

Ark BDA Wellbeing Check: Helping your child prepare for reopening



After months of being cooped up at home away from friends, unable to attend school or go out, most young people are desperate to get back to the lives they had before the pandemic. Getting your child to take safety seriously is a struggle at the best of times, and as the nation moves towards reopening, it's never been more important to ensure kids are following the rules.

How can parents respect their teens' needs while still helping them (and everyone else) stay safe? Even if reopening hasn't started in your child's year group, it's never too early to start talking about what your family's approach will be. Discussing what's coming can help young people feel more prepared and increase the odds of smart, safe behaviour when the time comes. Here are some top tips to prepare your child for reopening:

1. Listen to your child's concerns:

To adults, teenage worries ("I'd look stupid in a mask!") or priorities ("I *need* to go to the park with my friends on Saturday.") can seem a little ridiculous. But taking them seriously is key to improving communication and understanding between you and your child. Instead of handing down rules that completely ignore your child's concerns, having a clear sense of what they want and need will make it easier to come up with rules that they can reasonably follow.

2. Empathise and validate:

Most of us have felt a sense of unfairness at the current lockdown situation, but few feel it more strongly than teenagers, whose lives have been disrupted right when establishing their own identities and pushing for independence are most important.

Remember to validate your child's feelings. You might say: "You're totally right. It is unfair. I feel it too. But it's what we need to do to keep everyone safe." This will make them feel listened to and make them more likely to listen to you in return.

3. Create perspective:

The quarantine has been a long slog. So long, in fact, that it can be hard to remember that it's really only been two months. It might not be over soon, but it's not going to last the rest of their lives. Helping your teen remember that the restrictions really are temporary can make it easier for them to follow rules in the meantime.

4. Stick to the facts:

Having seen the impact of the pandemic, we know how important it is to take precautions and we want our children to take them seriously, too. It's tempting to want to keep explaining until they seem to get it, or to "scare" them into compliance, but that can backfire. Teenagers are likely to push back against lecturing or overanxious behaviour. Avoid focusing on worst-case scenarios to make an impact. Saying something like, "If you don't take this seriously people will *die*" can just make your teen more likely to brush you off. Instead, focus on being transparent and grounded with them. Emphasise that this affects everyone, that they have their role to play, and that you trust them to do the right thing.

5. Use trusted sources:

If teens are sceptical about the risks posed by the coronavirus, don't hesitate to turn to trusted, fact-based sources like the BBC, or the World Health Organization. Teens may also be reading or hearing information that runs counter to what the scientific community is saying. To head off misinformation, ask your teenager about what they're reading and help them make sure information is coming from a trustworthy source.

6. Personalize the situation:

If your child hasn't been personally impacted by the virus, it may seem abstract, unreal and unlikely to affect them. They also know that fewer young people have gotten seriously ill, which can make it seem even less relevant to their lives. Help teens make the connection by citing the danger for older family and friends. You can also emphasise that what we do now can have a big impact on what our lives look like down the road. If we don't all use caution as we open up, we might end up with more outbreaks, which means more lockdowns and more disruptions in things like school, college and being able to see friends. The point is to help teens see that your fears aren't far-fetched, and that social distancing is important in ways that do affect them directly.

7. Link independence with safety:

Sooner or later, your child will be going out and seeing their friends, one way or another. When they do get out, try tying independence to compliance with safety measures. The more willing they are to take seriously safety precautions like distancing, wearing a mask or socializing only outdoors, the more freedom they'll be able to have. Work together to brainstorm ways they can safely hang out with friends. For example:

- Measure 6 feet of distance and practice staying that far apart.

- Make a list of outdoor places where your teen could safely meet with friends, like a nearby park (if it's not too crowded), the beach or even the garden for a socially-distanced picnic.
- Make or buy nice-looking masks your teen is more likely to actually wear. You could even suggest they get matching ones for their friends.

8. Prepare for tricky situations:

For even the most cooperative young people, challenges *will* come up. They may have friends who aren't (or whose families aren't) taking safety practices seriously. One way to prepare your child to stick to your plan is to emphasize your family's values — and acknowledge that not everyone shares them. It can also be helpful to give your child practice dealing with difficult situations before they come up. You might ask: What would you do in that situation? What are a few things you could say to your friend? You can also offer yourself up as a catch-all excuse to deflect peer pressure: "I can't. My mum is really strict." Whatever strategy you use, preparation will make it easier for kids to find their voice when an awkward moment arises.

9. Address lying head-on:

Teenagers lie. It's annoying at best, dangerous at worst, and definitely something parents are concerned about, especially now. It's never been more vital for young people to tell the truth about what they're doing — and to be honest if they've made a mistake, so that you can be sure the rest of the family (especially older or more vulnerable relatives) stay safe. When young people are lying, they're often just trying to escape the consequences. You can head this off by offering your child a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card for mistakes. Make an agreement that if they'll be totally truthful, you'll put any kind of punishment or lecturing to the side. Help your teenager understand that these are extraordinary circumstances, and that the consequences of lying could be much more serious than getting yelled at or grounded.

10. Remember that your family is a team

Above all, remind your child (and yourself!) that though we're in the middle of a very difficult time, this crisis, like so many others, will pass. We're all on the same team and what we do now will decide what happens next.

Families struggling with preparing their children for reopening should start by taking these ten top tips. You can also reach out to the BDA Safeguarding team for help and advice by emailing safeguarding@burlingtondanes.org More information, as well as links for extra help and support, can be found at: <https://childmind.org/coping-during-covid-19-resources-for-parents>