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PARENT MINI GUIDE

WHEN HOME BECOMES SCHOOL; SECONDARY STUDENTS



In this Mini-Guide we cover:

- Setting up the physical, learning and social environment for success
- Taking care of yourself while you take care of your family
- Your final year student – special considerations

For more 'Wellbeing done well' resources, visit www.bestprograms4kids.com

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A bit of background

As we watch on, us the world, now united against this aggressive virus, the reality is that many of us are going to be forced into, or turn to, home schooling. Now, I'm sure that for many, this is not something that's on your bucket-list, however, it is the reality of the world we're living in right now. So, as the saying goes, 'a stitch in time saves nine' - getting ahead of the home-schooling curve ball will set you and your family up to be successful.

For many choosing to home-school a child because of, or ahead of, school closures, it will be a first-time experience. You may have a well set-up school system, offering all sorts of content for your child to complete and submit from home, or you might be doing it alone. Either way, outside of the content requirements for your child, there are also other factors that need thinking through and planning for if the experience is to be at all successful.

What follows are some 'getting set up for success' tips and tricks that will work. I know because I have home schooled my own children (4) before and I have chosen, out of my own sense of social responsibility, to withdraw my 2 remaining at school at this time. So, if I can manage home schooling 4 little boys in a teeny-tiny dining room in a London home for 2 years and come out relatively sane, then I know it's do-able for all of us.

The key is starting out as you mean to continue. If you start off by 'having a few days off' and giving into the moaning about staying in a school week routine, you're in for a world of pain. In terms of home-schooling, because your teen is not having to move from class to class and to be distracted by the behaviour of others, you're really looking at reducing the normal school day by one third. Good news for your teen – not such good news for you. But it is an awesome carrot to dangle in front of that unwilling nose surely! Get the work done in the allocated time and the rest of the day is their own to do with as they choose.

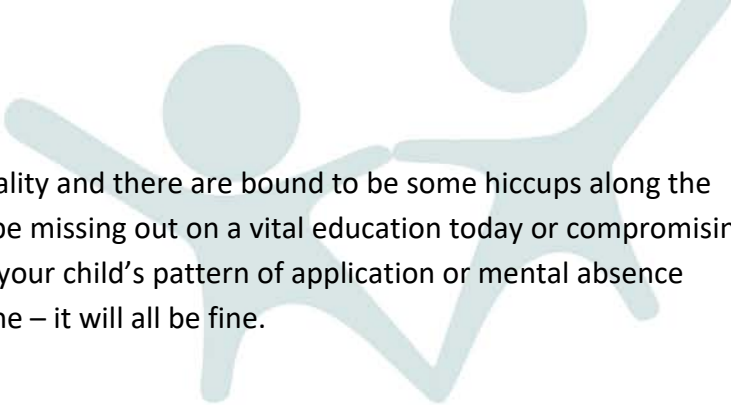
So, let's get going with getting set up for success. It is going to require some flexibility and adjustments, but it's absolutely do-able.

Setting up expectations

Your own

Let's start by not only acknowledging, but greeting the elephant in the room and giving it a name. I'm going to suggest 'Hormones' or maybe 'Resistance.' Yep, you're dealing with a particularly temperamental beast when it comes to teen-wrangling, and home education is not for the feint-hearted. Every day is going to be a grand and wild adventure and while some days will be diamonds, rest assured, some will most definitely be rocks. So, that means that some days the work you expected to get done will get done and other days it won't.

Be prepared for that (but don't mention it to your teen) and roll with it. Just don't let it sneak up into more off days than on.



We're all learning to cope with the current reality and there are bound to be some hiccups along the way. Reassure yourself that your child won't be missing out on a vital education today or compromising their career one day. What you're noticing in your child's pattern of application or mental absence would be happening at school too. Just breathe – it will all be fine.

