Teens & COVID-19

There is one demographic that has had a very hard time complying with social distancing: young people ages 12–24. Developmentally, teens and young adults are primed to push back against the very things that help prevent COVID-19 transmission. During this stage of development, teens and young adults:

- **Think they are invincible:** They see bad things happen to others, but don’t think bad things could actually happen to them. Others might get sick, but not them.
- **Are self-absorbed:** They find it difficult to see things from someone else’s perspective. If it’s not a problem for them, it’s not a problem.
- **Are grasping for independence:** In an effort to establish themselves as independent people, teens tend to push back on authority. They question the rules and, at times, ignore them. They argue with facts and often suggest that they, actually, have more information that the adults in their world.
- **Need to be with peers:** Teens and young adults form very close and intimate relationships with their peers, and maintaining that social connection motivates almost all of their behavior.

These traits are not subtle. They are not characteristics that some teens have slight variations of. Rather, they tend to be the defining characteristic of a teen’s personality for several years. And, these characteristics make it very likely that teens and young adults will not comply with COVID-19 precautions. So, when talking with teens about COVID-19 (or any other health risks) it’s important to keep these developmental traits in mind.

Here are some ideas for having a useful conversation with your teen or young adult about COVID-19 risk:

- **All the cool kids are doing it.** If there is anything that motivates teens and young adults, it’s fitting in. If they think that wearing a mask is socially acceptable among their peers, they’re much more likely to do it. Share media with your kids that show other teens in compliance. They argue with facts and often suggest that they, actually, have more information that the adults in their world.
- **Link independence with safety:** Most teens put freedom and independence above all other concerns. As a parent with some leverage of your teen’s freedom, you can tie tools for independence with compliance with safety measures. For example: your teen is allowed to take the car, but only if it’s to go meet friends at an outdoor gathering at which social distancing will be practiced.
- **You are not in this alone.** Remind teens that they are doing what their entire generation is doing right now. Although it may feel like they’re the only one isolated from friends, teens across the entire world are having to stay at home. That means there are about 2 billion other teens also feeling frustrated and stuck.
- **Present choices:** Teens want to feel empowered and self-reliant. To appeal to that, present the desired behavior as their choice. They can decide for themselves to contribute to the problem and help spread the virus OR be part of the solution, slow the spread and help save lives. This is their choice. We hope they’ll make the right one.
- **Find out where they’re coming from.** It is important to let adolescents know that their voices are being heard and their concerns and needs are being recognized. Ask your teen where they’re coming from? What priorities are they thinking through? How are they perceiving the problem and what do they think are useful solutions?
- **Model the behavior you want to see.** Adolescents may not be great at listening to our verbal demands, but studies show that they are very likely to mimic our behavior. Be a good role model about wearing a mask, limiting social interactions, staying outdoors, and maintaining social distance at all times. Your non-verbal communication will speak volumes.

If you are struggling with your teen, or anything else, give Family Services EAP a call. Our counselors are available for **FREE** and **CONFIDENTIAL** appointments! Contact us at 978-327-6666, info@FamilyServicesEAP.org or submit an inquiry online at FamilyServicesEAP.org.