

Getting through lockdown together with teenagers

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My first blog in this series of 2 is aimed at helping families think together about how they can get through the next few weeks of lock down from a well-being perspective. I use the acronym **C*A*L*M** to talk about **C**reating new routines, **A**sking the grown-ups whenever kids have worries, **L**ovely things you can enjoy to help you through, and **M**aking the most of the new opportunities this historic event provides; in spite of all the really hard things it also imposes. I share ideas about how to involve children in this process; offering them some control in a situation where we are all feeling pretty powerless.

Lots of people have asked me to write something similar for teenagers. All of the above applies, of course, as it does for every one of us. However, involving teenagers risks putting parents immediately into a double bind. It is really hard for us grown-ups to 'get it right' where teenagers are concerned; and their first response to an idea is often to reject it – regardless of how good the idea might be. Even introducing the idea of talking about their ideas is likely to be kicked into touch.

I picked my moment and asked my own teenagers if they would help me come up with ways to get around this trap. At first they said no, of course, or words to that effect. But bit by bit they have contributed lots to this blog. In fact, that is my main message – **to offer opportunities, anticipate rejection, but keep the door open for them to join you in their own time**. And be genuinely grateful when they do. But don't go over the top with that gratitude or even mention it.....

An acronym to summarise this is **O*A*K** – which is really fitting actually as it requires us as grown-ups to stand steady throughout the storms, and be a calm presence when the sun does eventually come out.

O – offer opportunities often

A – anticipate rejection

K – keep the door open

I shared this acronym with my teenagers and they hated it, of course. They then spent a fun five minutes coming up with alternatives – you can imagine how that went. We settled on **C*R*A*P** because that pretty much sums up what lockdown feels like.

It is rubbish for everyone, of course, but out of every generation it could be argued that teenagers are uniquely disadvantaged during enforced house arrest. **Developmentally, their main tasks are to separate from their families, connect with their peer group and form intimate relationships.** This is all now rendered impossible. They have no escape, they have to be at home, and they cannot see their friends.

Some parents will be secretly delighted that this natural drive to escape has been curtailed and they are back in the nest; particularly at a time like this when everyone is feeling anxious. But the nest is the last place that most teenagers are likely to want to be.

This tension of going out/staying in has always been around in families – but now it is

enforceable by law and there really is no choice. The one advantage of that, of course, is that it is no longer a battle between you and them. Deep down they do know that, but their anger and frustration is likely to be directed at you anyway – because where else can it go?

There are some exceptions of course, and lots of parents of children who are very anxious or have additional learning needs are sharing that life is actually easier for them in some ways. They are enjoying a bizarre honeymoon of not having to get their kids to places they find difficult to be in; take part in activities they find really hard to do; or engage with people they struggle to be with.

But mostly it is **C*R*A*P**, and for everyone there will be **C*R*A*P** bits. Here are some thoughts about what might help:

C – Crashing is understandable

Our teenagers have been hurtling towards major milestones since they first started school. They have never had a say in this; rather it is an unwritten rule embedded in our culture – one that has loomed larger and larger in recent years. I am talking about external exams; GCSEs and 'A' levels. The 'business end' of school, as they are often referred to.

Suddenly they are gone, disappearing before our very eyes. No one in the history of the British education system could have predicted this, and our teenagers, who are most impacted by it, are having to face it.... alone.

It is like speeding towards a final destination and then suddenly flying off the edge of a cliff. Even for those not sitting external exams it is a derailment. The mantra that their future depends on working towards these goals, a mantra that has been chanted throughout their lives like a humming motor, has been silenced. Gone.

My daughter's GCSE art boards still lie on our kitchen table, shrouded in bin bags, like a corpse. It is a bereavement with no funeral. The prom dress hangs in the spare room like a (subtle and tasteful) bridal gown with no wedding. As adults we know these things will get sorted, and plans will be made to address the losses.... but for our kids? Right now? It is carnage. They are in shock, and the overwhelming urge must be to crash.... and sleep it off.

It is tempting to say reassuring things like 'at least the pressure of exams is off'. That has certainly been on the tip of my tongue many times and may have even slipped out. For some young people that might help. I would be

cautious though. It is a complicated bereavement, like the death of a relative you don't really like. Only you know how you want to manage such a sensitive loss. Better to ask open questions.....'how are you feeling about not sitting your exams having been building up to it for so long?' Take a guess that it is probably a mixture of emotions. Some will have wanted their chance to shine, others will feel guilty about not doing more during the year, pinning everything on the exams. Reassure them by saying everyone is in the same boat. It is their year group and sense of a nationwide Coronavirus cohort that will mainly get them through this.

