Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

COVID-19: How Missing Milestones is Impacting Teen Mental Health

Behavioral Health

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Editor's Note: This is part of our Mental Health Awareness Month blog post series, which focuses on how COVID-19 impacts child and family behavioral health. We invite you to check back for new posts or to follow along for updates on Twitter at @PolicyLabCHOP.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted and will continue to disrupt the lives of adolescents in so many ways, including missing or delaying milestones that so many teens look forward to. For high school seniors, most traditional events marking the culmination of their high school careers, such as prom, spring break, senior week festivities and graduation ceremonies, have been cancelled. High schoolers planning to attend college cannot visit campuses to assist them in making their choices. For athletes, there has been no spring season and for musical and theatrical artists, there will be no final performances.

Benchmark birthdays like quinceañaras, sweet sixteens, and turning 18 are being held in quarantine and related milestones such as getting a driver's permit or license are delayed. Some high school students participate in summer internships or programs to build experiences to strengthen their college applications. Others apply for summer jobs or employment after graduation. These sorts of opportunities will likely be delayed, or potentially missed altogether, given our current shelter-in-place directives and probable long-term social distancing measures.

Importantly, the impact of all of these delayed or missed milestones on youth's well-being is still unknown. As researchers and psychologists, we are working to predict these effects and help support teens and families during this time.

Why are Milestones Important for Youth's Well-being and Development?

Participation in activities such as prom, graduation, sports competitions, and theater and musical performances, promotes positive adjustment by providing opportunities for adolescents to build and develop peer relationships. This is an invaluable developmental period for teens as they shift their social interactions from family-focused to peer-focused. Milestones are key for typical adolescent development, and it's through participating in them that teens become more independent by developing cognitive, social, emotional and academic skills that prepare them for adulthood.

Involvement on sports teams or in extracurricular activities or holding a job can facilitate this development and teach teens about cooperation with others, planning and organizing their time, responsibility, and resolving issues that arise outside of the home. Notably, participation in milestones is associated with many positive outcomes over the course of later development, including better physical and mental health.

How Could Missed and Delayed Milestones Impact Adolescent Well-being?

Adolescents are experiencing other significant changes in their lives as a result of COVID-19, including financial stress, safety concerns for self and family, educational changes, and social and physical distancing. These changes, coupled with disrupted milestones, may lead youth to experience feelings of loss and a range of emotions, such as disappointment, sadness, anger, frustration and anxiety, which are likely echoed by their family members who were looking forward to the same events. Teens dedicate time and energy to graduate, to compete in a sport, and to perform or display their art, and they may perceive that now there is no reward for their hard work. For some adolescents, there may be a loss of motivation to continue to work towards their previously established goals and they may begin questioning whether they should continue on their intended path.

For others, there may be a sense of anxiety for these missed milestones, with teens questioning whether this loss will negatively impact their future. If teens are not able to work in the summer, the financial stability of their household may be impacted. Because they are not playing sports, teens are missing opportunities to continue their physical conditioning and to participate in summer leagues, which could impact their potential for college recruitment. For youth already experiencing behavioral health problems, these missed milestones are a particular concern. The cancellation of activities can reinforce symptoms of depression, such as sadness, low motivation and social withdrawal. Adolescent depression has been associated with lowered educational, social and behavioral health functioning into adulthood, and it is not clear whether quarantine or prolonged social distancing measures may exacerbate this association for teens in the future.

As more comes to light about the impact of these changes on mental health, there are tactics we know could be effective in supporting teens during this difficult time.

Recommendations for Families and Others Who Work with Adolescents

- Validate how teens are currently feeling. One example of validation is saying, "You'll get through this, but that doesn't make it any less miserable right now."
- When issues come up, problem-solve *with* teens instead of *for* teens.
- Encourage creative ways to celebrate the milestones and to connect with peers (e.g., hosting a virtual prom).
- Give teens space while monitoring for concerning symptoms or behaviors.
- Foster ways in which youth can continue to work towards their activities and goals. For example, continue to do exercises associated with their sport, continue creating art, or studying for a driver's permit test.
- Document innovative alternative programs to address delayed and missed milestones and evaluate the impact which would beneficial to share and disseminate with other organizations and communities.
- Continue researching how these milestones advance teen development and well-being and how missing or delaying these opportunities will impact short- and long-term outcomes.

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