

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Health Matters and Supporting the Development of our Teens Makes a Difference Part 2—At Home

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 teen mental illness, for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. This week, BHI is talking about proactively employing a brain healthy approach and lifestyle at schools and at home to support our teens (physically, mentally, and emotionally) during the pandemic and in general.

Many of us have assumed the responsibility of supervising our children’s education during the pandemic, and in some cases, we’re delivering direct instruction. For those of us with teenagers, this can present a problem. Teens and their parents often clash about autonomy and control. The pandemic may heighten these conflicts.

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 learning at home has taken away the space that school provided for thinking independently, experimenting and to forming support networks with peers. As parents, we are looking for ways to reduce the impact of that loss on our teens’ well-being, development, and brain health.

Hill emphasizes that with adolescents, one of the most important things we can do as parents is to help them advocate for themselves. Rather than doing more, parents can help youth strengthen crucial neurodevelopmental skills of executive functions. For example, “hold youth accountable for getting the work done and encourage and guide them in asking for extra help when they need it,” says Hill, adding that teens crave autonomy and independence, and this is a context where parents can cater to that developmental need.

Research suggests that having parents oversee remote learning is unproductive and that we may have better success by motivating our teens to establish solid brain performance skills such as

work habits and learning to manage their time. The one thing that is certain is that supporting our teenagers during the pandemic requires a strong, coordinated partnership between our schools and our families.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST TEEN BRAIN HEALTH

These tips may help your teen feel more independent at home:

- Encourage them to create a plan for getting schoolwork done. This allows them to take ownership and responsibility for their schoolwork, strengthens their executive functioning skills, and provides practice for time management.
- Remember that teenagers' biological clocks are programmed for staying up late and sleeping late. Help them create a brain healthy sleep-wake routine.
- Recognize the importance of socializing in your teen's life and the role it plays in developing their own identity. Let them connect safely with friends.
- Understand that teens often want to talk about how their interests factor into "the big picture." They may want to know why a class matters. Talk with them about their future plans and how school—and classes like algebra—factor into that plan.

It is also important for parents to remember that feelings of worry and anxiety are common in adolescence (and beyond), but when they become excessive, and interfere with brain health and performance, they can compromise your teen's ability to learn and to function at school, home, in relationships and in extracurricular activities. Try these methods to help reduce their risk of brain illness and symptoms of anxiety.

- Don't add fuel to their feelings. Your teen may be the one suffering from anxiety, but constant reports of danger, intense academic pressure, and a "need to know now" can add to those feelings.
- Teach coping skills. Often, young people try to escape anxiety by avoiding what scares them. Teach them brain healthy ways to build resilience, cope and manage their worry, not eliminate it from their lives.
- Work together. Teachers and counselors should work in partnership with parents when dealing with anxious students. Everyone should have shared terminology, coping mechanisms, and goals for the teen.
- Encourage your teen to adopt a brain healthy lifestyle, including thoughts, behaviors/reactions, emotions and language that promote:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional well-being
 - Meaning and purpose
 - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
 - Engaging with nature

- General health
- Positive impacts

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 performance-based optimization*. 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](#).