

# Helping Your Child Manage Disappointment About Abrupt Changes to the End of the School Year

As concern grows over stopping the spread of 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19), many of the nation's high school students and children of all ages have experienced school closures, remote learning, and the cancellation of extracurricular and seasonal activities and highly anticipated milestone events, such as playoff games, prom, and graduation.

“In response to these changes, youth may exhibit many emotions, including confusion, anger, disappointment, and sadness,” says Rebecca R. Berry, PhD, clinical associate professor in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone Health and also part of its Child Study Center. “It can be hard for parents to offer a quick solution, or for youth to find a ‘silver lining’ in the middle of it all—and that’s OK.”

Dr. Berry, in partnership with the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's WonderLab, offers strategies to help both parents and their children learn to process and manage these difficult feelings.

## Listen Actively to Your Adolescent's Concerns

Adolescents usually carry high expectations for events that offer excitement and fun. So, it is understandable that they may not want to discuss thoughts or concerns about

losing out on an important social or educational experience at first. “Allowing them time to process provides opportunities to work through any intense emotions,” Dr. Berry says.

Extend an invitation to speak about the situation when they feel ready. When this conversation happens, give your adolescent space to share their feelings and listen without passing judgment. “Try not to interrupt with other viewpoints,” Dr. Berry adds.

“Importantly, avoid reassuring your teen that everything will be ‘OK,’ or this is ‘fine’ or, ‘not a big deal with everything else going on.’ Statements along these lines might serve to dismiss or invalidate their feelings and sometimes lead to more anger.” Instead, offer a calm presence and focus on being with them as they learn to manage overwhelming emotions, she says.

## **Validate Their Feelings**

In the context of these unprecedented life circumstances and abrupt social changes, young people may be feeling more upset, and have difficulty hearing advice from parents suggesting they should consider the “positive” side of their current circumstances, such as saying, “at least you can finish the year online,” or, “there will be other parties.”

Loved ones can instead acknowledge that adolescents are under real stress, and share that their feelings about missing a highly anticipated or milestone event are

reasonable, especially when they may have committed a large amount of time and energy into a project. For example: “I understand that this is really frustrating. It stinks to not get to do something that you’ve worked on or looked forward to for months or even the entire year. This is a really hard thing to miss out on.” Expressing that it is OK for their adolescents to feel what they are feeling is the most valuable message a parent can convey to them in this time.

Parents should also empathize with their adolescent’s disappointment related to missing out on meaningful time spent with friends, as well as with any worries about losing opportunities to engage in activities expected to help them with college applications and scholarships.

### **Follow Their Lead When Problem Solving or Offering Solutions**

“Often, adolescents may not want solutions to their problems or strategies for coping with disappointment or loss; they simply want acknowledgment,” Dr. Berry says. “Try avoiding promises about rescheduling events or making up for lost time. Instead, focus on encouraging self-care, scheduling pleasant activities, engaging in other ways to connect socially, and finding meaningful ways to support the community.”

Eventually, teens may want to find ways to recreate cancelled events, such as putting on a virtual play for close friends or family, recording a Google Hangout music jam session and broadcasting it online, or getting dressed

up for a makeshift prom in the living room. “But this should be on their own time and on their own terms—don’t force this process,” Dr. Berry says. “Help them work through uncertainty about how any break from extracurricular activities may impact their future by highlighting ways to achieve a sense of mastery and accomplishment in current coursework. Express confidence in your child’s ability to adjust to these changes, and help them establish new, flexible goals as needed.”

When helping adolescents handle the significant academic and social changes and related emotions related to the COVID-19 public health crisis, acknowledgement is key. “Youth are more likely to remember how parents responded to their feelings, and also will recognize the efforts made to help them cope more effectively with these new experiences,” Dr. Berry adds.

#### **More Resources for Parents**

Dr. Berry suggests the following online resources to parents:

- [American Academy of Pediatrics Parenting Website](#)
- PBS: [How to Talk to Your Kids About Coronavirus](#)