



BLAKEWORKS®

Tips and Strategies for Supporting a Preteen's Resilience

Establish a routine. Maintaining a daily and weekly routine – time to wake up, do schoolwork, take mini-breaks, eat meals, and play fun activities – offers predictability and security. It's more important now than usual for home to be a place where children know what's coming next.

Help your child maintain peer relationships. Children learn skills through interactions with peers, including how to be a good friend and ways to resolve conflict. With other parents, teachers and coaches, find creative, safe ways to keep children connected with friends online or in-person.

Build skills and self-esteem through planned family time. Children thrive on experiencing a sense of accomplishment. Encourage your child to learn a new skill such as cooking or join the family in an activity such as putting together a complicated jig-saw puzzle. The positive feelings generated will persist long after the pandemic ends.

Prioritize best talking times. Identify times your child is most likely to open up – during a walk, while you're making dinner, or at bedtime. Sometimes let your child initiate conversation. At other times you can check in through open-ended questions. "What was the best part of your day? What was most frustrating?"

Monitor online activity. Playing online games is one way preteens can connect with friends. It's important to supervise children's activity to ensure the games are age appropriate and that they're playing with friends, not cyber strangers.

Talk about social media. Some children may feel left out when seeing pictures or video of peers having fun. You can ask, "Does social media help you feel better or worse?" Having these conversations when children are young helps them learn and set boundaries that will be helpful throughout adolescence. It also opens up conversations with parents about these challenges.

Help your child learn to self-regulate. Childhood is a key time to learn to manage emotions: how to pause when upset, calm yourself down, figure out what you feel and why, and tell someone what you need. Being present, asking open-ended questions and listening can teach children these important skills.

Stay tuned in. You know your child well. When you notice changes in mood and behavior, talk with your child to see whether they have a worry or concern you can help them address. Changes in behavior that last more than a week or two signal it's time to check in with your pediatrician or mental health provider.

Communicate about moods. You can help children verbalize their worries by wondering out loud – rather than *telling* them what they're feeling. You can ask, "Are you upset about something at school?" "Are you missing your friends?" "I don't want you to be worrying alone, so I need to hear more about what you're thinking about." Then wait for a response.

Build your child's vocabulary about emotions. Being able to talk about emotions is an important life skill. Help your child understand it's normal to have worries – and to not be afraid of big or negative emotions. Learning to manage uncomfortable feelings helps prepare children for the intense emotions of adolescence.

Set a hopeful tone. It can be hard for parents to stay positive when stressed. When you talk candidly about your own emotions, you model healthy behavior to your child and convey a sense of hope. You can say, "I had a really hard day today. Work was stressful. I'm going to listen to my favorite music. Some days are like this. I expect tomorrow to be better!"

Check out our Words Can Work products to support vital conversations with young people about alcohol and other drugs, depression, bullying and more. Produced by Jeanne Blake with advisors from McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital.