In actual fact, they're just as reliant on their relationship with you for their emotional well-being as ever.

Feeling like 'someone around here really gets me, and knows that I'm doing my best - and adores me no matter how grisly I get' is a fundamental need for teens.

Our kids' brains aren't fully developed until around the age of 25 and though they seem convincingly independent, they are still very much in need of connection.

When kids feel connected you see the sweeter, more co-operative version of them.

Here's how to make that happen...

Check what messages you are conveying when you are around your teen. They'll get most of their felt sense of you from your facial affect (the emotion in your face) and the way you move your body. Is your body language saying that you are angry or worried or pre-occupied?

**Make sure your first words when you see them aren't...**

*"I asked you to empty the dishwasher"*

*"You said you'd be back by 6pm"*

*"If you walk around with your headphones in you won't be able to hear me"*

*"I'm taking your phone off you for the rest of the day if you don't..."*

**Instead, try pouring on the affection and responding with playfulness.**

*"I cried for an hour when you weren't back at 6pm because I missed you so"*

*"Ooh come here you, I haven't smelt you enough today, oops I knocked out your earphone, now you'll be able to hear how much I love you"*

*(In a silly voice) "Feed me"  
- "Oh what was that, I think that was the dishwasher getting hungry again"*

One way of making sure that we top up this need for connection is through structuring intentional time with each child where they can play or bathe in our loving attention. We call this Special Time. Here are some ways to make this work with an older child.

## **"I'll do whatever you wanna do"**

Special Time is when you carve out some time to offer one-on-one, undivided attention to your child. They get to be in charge for this time and suggest what you do. It's your job to be as present and delighted as you can, so for this stretch of time - anything from 5 minutes to an hour - put down your phone, leave the housework, make sure other children are occupied and take some time to show this kid how much they mean to you.

Many older kids might balk if you suggest this. Others might not be able to imagine what they'd do with you. You want this time to be directed by your kid, so these suggestions are just for inspiration, but here are some ideas of what sorts of things you might get up to, even during a lockdown.

You could show this chart on the following page to your teens if they need some ideas.

## Playing:

Shoot some basketball/play football/cricket/tennis with me

Get dressed in old clothes and have a water fight outside

Sock wrestling (can you get mine off before I get yours?)

Bet you can't get me off the sofa

Slug tag (crawl on your belly like a slug and use your nose to tag each other)

Let me teach you how to use my skateboard

Let's make up our own rules for a game

Lead me on a blindfolded, barefooted sensory walk in the garden

Take me on a bike ride somewhere fun

## Pampering:

(remember boys like this too!)

Do my nails

Do a glitter or henna tattoo on me - or let me do one on you

Scratch my back and tell me all the things that are great about me

Give me a massage with warm oil

Do a makeover on me

Dye/braid/brush my hair

Stroke my hair and sing to me

Make me a special foot bath with salts and oils

Let's make some homemade facials

## Enter my world:

Learn to play my favourite videogame with me/watch the show I'm obsessed with

Let me show you stuff I've made/videos I like on Instagram/songs I like

Buy me the equipment for something I want to do with joy and presence

Sort out my tech for me

Help me make my room how I want it

Learn something with me - Hoola hooping/Japanese/Macramé

Surprise me by learning something I know about that you haven't yet taken interest in (chords and lyrics to my favourite song/how to play a game I love (Minecraft/Pokemon Go/Magic the Gathering/Lego)/how to do a particular dance or sport)

## Making:

Make my favourite dessert with me

Learn how to make burgers/pizza from scratch with me

Let's go through old photos and recreate them (or recreate pieces of art)

Let's make some jewelry together

Help me do some sewing/embroidery/knitting/electronics/woodwork

Let me paint your portrait/you paint me

Set up a photo shoot with me with makeovers and outfits

Let's make matching friendship bracelets

Graffiti a wall in the garage/huge board with me

Build a bivouac with me

## If they refuse

If your child says 'no way' to this idea, you can still do a version of it. Allocate a period of time, say 10 minutes or half an hour when your teen is relaxed. Go and sit near them and flick through a magazine or book (not your phone, which swallows your attention). Every now and then you might gently look over to them.

Initially they might say 'What do you want?' or 'Stop being weird, go away' and you can respond that you just want to sit near them for a bit. Quietly offer your attention. You are looking at your magazine but really, you are making yourself available. You might notice your kid starts to tell you about something, in which case, just listen with interest.

Don't use this time as an opportunity to follow any agenda you might have of your own (such as campaigning for them to pick up their socks) this time is solely for whatever your kid needs it to be.

When time is up you can just move away again. It may be that after doing this a few times your teen is more amenable to a structured Special Time. If however they need to constantly reject you and push you away - keep pushing for closeness, even if you don't achieve it. It's this sense that we're fighting for a relationship with them that our teens so badly need.



## How to do Special Time

It's good to choose a length of time that you think you can pay focused, undivided attention. Anything up to an hour is good. Set a timer. This gives you a clear container and saves you from awkwardly saying you've got to go when your kid is in the flow of doing something with you.

For this time your job is to be **BIG YES** to whatever your child suggests. So long as it doesn't hurt anyone or damage anything, you can say yes to things you might not usually allow. Your delight and enthusiasm is key. See what you can love about your teen in this short window of time. You might discover things about them as you pay attention to their chat and they show you more of themselves.

If you harbour any feelings of resentment or worry about this kid, it's your job to shelve all that while you offer the warmest attention you can muster.



## When Special Time ends

It's good to keep the time boundary clear so end Special Time when you planned to and remember you can do it again. Thank your kid for spending this time with you. Let them feel it was a pleasure rather than a burden for you.

Because you've opened up a sense of closeness through doing this, you might find your kid opens up to you about how they are feeling. Sometimes feelings come up in the form of a big strop or rant. See if you can just respond kindly and allow the storm to pass without taking it at face value. It's a really good sign if they are letting off some steam that they'd previously been holding in.

Feel free to do this as often as feels necessary. Punctuating the week with little islands of affection and encouragement go a long way to countering any loneliness or anxiety your teen might be experiencing in relation to the pandemic. Your child is really lucky to have you seeing the best in them and fighting to be close to them.

***Thank you for being so wonderful!***

Roma



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