For learning

Home schooling needs planning and discussion. Absolutely no structured learning should begin without setting up some expectations for how learning is going to happen right at the beginning. So, you're going to need to talk about:

- That this **IS** school. This is not a holiday. This is not optional. A little bit of stroking the teen, 'You're nearly an adult and I know you have the capability to be self-disciplined' ego is in order – even if it's not even close to the truth. Remember, desperate times call for desperate measures. A little bit of ego-stroking is part of your go-to strategy in setting the expectation that school work will get done, seen and submitted.
- How long the school day at home will last. Bank on your teen getting through all the necessary content in about 2/3 of the time they would spend at school. They do not need to be sitting at a desk for 6 hours like they would at school to ensure that learning gets done. Where are you going to place the expected 4 hours of work in the day?
- Your expectation for getting up (on school days) and getting learning. What time will that happen by? How long between waking up and sitting down to start? Try and keep a steady routine going. Set alarms (out of reach of their bed so they have to get up) if you're not going to be at home and make it a **must** that your teen will text you when they're ready to start. Whatever time they text you is officially the start of their school day.
- What time will the first break be? Getting up to move every 30-40 minutes is good for everyone, but a scheduled break (like recess) should be factored in. 25 minutes to get something to eat is more than enough. This is 25 minutes in addition to the required 4 hours.
- Accountability is King! Make it part of your expectation that all notes etc. will be viewed by you at the end of the day. If book reading is involved, mark pages read with a post-it note with the date on. Too easy. If online research is involved, check the 'History' or your teen's browser to see which sites they visited. If you do this from the start, your teen will know you mean business. Whatever you do, don't fall for the 'Don't you trust me?' + hurt look that will be floated. It will only take a few days until it will just become an expected part of your child's school day.



Introducing your teen's brain chemicals

While there may be times when you wonder what's going on in your teen's brain, these years are some of the most extraordinary in the neurological life of your child. A number of incredible processes are happening up there in that amazing brain – even though, at times, you may well wonder if there are any signs of intelligent life at all!

Let's take a very quick through the big brain chemicals that you can remember simply using the DOSE acronym.

Dopamine – this is the attention, focus and reward chemical used by the brain – it is the learning chemical. Dopamine is primed in response to movement and interest. The position of the body informs the brain on which chemical needs to be dominant. (Yes, this is a very simple explanation – in reality there are a bazillion other factors. But, for the sake of simplicity, let's stick to the basics.)

When you sit up straight, it signals to your brain that attention is needed and the dopamine pump starts spinning. When you slouch or lay back, your brain says, 'Time to relax' and floods your system with the love chemical called Oxytocin – more on that in a tick. So, choosing a position to work in that's not bed or laying back on the couch is pretty essential. And so is movement – especially for boys. Girls can sit for much longer periods of time with dopamine being retained and used by the brain. Boys – not so much. They are very movement dependent (think spinning pens, jiggling legs, swinging on chairs) to keep up any dopamine in the brain. Feeding your teen protein-rich food is also a very good way to keep that dopamine pump working, so make sure breakfast and snacks are a good source of protein.

Oxytocin – mentioned before, this is the love hormone for sure! When you lay back on the couch at night and start to feel a little sleepy and relaxed, thoughts pop into your head but don't linger long – that's oxytocin at work. It doesn't matter if you lay back on the couch in the morning instead of at night – oxytocin will still come visiting.

Oxytocin and Dopamine are not really 'go together' – it's pretty hard to focus and relax at the same time. So, setting up your home school needs to take into account having a work space that's conducive to focus and attention, not daydreaming and space-cadeting.

Serotonin – the happy chemical. Yep, this is what your teen needs to feel happy, satisfied, motivated and connected. Interestingly, we make more serotonin when we smile – the human body is a magnificent thing! In these troubling times, finding time to laugh and smile, connect deeply and have your teen laughing with friends, at funny (to them) YouTubes and family shenanigans is a huge help.

Endorphins – the feel goods. Exercising, socialising, listening to music – all activities that can get endorphins flowing. While you're home schooling, make sure that you find ways for your teen to cash in on this terrific little pick-me-up. Anything that requires repetitive learning can be done outside, throwing a ball against a wall or while bouncing on the trampoline. If the frustration gets too much, find a way to work it out – your punching bag is a good start. All these sorts of up-and-at-'em activities get the endorphins flowing.



Setting up the right physical environment

I implore you to resist the urge to let your teen study on the couch or in their bed. Read the section on brain chemicals above if you're unsure why. And let's add to that the need to keep your teen's bedroom and relax areas for the purposes that one does not usually associate with learning. This situation may well go on for a while, and everyone is going to need to carve out their own space. So try and start by assigning areas of your home for specific purposes. It will be much easier in the long run.

