

Activities to keep teens engaged while schools are shut during the coronavirus pandemic

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Coloring isn't just for little kids. It can be relaxing and creative for teens, too. (Janet I. Tu / The Seattle Times)

By

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The current shutdown of school systems to combat the spread of COVID-19 has a silver lining for one group: teenagers.

These chronically sleep-deprived high school students can and should take advantage of not having to be anywhere and stock up on sleep. According to Johns Hopkins pediatrician Michael Crocetti, teenagers need between 9-9.5 hours of sleep each night. During the school year with homework, extracurricular activities, work and hanging out with friends, though, they're sleep starved.

So parents — let them sleep!

But what to do with the other 15 hours of the day? While teenagers can take better care of themselves than their elementary school siblings, they do need some structure during this down time. Keeping some sort of schedule (including for online assignments and reading) will make the return to school — whenever it comes — a little easier, and provide sanity for parents. Work with your teen to create this schedule, allowing them time to just RELAX.

Here are other options to keep them active and engaged.

Keep the brain engaged

- With the [ACT postponed until June and the May SAT canceled](#) outright, juniors and seniors can ease up on the crash test prep and ease into it. While the temptation may be to stop studying and preparing since it is much further away, this actually gives students more time to learn at a relaxed pace and prepare for the test. Spend an hour a week rather than hours a night preparing.
- How often have you heard someone ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” (I still say astronaut). Take time now to learn how a chemist is involved in fighting coronavirus. Or what does an epidemiologist do? How can math and statistical skills predict the next pandemic?
- Read a book for pleasure! Yes, this can be done. Your teenager can enjoy a book just for the pleasure that good writing brings — without the need to write an essay after! Make it fun and post a review with a dance on TikTok! Get creative with how you share your thoughts.
- Do some research on a topic you enjoy. Ever wonder what it’s like living in another country? What about learning about people of other religions? As longtime teacher Candace Spivey of Duluth, Georgia, said, “In this day and age it is so important to be culturally aware and what better way than choosing a culture you might already have questions about or one that will bring you closer to a friend?”
- Share your knowledge and help younger siblings or neighborhood children learn to read or do math. Yes, it is “playing school,” but you will not only share your knowledge, you will also help another working parent get some work done. This can be done with proper social distancing by using video conferencing through Zoom, Google Hangouts, Skype or FaceTime.
- Universities ranging from [Harvard](#) to [Green River College](#) in Auburn offer virtual tours of campus. This is a great — and free! — way to explore colleges and universities. Sites like youvisit.com/collegesearch can be a great way to spend the afternoon exploring the possibilities of secondary education.
- Learn to budget. Yes, while parents might be slaving over spreadsheets, trying to figure out how all this will affect the family budget, setting up a budget to pay for college, a car, prom (when it returns) is a great tool that pays off (see what I did there!) down the road.
- Looking for a cool virtual tour that doesn’t involve (directly) learning something? Google Arts and Culture partnered with museums around the world to [offer virtual tours](#) of their amazing galleries.

Help yourself, help others

- Can’t go to the gym to work out? Sports teams shut down? Walk through the neighborhood (leaving plenty of socially distant space) and then offer to help — over the phone, digitally or

from a distance — elderly neighbors with grass cutting or tree trimming. All of these activities will help you stay fit and help someone who really needs it.

- Have a car or other transportation? Email, call or use apps like Next Door to arrange to make essential grocery/drugstore runs for housebound neighbors. Even if you have to leave the bags at their doorstep, you can help someone.
- Offer to cook. For teens who don't know how to cook, this is the perfect time to learn! Thankfully, you won't need all those paper towels and rolls of toilet paper people seem to be hoarding. Just some fresh vegetables, a protein and maybe some ingenuity. Start with the basics: how to make scrambled eggs, grilled cheese, homemade tomato soup. Learn to read a recipe or follow a YouTube tutorial.
- Spivey also suggested using this time to write your state senator or legislator. Tell them your concerns and how it impacts you and your peers. The most active and engaged constituents tend not to be from this age group, but there's a power in being able to vocalize your concerns to people who can actually do something. "Think about what changes you would like to see made in education based on your experiences as a student," she said. "Share those experiences as well as practical changes you would like to see made."

Just for you

- Practice self care. Yes, we don't often think of teenagers needing to do this, but with the stress of school stripped away, this time is perfect for [learning techniques](#) to relax, including deep breathing or taking a few minutes to meditate or go for a quiet (socially distanced) walk. This mindfulness, if practiced now when things are on pause, will be helpful when school resumes.
- Try something you've never done. With so many how-to videos on YouTube, learn a new skill like yoga, designing clothes or knitting to give you a creative release.
- Color. Yes, the activity many people quit doing once they hit middle school can be relaxing as well as creative.
- Clean your room! Yes, parents seem to always admonish teenagers to do just that, but it is a perfect time to go through what you have and figure out what you wear, what you use, what you don't wear or use and clean up.

Finally, remember that this is only temporary. Even though it seems it could go on for weeks, this, too, shall pass.

Kathy Kudravi is a freelance writer and the mother of two teenagers.