

For Families

Remembering Our Humanity as We Support Adolescents

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This partner essay by Laurie Ewert-Krocker was written during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has placed new restrictions on adolescents. These timely suggestions establish a baseline of what adolescents may need in their relationships with adults.

What Do Adolescents Need Right Now?

Adolescents need us to remember that they are fundamentally human beings who want to be respected and treated with the same level of dignity with which we treat other adults. Montessori education recognizes that we all share the same human tendencies and basic needs throughout our lives — and that as children grow through stages of development particular needs and characteristics are highlighted and need support to build the potential of adulthood. In a time of instability, it's important to remember what's fundamental for *all* human beings — and then consider particularly what is important to teens right now.

The need to orient

We are all experiencing new and changing schedules as well as significantly restricted environments. Adolescents suddenly have limited access to peers and adults other than parents and family members. They will grieve this loss on some level. Not having their peers and their 'tribe' close by will be impactful for them on a social/emotional level. Sensitivity to that loss is paramount. They are also going

to experience different kinds of expectations than is usual — from teachers, from parents, from friends. And those expectations are likely to change as everyone follows a learning curve and responds to unpredictable events. These expectations might also go unarticulated or be ineffectively communicated. Adolescents need the people in their lives to help them orient to the changing conditions of their lives right now. Clarity, patience, and kind honesty need to rule the day.

The need for order

We all need enough order and some level of predictability to stay healthy and functional. Everyday chaos is overwhelming. Routines will be helpful — just as long as the routine considers the adolescents' needs as well as everyone else's. Their need for order will be more internal than external, while adults might cling to external order as an anchor. Give them some space to own their own disorder (like in their rooms) and express where order is helpful to them. Lovingly explain how order helps each person in the family to feel safe and secure — but perhaps in different ways. Offer to help them keep order from time to time — rather than demanding it.



One idea: Have regular family meetings to check in with everyone (even if there are only two of you!). What's going well? What's challenging? What are everyone's current needs? How can we help each other? How can we paint a picture of a hopeful future with each other? How can we share some quality time together that is fun, joyful, playful? What will make us laugh?

The need to imagine positive outcomes

Adolescents need a certain level of consistency and assurance from adults about the future; we will get through this! Help them imagine what that will look and feel like. Invite them to consider positive changes for the future based on what they are experiencing and perceiving. They need messages of hope and regular assurances that their needs are being considered and attended to as best the family can. But beware — they can tell if you are being disingenuous — so this means incorporating hope and faith in the future into your own outlook.

The need for work

'Work' is what we all do to contribute to the sustaining of our lives and our communities. Humans work to adapt to

the environment and improve life. Work gives us purpose and meaning. For an adolescent, work needs to feel relevant and valuable — not just something to keep them 'busy' or 'out of people's hair'. Work needs to feel either like a valuable step toward their future or like a contribution to the community's needs. Their schoolwork should feel like it has a purpose in their lives. The work they do for the family needs to feel like a contribution. Can there be a family rotation of chores, menu-planning, cooking, and so forth that includes the adolescent — but also considers that their timeline for getting things done might be a little different than an adult's? (If they don't get something done until later in the day or week than you would like, be patient and let the timeline be theirs, if possible.)

Is there service work they can do in their family or for their community while maintaining social distancing? Can they put your family budget on a spreadsheet to track expenses? Can they work in the yard or take on repair or maintenance projects like painting or building? Can they write letters to elderly relatives? Can they make babysitting kits for families with young children? Can they record storytelling or reading aloud sessions online for the

children of busy working-at-home parents? Can they make board games and mail them to children of family friends? Can they put together simple building kits for children? Use some of their own Legos to create unique construction kits? (Disinfect and mail or drop off outside the door?) Organize music playlists for people? Can they sew protective masks?

The need for communication

Communication may be humanity's number one need right now. Adolescents need lots of communication opportunities — lots of opportunities to share what they are thinking and feeling.

- Communication from parents: Regular, short meetings and check-ins that ask them how they are doing and feeling (not just *telling* what the adults need and think); honest, clear information about what is happening in the world (but not that everyone is swirling around in the worst-case scenarios); lots of 'I' statements from adults: 'I think this is what is happening'; 'I think this is what we need; but what do *you* think?'
- Task and responsibility charts for the family where everyone gets to choose several tasks from a list and

commit to a timeframe for completing them; a sense that everyone is partnering in the situation and no one is shouldering the labour for everyone else.

- Examine your own expectations for your adolescents: What are you expecting them to take on (like care of siblings or housework)? Has that been articulated? Have they been diplomatically asked and negotiated with? Do you know how they feel about that? Adolescents are often very willing and able to step up into adult roles when needed — but they need to feel that they are being treated with respect and that their perspective is considered.
- Communication from peers: Peers are an adolescent's primary need, so making sure they have access to friends and classmates is crucial. Seeing their peers face-to-face online regularly would be helpful. Relaxing the phone and technology rules a bit for now makes sense — but not at night when sleep is still the primary mental and physical health requirement for adolescents.

The need for self-expression

Adolescence is a time of life focused on identity formation and internal processing. Self-expression happens through open dialogue with others but also through the arts and



physical activity. Being restricted from playing sports and going to music or dance lessons is going to be painful. How can they continue to be involved in their chosen forms of self-expression? What space and materials might they need to set up a studio or workout space at home? Are there online programmes that can keep them motivated? (Don't be surprised if they feel the need to have a digital connection with friends while they engage in self-expression activities.)

One of the insights of a Montessori approach to education is that whatever a child/adolescent might be doing in the moment (that may look questionable to our adult minds), there may be a very important human drive or developmental reason behind it. We try to stop ourselves from reacting, observe, consider what that need might be, and respond by supporting. Knowing that our human tendencies are always an active force in our lives — but may look different at different times — helps us to consider our own humanity and the humanity of those around us. We will all be compelled to orient, order, work, explore, communicate, abstract, imagine, self-express in the coming time — but those tendencies will look different for each of us. Our everyday work will not only be to remain consistent, calm, and flexible, but to work at truly *seeing* and *listening* to each other.