You may or may not, have an area that your teen settles to do homework etc. but now is the time to get that sorted. Avoid the dining room table if possible. It might seem ideal but if it's in the middle of noise and busyness it will be too distracting. And having to pack away books and notes every time a meal is served at the table is very annoying. Find a place that your teen is happy to study – making sure that if it's their room the door remains open during school times. This is a non-negotiable. It doesn't have to be anything fancy – so don't go and spend big dollars on a desk and chair. Have a look and see what you've got at home and get your creative on. As long as your teen feels like it's their little nook, simple will become school very quickly.

Set this spot up for success. What supplies does your teen need in this space so that they're not always in your face asking where the sharpener is, or if you have a highlighter. Again, it doesn't have to be fancy – just enough so that they can work without too many needs getting in the way.

Part of your teen's physical environment is most likely going to include something to play music from. To stop the endless scrolling (also known as loudly justified time-wasting) through Spotify, get your teen to set up their play list. A good idea is to set up a four-and-a-half hour playlist – when it's done, so is school. Headphones are a good idea if you have more than one child working in that space – less complaining about who is playing what louder. Actually, headphones all round for anyone working at home should be considered vital equipment.

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Setting up the right physical environment

Lean into technology

Yes, we've all been hysterically keeping our teens off social media and out of chat rooms and now, we're going to have to seriously re-think that plan. Your teen is a social beast. Their interactions with peers and connections with friends are their prime drivers for happiness. So, think about how you can make this work in your home, knowing that your teen is going to spend more time online than they otherwise might.

Does your teen have a friend or small group of friends they study well with? If so, encourage them to work with that person or people every day. Yes, there's going to be some giggling and a lot of time spent yakking and not working – but it's filling their emotional bucket and they'll be more willing to sit down to complete work if they know that at least one of their scheduled 'periods' in the day is going to be spent with friends.



Be vigilant

Just like any other time, be vigilant with tech-use while home schooling. Talk about responsible use of tech during designated work times and as far as possible, take the time to police it in the early days while you find your rhythm. You may well be a parent who is also self-isolating which makes this easier – but you may still be having to work out of home while your teen is at home, so start to figure out how you can track how much time your child is spending online - and when. There are numerous apps that can be used to track where your child is spending time online so get in there and use them. This is definitely needed in your ‘kicking off home schooling’ discussions with your teen.

Everyone has to give a bit. You’re going to give them a bit more time online and they’re going to give you a bit more visibility about where they’re spending their time. Be prepared early with some reasonable consequences for not sticking to your agreement – it really will help you to stay on top of what can become a very big problem for a teen who is socially isolated and having to be very self-disciplined. Suitable consequences would include reducing available time in the following day – nothing too over the top but enough to send a message that you mean business.

Setting up the right learning environment

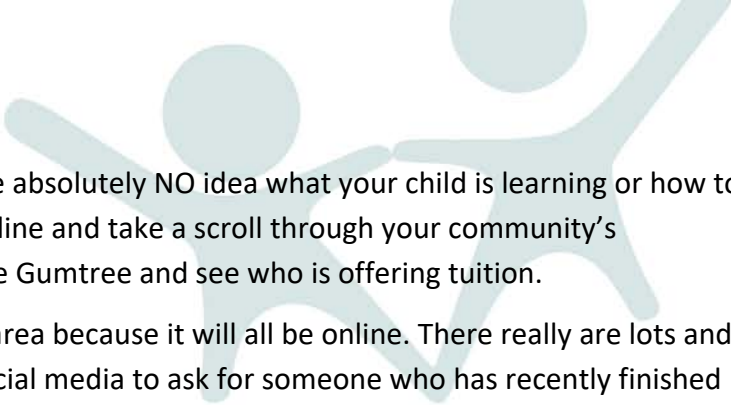
Right, this is the really important stuff. Getting this right will save you lots of time and tears (most likely your own) later. Remember, part of the expectations are that this is school from home – not extended holidays. Start right, from the start with this, and it will stop much of the carry-on about what their friends might be doing – or not doing - and what a terrible parent you are.

Use the existing timetable

It’s like a little gift ready for you to unwrap. Honestly, it truly is the simplest approach to structuring a school day. I know what you’ll get otherwise is, “I don’t have any science to do...” Rubbish! Every day your teen will have different subjects scheduled on their timetable from school with content that needs to be covered.

