

Westlake Boys High School



Being in 'Quaranteen' – what have we learnt about supporting your son in a lockdown?

Being a parent of a teenager is...

We have left that sentence unfinished as you will have some words to best sum it up for you/your family. What we can state with a high level of confidence is that being a parent of a teenager in a lockdown amplifies whatever it is you are thinking and feeling about being a Mum or Dad.

It isn't usual that you would spend such a concentrated amount of time with your son, in the way we are all doing it now, so our parent approaches are changing (and being challenged) all the time.

We understand and recognise that you will have many competing priorities at this point and a significant number of them will feel urgent. We want to be part of the solution around this and give some insights from research that has been conducted throughout periods of lockdown around the world, to better support you.

Whilst we have made a commitment to our boys to keep expectations high and things as normal as we can regarding their education, we understand that the realities and practicalities at home may be difficult at times to navigate.

With the above in mind, we feel that the most important issues to focus on are likely to be:

Exercise

Living in a constricted space will likely mean your son is getting less exercise than normal. Your son may be sleeping more, as some of the previous pressures of school (and travel to/from) are absent. They may also be sitting in front of a screen for long periods. However, the brain needs oxygen. The more we move around, the more oxygen gets to our brains. Lack of exercise means that less oxygen is getting to the brain.

Routine

In the present circumstances it is all too easy for routines to disappear. This is understandable to a degree, but a day free from routines is not helpful for any teenager. Your son needs consistent routines in the day. Routines contribute to the growth and development of parts of the brain to do with structure and planning.

Social Isolation

Your son values their relationships with their friends more strongly as a teenager, than any other time in their lives. Inevitably, your son is more isolated than ever before, this can be difficult for them to deal with. Contact with others of the same age provides support and is an arena for sharing experiences. It is also valuable for brain function, as it supports the development of the social brain.

Intensification of family relationships

Being together in the home will intensify relationships between you and your son. Conflicts may easily flare up over a range of issues, that would otherwise seem trivial or minor. Some may be over domestic problems, such as use of the kitchen, loud music or time spent in the bathroom. Other conflicts may be more to do with health or lifestyle, such as appropriate bedtimes.

Emotional Regulation

In normal times it is completely natural for teenagers to find it hard to manage their emotions. Hormone variation plays a part here. During lockdown, living in a small space and cooped up with parents and siblings, emotions will be even harder to keep under control. Your son may feel resentment or loss (that they cannot articulate), and some may have higher levels of anxiety. The parts of the brain that regulate emotion may have a lot more work to do at this time.

As you have read, the issues outlined above are quite wide ranging and all encompassing, especially when you have to balance off everything else that forms part of your day or week.

Rather than just leave you with a sense of perspective around the pertinent issues, please read on below for some of the solutions we feel could be useful:

Physical Activity

Plan regular exercise or fitness routines for everyone in the family, if you can, do it together. If possible, teenagers should move around rather than stay still for long periods. Exercise can happen indoors as well as outdoors. No one should sit in front of a screen for too long, hence our reduced school day and 30-minute lessons. The more exercise and movement your son engages in, the more oxygen will be getting to the brain.

Habit Formation

A structure to the day is extremely helpful for your son. If possible, help them create their own routines and structures. This will assist in managing any sense of imprisonment and isolation. Routines will also contribute to the development of parts of the brain related to thinking, planning and problem-solving. Routines also have health benefits, particularly in relation to sleep and nutrition.

Emotions

Don't be afraid to talk about feelings. Try and keep everyone's emotions under review. If there is an opportunity for feelings to be expressed and shared, this will reduce the likelihood of explosions and uncontrolled outbursts at other times. If your son can be given the sense that their feelings are being recognised and taken seriously this will assist with their emotion regulation.

Conflict

Conflicts within the family will be heightened when families are with each other, for long and unconfirmed periods of time. It will be important to create processes in the family which will help to reduce such conflicts through open communication and acceptance of everyone's needs. Listening to each other and allowing a space for issues of conflict to be aired will help enormously.

Communication

Although we are frequently told/led to believe that teenagers do not want to communicate with their parents, this is a myth. Your son does want to talk, but at times and in ways that feel safe to them. In the present situation, communication – especially about worries and anxieties - is essential. Brain development means that language skills are increasing, and this can be encouraged by open communication.

New opportunities

The lockdown may present you with new ways to provide opportunities for your son to take on more roles in the family, such as looking after younger children, contributing to the domestic chores, and helping in other ways. Such things will give teenagers a sense of responsibility and will help them deal with some of the more difficult emotions that are experiencing.

Screen time

It is inevitable that the digital world has become more important during lockdown. This fact is just as applicable to adults as it is to teenagers. There is no evidence that *sensible* use of the internet is

damaging to the brain. However, adults in the family do need to keep an eye on what your son is viewing online, for how long and who this is with. Open discussion about screen time is to be encouraged, and parents should be alert to any inappropriate use of the internet and deal with it immediately/decisively.

Motivation

Research has highlighted the fact that your son's brain is especially sensitive to rewards. This may seem difficult to put into practice at present. However, the more your son can be motivated by reward rather than criticism, the more responsive they are likely to be.

Confronting an issue

Our first reaction is often to respond to something that we do not like immediately, impulsively and with a heightened level of volume and emotion. Whilst this serves us well when we see someone in imminent danger, it often makes matters worse at home (a relatively safe environment). When in situations of stress or anxiety, our body secretes a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol instigates a survival mechanism and our 'fight or flight' response. During a period of heightened cortisol sensitivity, we think with less logic and have a narrower attentional focus. Our suggestions when flash points arrive are to maintain calm (no response is often the best response) and then to talk about the issue, when it is no longer an issue. It can take up to 45 minutes for cortisol to dissipate, until that point arrives, you may not see the best, or most communicative, version of your son.

You matter... a lot!

Many parents have the view that they become less important as their sons move into the teenage years. Everything we know tells us that this is untrue. Your son needs you and other key adults. They just need you in a different manner from the way younger children need these important role models. In the present lockdown, parents/caregivers have an essential role to play in helping teenage boys manage the stresses and anxieties of this current situation. The support, the structure and the role-modelling that is provided by you are some of the most important elements in the development of a healthy teenage brain.