FYSB
Family & Youth
Services Bureau

TIPS

for Virtually Engaging Parents & Caregivers During Social Distancing

Parents and other caregivers[1] of adolescents play a key role in supporting young people and helping them navigate adolescence as they transition toward adulthood. This is particularly important during times of stress and change, such as the current public health pandemic that has upended the regular routines of adolescents and families (Dalton et al., 2020).

With schools closing and many parents working at home or unable to work, parents and their adolescents are spending more time together than they normally do. This abrupt change in routine, compounded by the added stressors of caring for a family during this difficult time, presents a host of challenges for parents. However, it also provides parents with a unique opportunity to strengthen the parent-adolescent relationship.

This tip sheet provides you with strategies you can use to reach out to parents virtually and provide them with support and information to help them cope with the challenges of the pandemic situation. By increasing parents' skills for communicating and connecting with their adolescents, your organization can make it more likely that their adolescents will avoid sex and other risky behaviors (Donaldson et al., 2016; Grossman, 2020; Mahabee-Gittens et al., 2013; Markham et al., 2010) and perform better in school (Jeynes, 2007; Jeynes, 2016; Jeynes, 2017; Kim & Hill, 2015; Wang et al., 2014).

1. In the interest of brevity, we are using the term "parents" to refer to "parents and other caregivers" for the remainder of this document. When reaching out virtually, it is important to be inclusive of all types of caregivers and guardians such as the adolescents' grandparents or other relatives.

Getting started with virtual communication

- Have a virtual presence. This could be through an organizational website, social media channels, or email. Find a way to let parents know how they can find you virtually (e.g., by following your organization on social media, via text).
- If you don't already have contact information for parents of the youth you serve, explore ways to gather the contact information you need. For example, if your youth program is part of an in-school offering and your program staff do not have access to phone numbers or email addresses, you could work with the school to communicate with parents about opting into your text, email, or social media communications. If you are continuing to reach youth virtually, you could ask the youth to extend your invitation to their parents to join in a webinar, text messaging program, etc.
- Remind parents about your organization and that you are available to support them. Let them know what kind of services your organization is offering right now and the ways in which you can assist them during this difficult time.

Engaging parents and caregivers from a distance

There are many different ways you can engage parents from a distance. Consider the resources (including time) that your team currently has available and what might be most helpful.

1. Offer virtual learning

This could be a real-time virtual learning event or a list of recorded events that parents can watch at another time. If time allows, consider engaging parents in the development of this activity to ensure it is relevant and helpful. You could ask parents to submit questions before or during the event.

Ideas

Use a video conferencing app such as Zoom (which has free basic accounts that can be used for sessions lasting no longer than 40 minutes—currently longer if you register as part of a K–12 institution) or Google Hangouts (which is part of the G Suite for Education and G Suite for Nonprofits) to connect with parents virtually. Organizations can also hold an event via Facebook Live. Make sure the virtual mechanism you use has features, such as passwords, to provide for greater security in your meetings.

Make recordings of your virtual events and post them on your YouTube channel or your organization's website. Link to them via your social media channels.

For real-time live events, consider offering parents a chance to hear from a local expert such as a program facilitator, pediatrician, or faculty member of a local university.

Collect videos or podcasts that you and your program staff recommend. Put these in one easy-to-find location and share the links with parents.

Record a short, virtual lecture. Set up your laptop or phone camera and record a short talk about a topic related to your programming and upload it to your YouTube channel.

If you are already engaging the adolescents virtually, you could host a virtual event that includes activities that parents and their adolescents can participate in together. You could also provide homework assignments that require discussion between parents and their adolescents.

2. Offer opportunities for informal virtual connection and resource sharing among parents and caregivers

Use these events to answer questions about topics related to your programming, give parents an opportunity to interact with an expert, or hear from other parents involved with the program.

Ideas

Encourage parents to join a group discussion via a free group messaging app such as GroupMe or WhatsApp. This group can participate in moderated "chats" about a particular topic.

Conduct a "coffee chat" via phone through an established conference/video line or via text. Invite parents to ask questions about your program or about other topics relating to adolescent health and development and parent-adolescent communication.

