

Supporting teens as they navigate post-pandemic re-entry

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Credit: Ziniu Chen, University Communications

As the school year moves into the summer months and teens continue to emerge from the restrictive nature of the pandemic, experts are focusing on the specific needs adolescents have as they navigate this unique time.

University of Virginia faculty members Nancy Deutsch, the Linda K. Bunker Professor of Education and director of Youth-Nex: The UVA Center to Promote Effective Youth Development, and Johari Harris, research assistant professor, said that in addition to the challenges the pandemic brought, there were some surprise benefits, too, and both need to be remembered as leaders work to support teens and preteens. In July, Youth-Nex will launch a webinar series, in partnership with the Readiness Project and the Center for the Developing Adolescent, aimed at creating a return-to-[school](#) experience that supports all adolescents' needs coming out of the pandemic.

We checked in with Deutsch and Harris, both of whom are [faculty members](#) in UVA's School of Education and Human Development, to discuss the impact the pandemic has had on teens and what supports they need, both now and when they return to school in the fall.

Q. What do you think have been the most challenging parts of the COVID-19 pandemic for adolescents?

Deutsch: The nature of the restrictions on socializing and stay-at-home orders is fairly contrary to what adolescents are seeking developmentally, which is increased autonomy and independence from their families. Spending more time with parents is not the typical pathway. Usually, peers become increasingly important during adolescence, and adolescents flex their independence and go out and explore their identities beyond the family unit.

While adolescents were still able to socialize digitally via [social media](#), most were probably spending a lot more time with parents than they were used to or than they would have chosen. For some, that may have also restricted the identities they felt they could explore and certainly was likely to limit their autonomy.

On the other hand, in some families, adolescents may have had increased independence and opportunities for displaying competence if their families were facing [child care](#), employment or health challenges that the [adolescent](#) was able to step in and help with. Of course, that can also pose challenges for adolescents, as, along with more responsible roles, they may have shouldered more burdens and worries resulting from the stressors many families faced over the past 15 months.

Q. In looking over the last year of the pandemic, have there been any surprising discoveries about what adolescents need?

Harris: One surprising aspect that has emerged is that many Black and brown adolescents have been thriving on online schooling platforms. While narratives have been quick to suggest that online learning has been universally harmful for students, conversations with families and adolescents of color have shown it is not that black and white. Indeed, it is families of color who have overwhelmingly kept their children home in districts that have opened to in-person classes, including here in Charlottesville.

While the fear of COVID-19 is part of the equation, we must also be aware of how schools are not automatically safe spaces for students of color. Many parents have spoken of how online schooling has freed their child from much of the racial bias we often see in face-to-face schooling. Given that adolescents are becoming increasingly aware of the inequity within [social structures](#), online learning has given them a reprieve from these issues in many ways.

In addition, many adolescents have appreciated the autonomy online learning has afforded them. The ability to move at one's own pace and/or ask questions without fear of scorn or pushback has been a real positive

that has come out of online learning.

Q. How can we be mindful of those positive outcomes for students as we come out of COVID-19? What should schools be holding on to as we come out of the pandemic?

Harris: I think the positive outcomes let us know we should not try to be returning to business as usual as it relates to schooling. For example, given the pervasive role of racial bias in schools, educational stakeholders must begin to implement more programs and policies and support the most marginalized students. This may even include continuing to offer an online component of schooling.

Also, considering we know autonomy is an important developmental need of adolescents, which online learning provided in many ways, schools can think about ways they can replicate this during in-person learning.

Q. What role can schools play in supporting teens' need to increase their independence as we come out of COVID-19?

Deutsch: I think schools are going to have to be extremely attuned to students' social, emotional and mental health needs as they return to school. Social skills may be rusty. Teens may have gotten used to either more dependence on or more independence from family, depending on what their situations were. They may need more opportunities to explore their identities and develop independence and autonomy, but also may need more scaffolding in those pursuits, depending on how they are feeling emotionally.

This has also been an incredibly stressful time for adolescents, so avoiding additional stress would be important; therefore, thinking carefully about messaging around academic expectations and avoiding academic pressures will be important. I wouldn't be surprised if students who have been at home and not attending school in person seem "younger" than teachers might expect in a given year. Students may not have had an opportunity to engage in some of the social development around autonomy and identity that they typically would do in the context of peers. The adolescent brain is extremely open to influence from their environments and many youth have had a far more restricted environment than they typically would have had.

Provided by University of Virginia

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