

The Power of Connection: How Resource Families Can Support Adolescents through the COVID-19 Crisis

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During this period of crisis that has disrupted everyone's sense of normalcy, children and youth in foster care need excellent parenting more than ever. For youth in care, for whom disruption is often a recurring fact of life, COVID-19 may feel like yet another instance in which the relationships, activities, and places of belonging they have come to rely on have been taken away. How we as parents and other caring adults respond to youths' difficult feelings and behaviors during this crisis situation can have enormous, long-term impacts on their lives.

In the first webinar of the Quality Parenting Initiative's (QPI) "COVID-19: The New Normal" series, Dr. Ken Ginsberg offers practical advice and wisdom for parents and other supportive adults who are caring for youth during this crisis. Based on developmental research and brain science, Dr. Ginsberg frames challenging behaviors as normal, understandable reactions that youth rely on as survival and coping mechanisms. These defensive strategies, while difficult and sometimes hurtful for caregivers to experience, have played an important role for youth in care by offering them some sense of the safety they have often lacked. It is essential, therefore, that the adults in their lives offer a calm, consistent, and reassuring presence to counteract youths' feelings of being in danger. Through trauma-sensitive practice, Dr. Ginsberg tells us, we can help short-circuit young people's reactive patterns of behavior, change their expectations about crisis situations, and literally rewire the brain.

Dr. Ginsberg also reminds us that there is no such thing as a perfect parent. The dynamic process of negotiating boundaries, seeking mutual understanding, and learning from experience is what builds solid, trusting relationships between caregivers and youth. Both science and lived experience make it clear that the quality of youths' relationships to the caregivers in their lives is the most important intervention for protecting and promoting their wellbeing.

The information below provides a snapshot of the key takeaways from this webinar presentation and highlights the core components of a trauma-sensitive response to youth during crisis.

Tips for Supporting Adolescents during COVID-19

- Be real and transparent.
- Check in often.
- Remain calm and regulated.
- Prioritize youths' contact with loved ones.
- Use language of hope and resilience.
- Maintain routines and normalcy.
- Acknowledge and normalize emotions.
- Don't take behaviors personally.

Key Trauma-Sensitive Considerations for Adults

What youth may be feeling during COVID-19:

- Uncertainty about the future
- Anxiety about school
- Loss due to separation from family, friends and activities
- Significant disruption in routines
- Fear and concern for loved ones; a sense of helplessness
- A loss of control

What these feelings may look like as behaviors:

- Distant, withdrawn, self-isolating
- Ornery, moody, irritable
- Angry, lashing out, explosive
- Sarcastic, flippant, minimizing emotions
- Disrupted or abnormal sleep patterns
- Pushing adults away, refusing care

What parents can do to help:

- Calm yourself—model regulation.
- Give yourself permission to mess up and model how to move on from mistakes.
- Know what is about you and what isn't—don't personalize or internalize youths' behaviors.
- Reassure youth that you will get through this crisis together.
- Give control back to youth—ask for their advice/guidance, allow for voice/choice, honor their preferences around physical touch.
- Acknowledge that having emotions is good—don't belittle or discourage your or their feelings.
- Encourage acts of service to others.
- Create routines for family time together (games, stories, music, dancing).
- Support and encourage as much contact as possible with siblings, bio parents, and friends.
- Remember that many youth were under-parented and will need time to adjust to structured/active parenting.
- Ask youth what makes them feel safe.
- Encourage healthy eating habits and exercise.

What advocates and child welfare professionals can do to help:

- Pay particular attention to the needs of youth in congregate care.
- Advocate relentlessly for all children to be in a family setting.
- Offer supports to keep families healthy and well so they can support youth.
- Do whatever it takes to maintain family visitation and contact.
- Advocate for school needs.
- Ensure families and youth have access to tech resources.
- Check in with youth and families as often as possible to let them know you are still a resource.

Tips for Supporting Virtual Visitation and Family Connections

- Zoom
- Marco Polo (an app for exchanging short video messages)
- Google Duo
- FaceTime
- Phone calls
- Letter writing
- Virtual story time
- Netflix Watch Party (a Chrome browser extension)
- Share pictures
- Virtual dance party
- Virtual game night
- Virtual family dinner

Build a Teen Stress Management Plan

Learn more about the causes of stress, walk through the building blocks of a holistic plan for managing stress, and use the free personalized stress management plan-building tool at the Center for Parent & Teen Communication's website: https://parentandteen.com/strategy_plans/teen-stress-management/.