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**Teens want COVID-19 advice that gives them safe ways to socialize**

By The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff

Tammy Chang is an Assistant Professor of Family Medicine at the University of Michigan and Matthew Dunn is a graduate researcher.

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Teens and young adults in the United States have an important role in containing the spread of COVID-19. However, youth surveys suggest that many misunderstand social distancing guidelines. Some want clearer advice on how to safely live their lives.

Social distancing means to stay at least 6 feet away from people who are not part of your household. This reduces the chance of germs spreading.

This is especially relevant now that students have returned to universities and many campuses have had COVID-19 outbreaks.

A team at the University of Michigan conducted several text-message surveys of over 1,000 American youth ages 14-24. The surveys are to better understand what young people are going through during the pandemic, or global outbreak of COVID-19.

The results reveal young people's perspectives and could help improve public health practices.

**I Can Hang Out With Friends, Right?**

Responses in the surveys suggest that young people are taking the pandemic seriously.

Surveys starting in March 2020 and continuing through the summer showed about three-quarters of young people were feeling some level of anxiety about the pandemic. Many reported following guidelines such as distancing, wearing masks and staying at home, most often due to their concern for others. These respondents cited the importance of protecting friends, family and people at increased risk for illness. "Not so much for my own health but for my parents and grandparents," one wrote.

However, as youth described their thinking and behaviors, it became clear there are misunderstandings about social distancing.

**Misunderstandings of Rules, Virus Common**

Often, young people in the survey did not fully understand the strict nature of social distancing rules. A few respondents reasoned that it was safe to hang out with friends if both groups were potentially exposed due to work or other reasons. "Most of my friends are 'essential' workers and are already exposed to lots of people. It seems moot to be super strict about social distancing," one wrote.

Other misconceptions were that younger people don't get sick from the virus, or that visiting friends is an approved exception. As one participant said, "I'm healthy and would be able to fight off a virus easily."

While young people are less likely to have symptoms, they can spread the virus to others without knowing it. Also, some youths do get seriously ill.

The studies also found that young people tended to view social distancing as a short-term obligation, in hopes of a return to normal activities. Yet public health officials say there is still a long way to go. Some social distancing could be necessary through 2022.

**It Can't All Be Negative**

When asked about the impacts of social distancing, many young people shared what they've lost, often talking about the ability to socialize with others. "I can't talk to people" was a common response. "I have not been able to see friends or work at all" was another.

Telling young people only what they cannot do could lead to fatigue and riskier behavior. Helping young people understand how to stay safe should include recommendations for what they can do.

Although any in-person contact with others carries some risk, not all interactions are equally risky. The findings show that many young people have an "all or nothing" mentality regarding risk. Teaching them how to assess the range of risk could help their decision-making.

**Social Interaction Matters for Mental Health**

Social interactions are important for healthy teen development. Studies of children and adolescents experiencing social isolation have found harmful mental health effects, and this may already be happening among survey respondents.

For example, when young people were asked how they are dealing with the pandemic, nearly one-fifth described a difficult emotional response. One wrote, "I've been very stressed and depressed so I'm not dealing with it very well."

Across several surveys, depression was mentioned as a challenge during the pandemic. Another wrote, "My depression is exacerbated and I feel really unmotivated to do anything."

Depression is a mental health condition that can affect one's mood, thoughts and behavior. What distinguishes a mental illness, such as depression, from normal feelings such as sadness, is that mental illnesses cause ongoing stress and severely interfere with a person's ability to function. Most mental illnesses can be treated with medication and therapy.

**Figuring Out How to Socialize Safely**

As the pandemic continues, public health messaging will have to help young people find ways to socialize safely. The information should be directed at them and on their platforms.

Almost half of the respondents said they learned about COVID-19 from news media sources. However, these reports are generally written for an adult audience. Communications can be adapted for youth and extended to social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok.

A critical message is that risks are greater for certain activities, such as going to a crowded indoor event.

Young people need safe opportunities to interact and information on how to socialize safely.

Holding more gatherings outdoors is one solution. The risk of spread has been found to be lower outside compared to indoors. Connecting with nature could be a positive outcome in a changing way of life. Interacting online can also help.

Helping young people with social distancing requirements is important, for their health and the health of the people around them.

**Please respond:**

* **Using evidence from this text, are young people taking the pandemic seriously?**
* **What are some ways young people can socialize safely?**
* **Using evidence from this text, as well as your own thoughts on this topic, explain why it is important for young people to figure out how to safely socialize during the pandemic**.