

WHEN HOME LIFE IS HARD

Kids and teens often get a reputation for not liking school, but for some students, it's a relief from their home life. Whether they're dealing with serious challenges at home, like food insecurity, or just don't feel understood by their parents, many children and teens don't see home as an enjoyable environment. Factors related to home life – socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and even home cleanliness – can play a key role in mental health and well-being, especially among adolescents.



WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOUTH FACING AT HOME?

Seeking independence

Everyone goes through the transition from child to young adult, and that “in-between” stage can be tough. As they branch out on their own, they may be facing more parent-child conflict, feel controlled or judged, or feel unsure of who they are.

Cultural differences

A lot of tension between parents and children comes from differences in opinion. Social norms vary among communities, and first- or second-generation children who have grown up in American culture may clash with their parents more than expected. Generations have different cultures, too – children and teens with significantly older parents might also have a hard time understanding each other.

Competing responsibilities

As much as we wish kids could just be kids, the reality is that many of them have obligations. They're caring for younger siblings, responsible for cooking for themselves at a young age, or may need to have a job (or multiple). They may be struggling to focus on their schoolwork or missing out on social time with their peers.

Life circumstances

Some young people are dealing with tough situations that can't be easily fixed – financial challenges, food insecurity, houselessness, conflict between parents or siblings, and more. Sometimes little can be done to alleviate these issues, so it's easy for kids and teens in these environments to feel hopeless or ashamed.

Abuse

Rates of violence in the home increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Feeling physically and emotionally safe is the foundation of everything else – including learning, social development, and behavior.

Most families face challenges at some point, and it's common for relationships in the home to get more tense as kids grow up and face adolescence.

If you think your child is having a tough time at home but aren't sure how to help, visit mhascreening.org and take the parent screen to see if they might be dealing with symptoms of a mental health condition.



FOR PARENTS: WHY IS MY CHILD UNHAPPY AT HOME AND WHAT CAN I DO?

Meet them where they're at.

Remember what it was like to be their age? Puberty and hormones, social pressures, dating, body image issues, and the list goes on. They're also dealing with modern stressors related to COVID-19, frequent school shootings, and social media. Make an effort to understand what's weighing on your child's mind and support them, even if you don't quite get why it's a big deal to them.

Team up with your child.

Listen, commiserate, and validate – even if they brush you off sometimes. Young people often feel alone as they figure out what growing up is all about, and while parents aren't usually their first choice of who to turn to, knowing that you'll be there if they decide to can go a long way in helping them feel secure and supported.

Get them connected to additional support.

If the issues at home are situational and things that you can't resolve or change, the best way to help them is to provide resources to help them cope. If you don't know where to start, talk to their teacher or school counselor about options.

FOR SCHOOL STAFF: HOW TO BEST SUPPORT YOUTH WITH CHALLENGING HOME LIVES

Pick your battles.

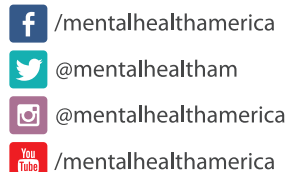
If you know (or suspect) a student has a lot of responsibilities at home or is dealing with other challenges, be flexible and accommodating. Allow them to eat breakfast in class if you have a feeling they're rushing to get their siblings ready for school in the mornings, and understand that sometimes your homework isn't going to be their priority.

Ensure you understand your students and their age group.

Many youth feel chronically misunderstood, especially by their parents. Putting in the effort to be somewhat familiar with trends and cultural norms will go a long way in making them feel that adults can be understanding and approachable.

Be a safe space for them.

Offer to listen, help them find support or resources, and be a positive and engaged adult role model in their life. Be cautious of your own capacity to provide support so that you don't overextend yourself.



SOURCES

¹ Boserup, B., McKenney, M., & Elkbulli, A. (2020). Alarming trends in US domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 38(12), 2753-2755. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajem.2020.04.077>

IN CRISIS?

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting MHA to 741741.