Other than subjects like woodwork (which you may be set up for), stick to the core subjects and just get them done in the order that they appear on the timetable. If you can’t find any content provided by your school, go through your child’s course outline and see what chapters of their texts they’re supposed to be focusing on and do that. The chapter can be summarised, you can ask to have the 5 top concepts explained in a paragraph each, you can ask to have the workbook (if available) completed. Get creative. If your school hasn’t given you a direction – choose your own. You can even plan to go off-piste – like cutting your own path through the curriculum. Use the basic material and then set up project-based learning around it.

Honestly, there is just so much useful stuff your teen could be learning at this time and if it’s not exactly aligned to the curriculum, they will be alright. Perhaps the only instance that this might not be true is if your teen is in their last 2 years of school. If this is your situation – don’t panic. Schools are prioritising the needs of their leavers so you will get what you need.



What you might find, instead, is that you have absolutely NO idea what your child is learning or how to help them. Again, no need for panic. Jump online and take a scroll through your community's marketplace on social media or a platform like Gumtree and see who is offering tuition.

It doesn't even need to be someone in your area because it will all be online. There really are lots and lots of options. Don't be afraid to use your social media to ask for someone who has recently finished school and done well in your teen's subject areas. This is a good source of support for your teen and a very good spend of your dollars!

So, back to the timetable. Get your teen to progress through their timetable in the same order they would in the school day. 30 minutes of course work and 15 minutes of revision or planning for the next lesson by looking on your school's messaging system.

Check your child's course outline to see when assignments are due – and request the assignment from the teacher if it's not provided online. Get your child to complete the assignment to the set deadline. This should be the extra 45 minutes your child will have each day in order to make up their school day.

Have scheduled breaks

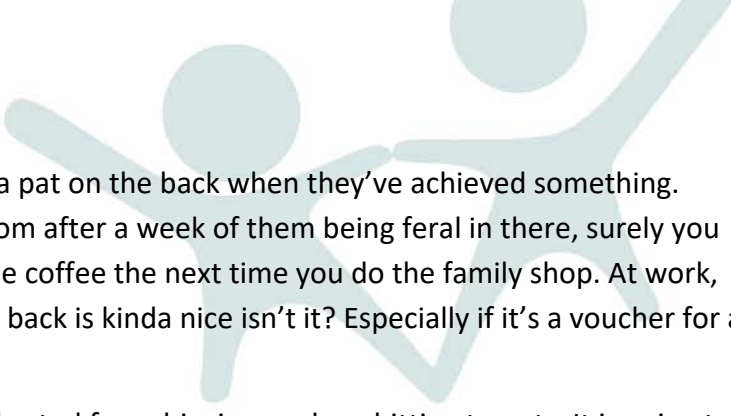
When you're negotiating when your 4 hours of schooling will happen each day, bank on your teen wanting – and needing – to take a break. This should resemble their normal morning break. Up to 25 minutes is a good block of time to get something to eat and to respond to the 3456 messages that will have accrued before the break (😊).

Set a timer – or get them to set a timer. Plan the snack! Honestly, it seems too simple but when your teen is 'staaarrvvving', they're going to spend at least 10 minutes hanging off the fridge door declaring that there's nothing to eat. They're going to spend the next 10 minutes texting their friends about their atrocious living conditions and 5 minutes on the toilet. At this point, without enough planning, they still won't have had anything to eat and will think that, "Just making some muffins really quickly" is a thing. It's not a thing but it will be a thing if you let it. So, don't! Get ahead of your teen's indecision and inability to decide what they feel like by having a regular snack planned – just like they would for school.

Make rewards very clear

Yeah, yeah – every single parenting expert on the planet will tell you how your child needs to be intrinsically motivated. We say to that – rubbish! You have a teenager who has not seen their floor in the past 18 months and you're banking on them being self-motivated?

Once the hilarity of that dies down, start thinking about what you can offer as an incentive to get their agreed quota of work done. Use something that's real currency for your teen – remembering that we're living in unprecedented times, so offering something that makes you twitch with anxiety it quite OK. Maybe it's extra gaming time on the weekend. Maybe it's the promise of a shopping expedition at the end of this madness with a bounty of cash. You know what makes your child tick – so get on with it and use it against them... or when you're talking to them – with them.