Some small group discussions could also be tailored toward certain audiences such as parents of adolescents with special circumstances (e.g., parents of adolescents with behavioral/emotional disorders) or specific types of caregivers such as grandparents.

3. Continue or start to provide regular, one-way communication

Provide parents an opportunity to receive regular updates from your organization. These updates could be specific to your program or might be about adolescent health and development or parent-adolescent relationships more broadly.

For one-way digital strategies, you'll want to set up a system that allows parents to opt in to a group to receive weekly communication (e.g., text messages, social media, email). This could be done via a website or through email (if you have that information). You might also advertise the opportunity through school announcements if those are being sent in your community. Ask parents their preferred way to receive information and what type of information might be most useful and beneficial to them. Consider a text messaging program or other outreach such as social media outlets (e.g., a closed Facebook group) or email, depending on parent preference.

See the next section, "How to set up a text messaging program," including some sample messages that you can use to engage parents.

How to set up a text messaging program

1. Identify a platform to help you reach parents and caregivers

- Look for an app that is designed for teacher-parent communication and incorporate it into your programming. Many are free! Google "teacher parent communication app reviews" to obtain reviews of apps you can use for this purpose.
- You may also consider a bulk text messaging app. Many of these offer free trials and have reasonably priced monthly plans. You can read reviews of some services by Googling, "bulk text messaging app reviews."
- Google Classroom may also be an option if your school has the G Suite for Education or your organization has the G Suite for Nonprofits. Similar to other classroom tools, it allows you to communicate with parents and share information about your "classroom."

2. Set up your contact lists and make a schedule for your text messages

It's important to have regular contact but you'll want to avoid sending too many messages. Aim for no more than one text per day.

3. Start sending messages

You might choose to share parenting tips, let parents know about information covered in class, or highlight upcoming events. Be sure to give parents a way to opt out if they no longer want to receive messages.

Sample text messages to send to parents and caregivers

There is some evidence that text messaging campaigns with parents can increase parent-child communication (Chu et al., 2019). This section includes sample text messages that you might consider sharing with parents. The type of text messages your organization sends will depend on your specific goals for outreach with parents. Consider your goals as you develop your own text messages to send to parents.

You could send texts that encourage parent-child communication

Did you know parenting that is warm and loving but also involves supervision, limits, and rules has been found to be more effective than other styles of parenting? Learn more about authoritative parenting.

Parenting during social distancing and quarantine can be challenging. Take a break and check in with your adolescent(s). Consider listening to music together or taking a walk.

Be a role model for adolescents. Follow local rules and national guidelines regarding social distancing and focus on staying well.

Navigating friendships during the adolescent years can be a challenge in any circumstance. Let your adolescent(s) know that you are here to listen to their frustrations.

Let your adolescent(s) know that it's normal and OK to be sad and frustrated about missing events like prom, graduation, sports seasons, and many other things they were looking forward to. Acknowledge that those losses are real and show them that you empathize with them.

Try to stay calm. If your adolescent says something you disagree with or does something to upset you, express your concerns, but don't overreact. Try to keep the door open for future conversations. Learn more about parent-adolescent communication.

Remember—parent-child relationships are a two-way street. You are changing in response to your child's development too!

Did you know parent support during the adolescent years is critical? Your adolescent may be listening and learning from you in more ways than you realize! Learn more about the importance of parental figures in the lives of adolescents.

If you are currently working with adolescents virtually, you might also send regular texts about what you are covering in your sessions

Today we discussed healthy relationships. Ask your adolescent(s): "What was one surprising thing about relationships that you learned today? How do you feel about the relationships in your life?"

Today we discussed goals. Ask your adolescent(s): "What is your goal for this year? What support do you need from me to reach your goals?"

Today we talked about resisting peer pressure. Check out some additional resources on peer pressure and adolescent friendships!

You could also send texts about special online events for parents

Don't miss it! Our online workshop for parents about setting limits is tonight! Join us on Zoom at 7 PM.

References

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More resources on fostering healthy parent-adolescent relationships can be found here:

Healthy Parent-Child Relationships

Parent-Child Communication tip sheet

Resources for Families

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