
Guidance for Supporting Young People to Make Healthy Choices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19 throughout the State of Colorado, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) has issued a number of Public Health Orders (PHOs) that impose a number of requirements to maximize physical distancing in order to protect public and individual health.

Per [El Paso County Public Health Order 2020-01](#), “Individual responsibility and voluntary compliance with CDPHE’s PHOs currently constitute El Paso County’s best defense against further spread of COVID-19. EPCPH encourages all citizens of El Paso County to protect their own health and that of their families, friends and neighbors by diligently adhering to the temporary restrictions set forth in the CDPHE PHOs to the best of their abilities. Public Health and its numerous partner agencies have used and will continue to use education and outreach as the primary method to obtain voluntary compliance with CDPHE PHOs as we work together to weather the COVID-19 pandemic.”

In order to effectively provide education and outreach to young people and help them understand why it’s so important for everyone’s well-being to follow PHOs, communities and organizations can take a strengths-based approach of engaging in a dialogue with young people and work to empower them to make healthy choices for themselves and their communities. In addition, they can leverage the proven positive influence that trusted adults have on the health and well-being of young people.

Preventing Stigma

Public health emergencies, such as the outbreak of COVID-19, are stressful times for people and communities. Fear and anxiety about a disease can lead to social stigma toward people, places, or things. For example, stigma and discrimination can occur when people associate a disease like COVID-19 with a population or nationality, even though not everyone in that population or from that region is specifically at risk for the disease. Stigma hurts everyone by creating fear or anger towards other people and can lead to social avoidance and rejection, and sometimes physical violence.

Young people and young adults are a group of people that can be subject to social stigma. News reports and social media have shared stories, photos and reports that often times call out young people for not taking the virus seriously and engaging in risky behaviors such as not wearing masks and congregating in large groups. While it’s important not to dismiss the seriousness of these activities, there are best practices that can be implemented to help prevent negative social stigma, increase voluntary compliance, and protect our communities.

Adopt a Positive Youth Development Approach

[Positive youth development](#) is a strengths-based view of adolescence. This approach focuses on helping youth acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become healthy and productive adults:

- Positive youth development guides communities and organizations in how they organize services, opportunities and support to engage youth in reaching their full potential.

- Positive youth development incorporates the development of skills, opportunities and authentic relationships into programs, practices and policies.

[Positive Youth Development Toolbox](#) - creates a space for people who are supporting youth in reaching their potential around safety, health, education, connection, and contribution.

What are the Young People in Your Community Worried About? – Ask Them!

- Young people are faced with having to adapt to rapidly changing events, adjusting their plans, and changing social interactions while understanding their own responsibility in maintaining a healthy community. Just like adults, they may be feeling a full range of emotions from worry to fear to frustration and anger, feeling bored and restless, missing friends and family, and being disappointed about missing out on special events and other activities.
- By asking young people what they are worried about, you are not only validating their concerns by giving them the opportunity to be heard, you are better equipping yourself on how to educate and outreach to increase compliance with PHOs.

Examples:

- When asked for ideas on ways to positively engage with young people in El Paso County, local teens recommended using social media challenges using platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter; using positive messages; re-sharing viral content or posts from famous people and influencers; using multiple posts over posts with a lot of text; creating/sharing memes and photos; suggesting activities to stay connected such as online gaming and video chats.
- In one Colorado county, young people were surveyed on what worries them most about COVID-19. Their responses included things like being stuck at home in quarantine; if prom, graduation, sports, etc. get canceled; family members getting sick; uncertainty about the future. This information was used to inform guidance for parents on [Talking to Teens about COVID-19](#).
- The Pikes Peak Teen Collaborative gathered tips and resources to help young people navigate this difficult time, and launched the [Beyond the Curve](#) campaign.
- In recent years, the State of Colorado has relied on focus group data to create youth prevention campaigns. Before creating messaging, young people were asked what prevented them from engaging in risky behaviors (specifically related to substance use), and the #1 deterrent was that it could get in the way of achieving their goals. Focus group participants responded well to messages that informed and relied on facts, not fear and they rejected language that was preachy or presented as a scare tactic and was quick to judge content laced with “someone’s biased point of view.”

Trusted Adults

A critical component of youth prevention and education efforts is leveraging trusted adults, including parents, guardians, educators, and other youth-serving professionals, to reinforce the important reasons young people make healthy choices. One of the best ways for youth to receive crucial information is from caring adults they know and trust. For example, the 2017 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey showed that young people who reported having a trusted adult to go to were 30 percent less likely to engage in risky behavior such as underage marijuana use.

