



Mott Poll Report

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How the Pandemic Has Impacted Teen Mental Health

Restrictions put in place to contain COVID-19 may be particularly difficult for teens, who rely heavily on their peer and social connections for emotional support. In 2021, the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents about the emotional impact pandemic restrictions have had on their teens age 13-18.

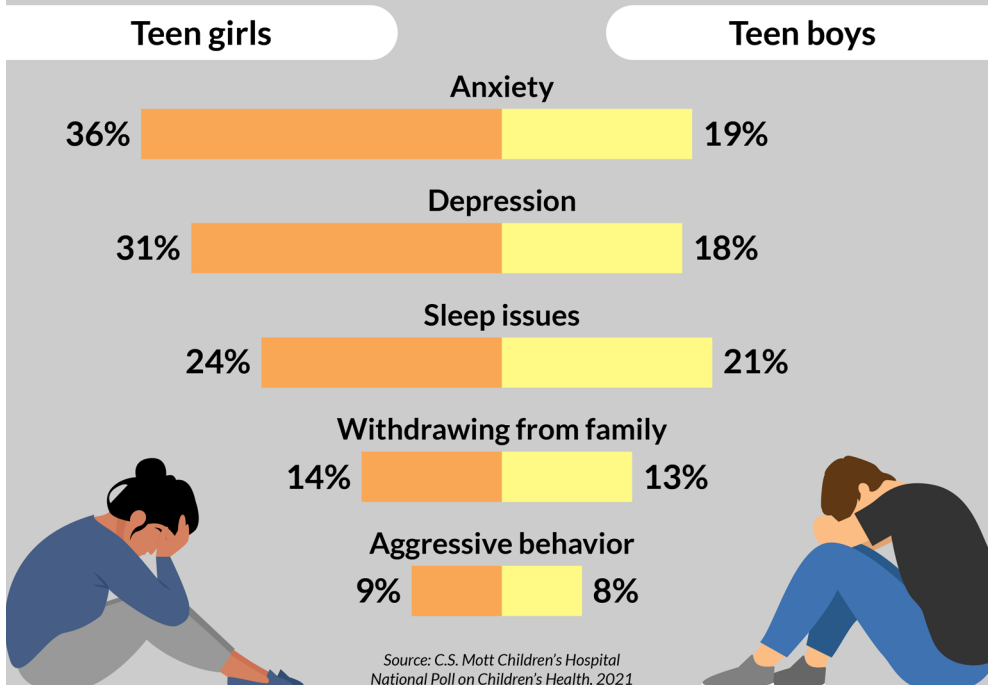
In describing how their teens have been connecting with peers in recent months, many parents say their teens have been texting (64%) and using social media (56%), as well as online gaming (43%) and talking on the phone (35%), every day or almost every day. Few parents say their teens have been getting together in person with friends daily or almost every day, indoors (9%) or outdoors (6%).

Most parents (73%) report that COVID-19 has had a very or somewhat negative impact on their teen's ability to interact with their friends. Around half of parents (46%) say they have noticed a new or worsening mental health condition for their teen since the start of the pandemic. Parent report of pandemic-related mental health change reflects some differences for teen girls and boys. More parents of teen girls than parents of teen boys note an increase in anxiety/worry (36% vs 19%) or depression/sadness (31% vs 18%). In contrast, similar proportions of parents report negative changes in their teen's sleep (24% vs 21%), withdrawing from family (14% vs 13%) and aggressive behavior (8% vs 9%).

Parents who note negative changes in their teen's mental health have tried various strategies to help their teen. Half (52%) have tried relaxing family COVID-19 rules to allow their teen to have more contact with friends; most of these (81%) say it has helped. Similarly, half of parents (47%) have tried relaxing family rules about social media; most (70%) report it helped. One-third of parents (34%), report talking with teachers or school counselors, with over half (57%) saying it helped. One in four parents (29%) report seeking help for their teen from a mental health provider, with most (74%) feeling it helped. One-third of parents (32%) report looking for information on the internet, with 58% saying it helped; and one-quarter of parents (25%) report encouraging their teen to try web-based program or an app to improve their mental health, and 60% say it has helped.

Effects of the pandemic on teen mental health

Percent of parents noticing a new problem or worsening of an existing problem



Report Highlights

3 in 4 parents say COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their teens being able to interact with friends.

1 in 3 teen girls and 1 in 5 teen boys have experienced new or worsening anxiety since March 2020.

Half of parents have relaxed family rules to allow their teen more contact with friends.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in January 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,002). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 977 parents with at least one child age 13-18. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 5 percentage points and higher among subgroups.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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Implications

Although serious illness from COVID-19 is uncommon among teens, the changes brought on by the pandemic have wreaked havoc on their lives. Many have experienced disruptions to their normal routines including closed schools, canceled activities and an inability to hang out with friends and extended family. Parents in this Mott Poll have shared that there has been a significant mental health impact of the pandemic for many of their teens.

At just the age when they are biologically primed to seek independence from their families, restrictions to control the COVID-19 pandemic have kept teens at home. As a result, most parents in this Mott Poll reported that COVID-19 has had a substantial negative impact on their teen's ability to interact with their friends. It is no surprise that many teens are feeling frustrated, anxious and disconnected due to social distancing and disruption of their usual schedules for school and outside activities.

These problems may be new for some teens, but for others they may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Nearly half of parents in this Mott Poll reported either a new or worsening mental health condition for their teen since the start of the pandemic. It can be challenging for parents to assess the seriousness of the situation, and when it may be necessary to seek outside help. Although teens can experience a wide range of severity of mental health problems, if parents hear their teen express any thoughts of suicide or self-harm, it is important to seek mental health assistance immediately.

The most common pandemic-related mental health condition was depression and anxiety, noticed by 1 in 3 parents of teen girls and 1 in 5 parents of teen boys. Recent research has shown teen depression during the pandemic to be associated with teens' own fears and uncertainties, as well as high levels of parental stress. Many parents said they have relaxed family rules with regard to interactions with peers and time on social media. Some parents also found that engaging a healthcare provider and/or therapist has helped their teen. Parents also may want to consider whether they are transferring some of their own pandemic-related stress onto their teens.

Parents have a critical role to play in helping their teens cope with the stress of the pandemic. However, around 1 in 7 parents reported their teen has withdrawn from family since the start of the pandemic. Mental health experts advise that one of the most important things for parents to do is keep lines of communication open; ask their teen how they are doing and create the space for them to speak honestly so they can provide help when needed. Parents also need to remember it is normal for teens to crave privacy from their family. Giving them space for some quiet time, creative time or music time can be helpful to their mental health.

Mental health apps are another strategy that can make therapy more accessible, efficient, and portable, and some parents in the Poll said they were helpful for their teen. Parents should consult their primary care provider or other trusted sources for app recommendations and for online resources about teen mental health.

Many authorities in child health also emphasize the importance of sleep for teens, especially when they are under stress. Almost 1 in 4 parents in this Mott Poll said their teens were experiencing negative changes in their sleep. In these situations, parents can help their teens craft a healthy and productive routine to their days and nights, including a regular sleep and wake time that fits with their online learning schedule and their interactions with peers and family.