

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Health Matters and Supporting the Development of our Teens Makes a Difference, Part 1—At School

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities. Creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness, like teenage anxiety and depression, for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. This week, BHI is talking about employing a brain healthy lifestyle (at school and at home) to support our teens during the pandemic.

Supporting our teenagers during the pandemic requires a strong, coordinated partnership between our schools and our families. From a brain health and performance perspective, whether they are learning at school or at home, our teenagers need to feel supported in their academic progress, as well as their social and emotional development.

An [article](#) from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) discusses a recent [Society for Research on Adolescence webinar](#) in which developmental psychologist and HGSE professor, Nancy Hill, said schools have always provided teens with a space to think independently, to experiment, and to form support networks with peers. Because of the pandemic, that space has been lost for many of our teens and it can have an impact on their well-being, development, and brain health.

“While the focus is on academic learning, rightfully so, for adolescents, we should not ignore the significance of the loss of peer relationships and friendships on their brain health and well-being,” said Hill, “learning to navigate and find affirmation in the broader social context is essential. School closures and social distancing is especially challenging in this regard.”

In addition to academics, the webinar identified six developmental areas where schools and families can work together to support teens.

1. **Peer Groups and Social Connections.** Schools provide young people with a chance to develop the relationships that help them define their identity, stay connected and

enhance their understanding of who they are as a person and as a learner. The loss of these relationships can lead to decreased brain health reduced brain and academic performance, and increased and risk of potential brain illness such as increased anxiety and feelings of isolation.

2. **Opportunities to Feel Competent.** Teens feel the pressure to keep up with their peers academically, in extracurricular activities, and socially. Feeling as if they are falling behind can undermine their perception of themselves as a “good” student, person, and as a community member.
3. **Being Part of the Solution.** Teenagers are no exception to the human experience of wanting to feel capable and like they contribute to and feel valued by their peers and communities. During the pandemic and other times of uncertainty, when powerlessness and helplessness are common, teens need to feel they have control over their lives and can make a difference.
4. **Changes in the Parent-Child Relationship.** Teens and their parents often clash about autonomy and control and in many situations; the pandemic has heightened these conflicts. Research suggests that having parents oversee remote learning is unproductive. Parents may have better success by motivating their teens to establish brain health and performance work habits and learn to manage their time and other essential life skills.
5. **Brain Health.** Studies suggest that the pandemic has increased the brain illness issues that many teens experience, leading to increased feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation. While schools provide services that support brain health, the pandemic has made it difficult to identify students who are in need and provide access to those services.
6. **Safety.** When schools are open, parents and communities feel more confident that teenagers are safe during the day. With remote learning, safety and monitoring can become a problem for teens whose parents are at work, are busy caring for younger siblings, or for those who live in high density, urban areas where the risk for exposure is higher.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST TEEN BRAIN HEALTH

The webinar offered these suggestions for working with your teen’s school to support them in each of these brain health and developmental areas:

- **Peer groups and social Connections boost brain health and build brain performance. Work with your teen’s teachers in:**

- Engaging them in group projects that require collaboration.
- Establishing routines and schedules that include time for academics and socializing to provide a sense of stability.
- Incorporating social media as a tool—but not a substitute—for connecting with others.

- **Opportunities to feel competent boost brain performance. Increase feelings of competence by:**

- Providing the support teens need to succeed at both school and home, which may include a computer, WiFi access and tech support.

- Keeping standards high and communicating expectations clearly. Provide the structure that allows you and your teen to stay connected to the school and the support it provides.
- **Being part of the solution boosts brain performance. Empowering young people by:**
 - Finding opportunities for teens to get involved in community service, or volunteering.
 - Letting teens know their schoolwork has value by connecting it to their own goals and interests.
- **Changes in the parent-child relationship increase brain development and performance. Your teen’s school can help by:**
 - Providing support for you so the burden of home instruction is shared.
 - Finding ways to connect your kids with other adults who can provide support.
- **Brain Health. Work with teachers to promote student brain health, enhance brain performance and fight brain illness by:**
 - Connecting your teens with an adviser or mentor who can think about student needs holistically.
 - Recognizing the different demands your family is balancing. Make sure teachers are understanding and don’t blame teens or parents for missed classes or assignments.
 - Reorienting schedules around what you know teens need — early classes may not work best for many students.
 - Working to establish trust.
 - If you sense a teen is struggling, say something, do something.
- **Safety decrease risk for brain illness. To provide brain healthy safe and supportive learning environments for all, think about:**
 - Forming strategic partnerships with community organizations for a supervised teen space.
 - Talking to your teens about their roles in their communities. Think about ways they can support each other and help each other stay safe.

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through research, innovation, education, collaboration and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).