The simple fact is – every single human loves a pat on the back when they’ve achieved something. When you’ve cleaned your child/ren’s bathroom after a week of them being feral in there, surely you want to reward yourself with a really awesome coffee the next time you do the family shop. At work, when you hit a milestone, having a pat on the back is kinda nice isn’t it? Especially if it’s a voucher for a lovely meal or bottle of wine.

Our teens love to be rewarded and to be celebrated for achieving goals or hitting targets. It is going to be a very important part of your family’s success during the home schooling experience.

Have ‘no random chatter’ times

Whether you’re working from home by choice or not, being distracted by random chatter can get very irritating very quickly. Maybe you haven’t spent an extended period of time with a 14-year-old. Let me break it down for you. Long rambling stories seem to go on and on and then go nowhere. You stop listening – even though you’re nodding and smiling – and then there’s the ‘apparently’ hilarious punchline. You nearly miss that too but manage to respond in a way that would indicate that you were actually listening all along. In short, your teen is going to want to ‘hang out’ with you – even though yesterday you were officially the most boring and embarrassing person on the planet. It’s not good news. This random chatter can also be an awesome excuse for dodging work and filling up their ‘school hours’ but what it does actually mean is that you will get distracted from doing what you need to do.

So, like your ‘only tell me if there’s lots of blood’ rule when your child was much younger and came to you with their ‘invisible to the human eye’ wounds that appeared to be almost like an amputation, get a similar rule in place now. While the work session is on (from starting time until break-time, end of break-time until end of school day), unless there is something to report that would stop the globe – it **can** wait!

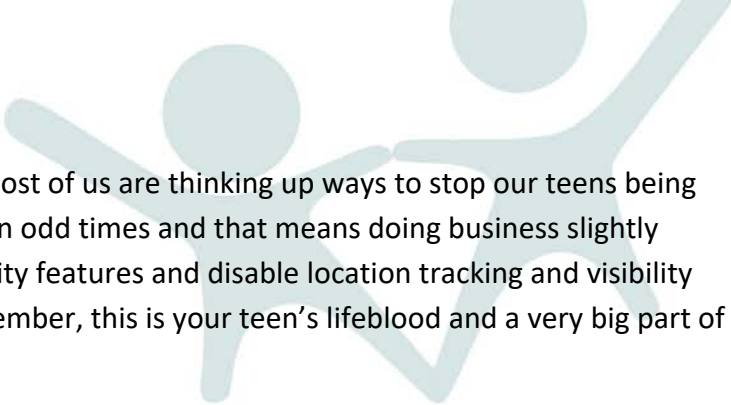
Get them outside

The sunshine’s free gift of Vitamin D is an essential ingredient in good mental health and wellbeing. In fact, studies from around the world make note of the high correlation of Vitamin D deficiency and depression. As we navigate our way through rocky social, emotional and learning territory with our teens at this time, there are some relatively simple ways to help them into healthier practices than they might otherwise not engage in – and getting them outside is certainly one simple way that packs a powerful punch for their mental health and general wellbeing.

Having at least one learning session outside in your garden is good for your teen in lots of ways. Getting them out of the house and looking at something different opens the brain to new ways of thinking and relieves stress. Try planning what part of the day might be good to spend learning outside – choose a subject that has low need for a device.

Check up and check in

Social: Your teen’s social world is their primary driver to get out of bed every day. With social distancing in place, it means missing out on parties and social gatherings – which can be very disappointing. Help your child to connect – safely of course – to their friends online. This might be through private chat groups or using a messaging app when gaming.



It seems quite odd to be saying this – when most of us are thinking up ways to stop our teens being glued to their phones. However, we’re living in odd times and that means doing business slightly differently. Make sure you check all the security features and disable location tracking and visibility outside their select group of friends, but remember, this is your teen’s lifeblood and a very big part of their happiness.

Once this is all over, we can all go back to a much more conservative approach to allowing our teens access to social messaging during the school week.

Take the time to sit with your teen and ask how their social interactions are going – just as you normally would. Who’s fighting, who’s dating, whose parent is being insufferable?

Emotional: It’s fair to say that every one of us is feeling anxious at this time – about the virus situation and spread, how our families are going to stay well and healthy and how we’re going to keep our jobs and continue to afford to put food on the table. Not all anxiety is bad – this situation requires us to be more alert than usual so we remember to wash our hands and avoid physical contact outside our homes. But, anxiety can grow into more than that – especially for your teen who is more self, family and world aware.