For Families:

- As a parent or guardian, it can be hard to know how to talk with teens about COVID-19, particularly when we are anxious and don't feel as though we have all of the information ourselves. Be sure to remind them that we're all in this together and even though it may be quite some time before the pandemic is over, it will resolve, and life will get back to normal.
- If a parent thinks something is wrong, a young person is 4 times less likely to engage in a behavior. Research has shown that favorable parental attitudes and involvement in a problem behavior is a risk factor for young people to engage in the same behavior. If adults in your household are not following PHOs, it can be difficult to expect young people to do the same.
- Family management problems can also be a risk factor for adolescent problem behavior. Set clear family rules during this time, and hold a family meeting to explain the rules, expectations and any consequences that can be expected if they are not followed.
- Maintain or create a flexible routine with your teen that includes chores, online socializing, mealtimes, fun family time (games, movies, baking) and time outside.
- Help others. Brainstorm concrete ideas about what you could do to help others in the community. We are all in this together! Could you donate canned food to an organization that needs it? Could you FaceTime relatives or friends to check in on them? Could you help spread valid information sources on social media? Visit [Help Colorado Now](#) for volunteer opportunities or to donate (supplies, money, blood or time). Visit the [El Paso County Public Health Volunteering](#) page for local volunteer needs.
- Make plans to deal with boredom: Like all of us, teens may get a little restless being stuck at home. Here are some ideas to help combat boredom:
 - Make a list of fun (or productive) ideas such as checking out [Pikes Peak Library District](#) for free online content including movies, e-books and music; learn something new on Khan Academy or EdX which feature online courses.
 - Go outside! This could include going for a walk or run, playing with a pet, bike riding, stargazing, reading in the shade, or hiking as close to home as possible. Remind them to bring a face covering to use in case the park or trail gets crowded.

For Any Adult:

- Stay informed. Research COVID-19 facts from reliable sources (CDC, CDPHE, Public Health) so that you are prepared to answer questions and provide evidence-based facts.
- Ask open ended questions:
 - How are you feeling about what's happening with COVID-19?
 - What do you see as your role in preventing the spread of the virus? [#DoingMyPartCO](#)
 - What can you do to help protect the rest of your family and any other people you are around?
 - I have been taking a lot of walks, partly to cope with my own worries. What are you doing—or planning to do—to cope with anxiety or stress?
 - We all need continue to limit our interactions with people outside of our households, what are some ways you can spend your time?
 - What are your plans for socializing online? What are your ideas for getting some exercise?
 - What questions do you have about COVID-19? Even if I don't know the answers, maybe we could do some research together (see recommended resources below.)
 - How can you tell the difference between "hype" or "myths" and real information? (see recommended resources below.)

- Listen with an open mind
- Give them your full attention
- Be honest. It's okay to say you don't know something, and you'll get back to them. Better yet, look up the answer together.
- Things are changing quickly, and it is likely new questions and concerns will come up over time
- Move conversations forward. Once you start these conversations, it's important to keep them going.
- Have age and developmentally appropriate conversations.
- Be a good role model. Your personal actions should reinforce the messages you are giving.
- Get to know the other influencers in a young person's life that might help reinforce the rules (such as parents, peers, siblings, family members, coaches, teachers, community leaders.)

Recommended Resources for Accurate Information:

- If you are in El Paso County and have non-urgent questions about COVID-19, please call the El Paso County Public Health call center at 719-575-8888.
- If you have general questions about COVID-19, you can call **CO HELP at 303-389-1687** or **1-877-462-2911**. You can also email COHELP@RMPDC.org for answers in English, Spanish (Español), Mandarin (普通话), and more.
- [El Paso County Public Health](#)
 - [El Paso County Public Health Facebook](#)
 - [El Paso County Public Health Twitter](#)
 - [El Paso County Public Health Instagram](#)
- [Colorado Department of Health and Environment](#)
 - [CDPHE Facebook](#)
 - [CDPHE Twitter](#)
- [Centers of Disease Control \(CDC\)](#)
 - [CDC Facebook](#)
 - [CDC Twitter](#)

Where to Get Help

- As the winter months continue to unfold, teens may feel a full range of emotions from worry and fear to frustration and anger. Tell them directly that it's okay to feel disappointed about missing out on special events or changes to their plans.
- Review the CDC's information on [stress and coping](#) to help guide your conversations
- If you or anyone in your family needs support dealing with feelings of isolation or anxiety, or any other mental health concerns, please immediately contact Colorado Crisis Services which provides confidential and immediate support, 24/7/365 on the phone 1-844-493-8255, text (text TALK to 38255), or chat online (<http://www.coloradocrisisservices.org>). You can call/text/chat about anything in your life that you feel you need help with or want to talk about.

Sources:

1. Center for Disease Control's COVID-19, Reducing Stigma: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/reducing-stigma.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fsymptoms-testing%2Freducing-stigma.html
2. Jefferson County Communities That Care's Twelve Talks to Have with Teens: <https://www.twelvetalks.com/covid-19>
3. CDPHE's Positive Youth Development: <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/positive-youth-development>
4. CDPHE's Regional Public Health and Marijuana Workshop (presentation)
5. SpeakNow Colorado