But what about routine? What about schoolwork that still needs completing? What about the learning and revision they are missing out on? I asked my kids:

"First of all, there are a lot of hours in the day and a lot of time to find a balance. We know what we need to do. Secondly, all the build-up is about eventually finding a job and settling down. None of that matters if you don't have good mental health so it is important to prioritise that first. This is a really stressful time so not the best time to put pressure on us".

R - Rooms are their sanctuary

Social media means that we are constantly bombarded with images of happy families enjoying holidays and meals out and fun times together. The reality is that these are moments in time in some peoples lives and mostly teenagers are either out or in their rooms. I anticipate that lockdown will show the equivalent images of family craft and baking, hilarious Tik Tok videos and board games. Again, these are moments in time, and mostly teenagers will be in their rooms.

As parents we often struggle with this. We want them with us, to know they are ok, to see what they are up to, and to join in our 'fun' plans. When I asked my kids about this they said 'It is because we like it in our rooms'. It is as simple as that. This, of course, makes perfect sense when we think that their main task is to separate from us.

It is important, therefore, to respect their privacy, allow their room to be their domain over which they have some control, and knock before waiting to be invited in. If they share a room and want their own space is there a temporary arrangement you can come to? Even if it is just some time when each of them will not be disturbed? Connecting with friends on

social media is likely to be a life line for them, and some privacy to do this is essential.

But what about mealtimes? What about the mess and washing and dishes? What about spending hours on line or gaming? What about exercise and fresh air? I asked my kids:

"A lot of the time kids stay in their rooms to avoid being nagged to do stuff. The important thing is to make sure that the atmosphere when they do come out is comfortable, and somewhere they want to be. Being asked to do the dishwasher might seem like a little thing for you, but for them it might be the last thing they need after a really bad day on line. That doesn't mean they won't do it, just let them decide when."

A - Acknowledge how hard this is

Lockdown and Coronavirus is really hard for all of us. When things upset our kids the overriding desire for parents is to try and make it better. Often we do this by focusing on the positives, offering cheery platitudes and using humour. This can work really well and the great thing about teenagers is that they let you know immediately if it does. You will also get a clear message if it bombs. Jokes about having an excuse to sit in front of a screen all day or not having to revise can go down very badly.....

Try instead saying things like ‘this is tough’, or take a guess at how they may be feeling. You will get it wrong, of course, but they will clock your efforts at some level. Acknowledge your own feelings – Scared? Sad? Lonely? Bored? Angry? Disappointed? I have certainly felt all of these things in the past few days.

Don’t underestimate the power of listening and being around. It may not feel like you are doing anything to help, but actually these are the crucial qualities all parents can offer. It is a rare silver lining in this horrible mess that we are with our kids when they need us most – and when we need them most too. You will argue, of course, but the making up is critical – and reaching out with an **O*A*K** branch is more important than ever if you fall out.

But what if they blank me? What if they slam the door in my face? What if they are rude and take their anger out on me? I asked my kids:

“You never know what is going on in someone’s head, and you don’t know what has happened in their day, even just in their room. No one should tolerate abuse but if you try to understand where they are coming from, that there are things going on that you might not know about, you will make their lives so much easier even if they don’t show it.”

P – Persevere

The most important message of all is to persevere, and never give up. Preserving your relationship, or building your relationship if you struggled before lockdown, is the main priority. It is the key to getting through this. This is where **O*A*K** really comes into its own:

O – offer opportunities often

A – anticipate rejection

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Nostalgia can be a temptation that is hard for even teenagers to resist. Favourite meals, old board games, photo albums, movies, and family stories.....now is the time to revisit them all. And when they don’t work, which they probably won’t, revisit them again, and enjoy them for yourself anyway. That little kid is still in there.

Talk in their presence about all the things you love about them; all the things you admire about them and all the things you hope for them even though they might ignore and reject it. Write a note and shove it under their bedroom door. Most importantly let them know how proud you are of how they are coping with a global pandemic that has stopped

everyone and everything in its tracks. I know that I am super proud of mine.

When I asked my kids about a final message they said:

“Teenagers can be horribly stubborn and relentlessly cruel. But in all cases, this is just a wall put up to hide insecurities, vulnerabilities and fears that they just don’t want you to see. Helping them isn’t about exposing those vulnerabilities, it’s about recognising they exist, and doing what you can to take the weight off their shoulders.”

Proud indeed.



C

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(OAK)