Talk often about how they’re feeling – what their fears and worries are. Try hard to limit their obsessing over counts of numbers and stories of infection and death. Get creative with your ways to help them stay connected to their emotional anchors – maybe it’s their grandparents or sport coach. These are important stabilisers for your teen – so connect with these people over Skype (or similar) where they can keep up regular contact.

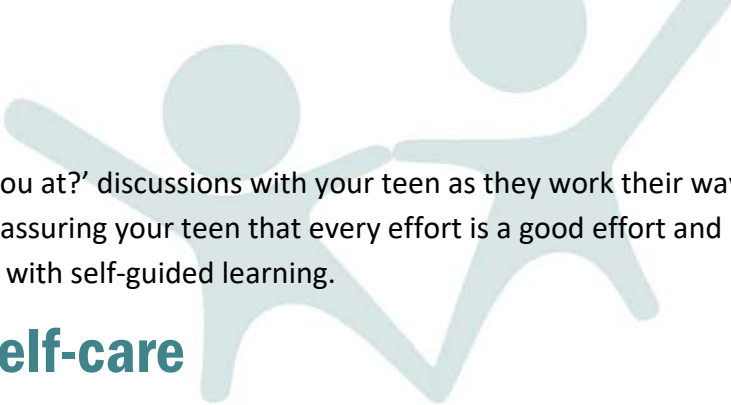
Now, more than ever, it’s very important to keep an eye on the mood of your teen. Fluctuations in mood are very, very normal and to-be-expected at this time of life anyway, however, an extended period of being down, changes in eating and sleeping, and changes in social connectedness need to be part of what you keep an eye on.

Reach out to your family doctor if you’re at all concerned about where your teen is at. The reality is – they are going to be very worried and that can grow into something all-encompassing and unmanageable if you’re not watching for it very carefully.

Learning: Have we mentioned before that your teen might show you those big, ‘but you can trust me!’ eyes – and they’re not to be trusted. School from home is a brand new experience for many, and without the structure of a school day it can feel a lot like a holiday – and become one if you’re not careful.

Take the time to help your teen set up their day before it begins. If you’re going to go out the door for work before they’re due to get up in the morning, do the set up the night before. Set some goals and help your teen to be accountable.

Without the support of their teacher and support staff, your child might feel quite unable to make sense of the content they’re covering. We are fortunate to live in the age of digital connection – so make use of it. If your child is struggling and starting to become resistant to completing set work, have a look online and see who can help. Help can come in quite unexpected ways – like looking on YouTube for a video explaining how to write an essay or figure out a tricky maths problem.



It's very important to have these 'where are you at?' discussions with your teen as they work their way through a curriculum that is complex. Keep reassuring your teen that every effort is a good effort and that everyone else is in exactly the same boat with self-guided learning.

Setting up for your own self-care

Working and educating from home can start off feeling like something fun and different and rapidly grow into something that feels claustrophobic and all consuming. Home becomes school, the office... everything! Those walls can feel like they're closing in if you're not careful to think through what you need to keep you sane and healthy while in self-isolation.

Starting with yourself and addressing your needs is the lynchpin in keeping your family together at this time. Do you have a daily wellbeing practice? Been too busy up until now to even think about it? Well, there's no time like the (very strange) present to get going. There are literally hundreds of apps that you can download that guide you through meditation and mindfulness practices. If this just isn't your thing, find yourself 5 songs you just love (that's about 20 minutes of listening) and walk around your back garden while you listen to them. Try and still your mind and just be in the moment while you're doing that. You might like to get into the world of podcasts – there are heaps out there and they can be a sensational 20-minute break. The important thing is to do something and stick to it. It's good for your teen to see you doing this too.

While you're all living in each other's pockets at home, try and become aware of the things that really 'get your goat.' Maybe it's the child who walks around snapping and clapping and it drives you bonkers. Maybe it's coping with the idle chatter and meme-sharing of a teen for hours on end that can feel soul destroying. For families who will be spending LOTS of time together for the foreseeable future, having some good boundaries around space and accessibility are essential. Try not to react in the moment it's happening. Rather, set aside some time every few days to meet as a family unit and talk through what's going on and what needs to change. Far less intense and emotionally draining that way.

We really do beg you to think very carefully about looking after yourself at this time. Looking after everyone else in a family – especially distraught teens – is emotionally draining. Keep the chatting about what's happening out in the world in terms of the virus to a minimum. It is happening and it does require conversation – but certainly not all the time. Try and have days where you try not to mention it at all.

Get yourself a good plan for looking after your own mental health and wellbeing and stay connected to your social network too. In times of crisis, it is often the most capable and competent in the family who bear the burden of everyone's stresses and woes. Self-care – it's not a luxury, it's a **MUST**.



A special note for your final year secondary student

Grief

It's very natural for there to be a sense of real grief over missing out. The last year of school has lots of privileges, events and traditions that your teen will have been looking forward to for a very long time. To feel cheated of experiencing all of that is going to take some working through. Your teen is not being dramatic – and you might find that their grief comes in waves. Just like any experience of grieving a loss, having someone there who can listen is the most important protective factor.

It's not fair and you don't have to dress this up as anything other than not fair. But you also have to hold the line on how far the grieving goes. Do lots of things to break a mood that lingers – cook together, download and watch a new show together, plan next year's Easter holiday – anything that takes your teen out of their sorrowful now.

A very good antidote to grief that settles in is a community project. Now, while your teen can't get out into the community, there are lots of things they can do to assist someone less well off than themselves. This will need some research, maybe some phone calls and a plan. All of these actions help your teen to put their situation into perspective and to hold steady emotionally.

Stress

The stress hormone cortisol builds up and up, and without fun and movement, it can become a very heavy emotional burden. Make a plan for regular exercise – make it fun. Look up celebrity workouts and superhero workouts (my boys use and love these) and work them into your daily routine.

Anything that disrupts your teen's stress build-up is useful. Learn a new card game, dig out an old boardgame and get the family challenge happening. Our family happen to LOVE Settlers of Catan and all the add-ons, and we often use that to distract a stressed child. You can shop for boardgames online or ask to borrow some from people in your community.

Working to demand

It's going to be tough meeting deadlines and keeping up with content without having the hand-holding of the teacher your teen is used to. You might have access to your child's teacher online which is helpful, but if not, your teen is going to have to work to demand independently. Set up a whiteboard by dividing it into their subject areas, the number of weeks in the term and then map on the content from their course outline. That should include chapters of texts, assignments and possibly marking guides. Once it's all mapped out, it's much easier to know what to work on and when.

Lengthening the hours if they're tertiary entrance seeking

You're going to find that 4 hours a day for your teen who is in the tertiary entrance pathway is not enough. For every 45 minutes of coursework your teen should also be committing to 45 minutes of study. That will be more than enough to keep them up-to-date.

Getting it all in perspective

There is nothing more irritating to my teen boys than when I say, “Keep it all in perspective – children in Africa are starving every day...” That doesn’t help our 1st world, over-indulged teens to cope and get perspective.

Acts of service – like chatting to bored isolated grandparents or writing a letter to someone in a local retirement village can be simple ways of reminding your teen that we’re all in this together and that everyone is taking a hit.

There is most likely going to be some high emotion and heavy catastrophising and that’s quite OK for a while – it is highly emotional and heavily catastrophic – but it’s not useful if that goes on and on. There are lots of ways your teen is already a global citizen, with their huge reach into the world through their little phone screen. Help them to keep perspective by remembering that people all over the globe are not only fighting for survival, but also fighting to find a cure, to help others and to stay safe.

Expect that this will be a bit of a wild rollercoaster, but hold the line when it comes to repeated or sustained over-dramatising and “poor me” thinking.

We’re all in this together

We are – all of us. Not one of us is going to emerge from this situation in the same shape as we went in. We want you to know that we’re going to be thinking hard about how we can continue to help families just like yours over the months to come. While our world has changed dramatically in just a few short months, we can all come out of this better humans if we remember to lean in with love – to our family, our community and our country.

We wish you and your family safe and well. We’re grateful that you’re part of our global and growing family and we’re here to help if you would like us to provide other resources specific to the social, emotional and learning wellbeing of your family. Please do email us at info@bestprograms4kids.com.

Take great care – and love that crazy teen of yours with all you’ve got!



Claire and Helen

