

PARENT UPDATE on
The Developmental Challenges of Sophomore Year
Tuesday Dec. 7, 2021

For the Sophomore PTO and B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network) virtual presentation on the unique challenges of sophomore year, social workers Mary Minott (mary_minott@psbma.org) and Abby Dean (gabrielle_dean@psbma.org) gave a bird's eye view of what they are seeing in the current sophomore class and addressed how common sophomore milestones, from open campus to relationships and driving, have been affected by pandemic delays. Facilitated breakout rooms gave parents the opportunity to share concerns as well as successful strategies for setting reasonable boundaries for teens while encouraging growth, independence, exploration, and finding a healthy balance of social and academic life.

In her introduction, Dean Summer Williams said that while the school year has launched well, we all have a lot on our minds and may be feeling overwhelmed as COVID ramps up. If parents/caregivers sense troubling shifts in student behavior at home, they should feel free to **reach out** to guidance, deans, social workers, or other trusted adults for any help. (B-PEN can also offer social/emotional/developmental support/resources at www.B-PEN.org and on [facebook](https://www.facebook.com/B-PEN.org).) She also urged parents to talk to kids and their friends about appropriate mask wearing, distancing, and being outside as much as possible, reinforcing that it is not just about exposure to ourselves, but also to others.

What Social Workers are Seeing

Abby Dean acknowledged that sophomore class parents haven't had much opportunity to connect with each other about common challenges. She suggests parents focus not just on how much we've lost, but on **resilience and wellbeing** for going forward.

Here's what we need to keep in mind:

- Things are different this year. COVID has affected all of us, and we have experienced **REAL loss**.
- Kids have **missed some developmental milestones**. Though extra family togetherness was a bonus in some ways, teens were supposed to develop some independence from their parents, but couldn't because they were stuck at home. Empathy and identity formation were stunted from the lack of in-person interaction that might have come through new friendships, open campus, class trips, jobs, parties, driving, etc. They also couldn't connect with teachers as easily, and screens replaced a lot of face-to-face interaction.
- **Screens became a mixed blessing**. Overuse may be an issue among some families, and a lot of screen social behavior got uglier.

- Though kids may be excited to be with each other in person, they're **not as socially confident** or experienced.
- Some kids are making up for lost time, **taking more risks**, experimenting -- seeing an increase in substance abuse.
- Other kids may have some **social anxiety** and be playing it TOO safe -- staying in, not branching out/exploring, not joining clubs or making new friends -- seeing increased anxiety and stress.
- No matter where your child falls on this spectrum, they -- and YOU -- are **not alone**. We can foster resilience to get back on track by **encouraging healthy relationships** with adults, developing solid identity, prosocial activities that foster **meaningful connections** and a positive sense of self.
- Sophomores are telling us **they will be OK**, but they need time and patience. Grades are not always an indicator of how they are doing. They want us to **listen**, and they appreciate when we share our feelings with them -- but talk **with** them, not just **to** them.

Break-Out Room Take-aways

Two different break-out rooms fostered discussions on current challenges as well as successful strategies.

Communication is key. As kids start to share less with parents as part of asserting independence, try to always keep the door open to non-confrontational moments to connect – in the car, watching TV, walking, etc. Use mutual interests to foster quality time. Ask open-ended not leading questions, and don't make assumptions. Unless it's a safety issue, respect that there are certain things a teen may not want to share. Weekday family dinners can be really helpful. Think of it as a slow ongoing journey rather than an easy fix. Some parents find family therapy a great way to get the conversation rolling with someone else as a facilitator.

Communication with other parents is key. Don't be afraid to reach out to parents of your teen's friends. What are they seeing/hearing? What are their in-house rules? How are they setting limits? You are NOT alone in being told you are the "strictest/meanest parents!" Ask you teen to send the phone number(s) of households they are visiting.

Other trusted adults can be helpful. Encourage your teen to connect with a trusted teacher or other adult as a sounding board – at school, at an outside activity, etc. Some parents find their child's Learning Center has been a great resource.

Encourage independence, but set boundaries. While part of growing is separation from parents, it can be tricky to find the balance between supporting exploration and keeping kids safe. Keep in mind the pandemic's impact and find reasonable expectations/boundaries your whole family can agree on. One parent told their teen what was expected and held them accountable by asking "Did you follow what we agreed on?" Another let the teen set their own expectations, which turned out to be very reasonable and fostered autonomy. Pick your battles, and always lead with the fact that limits are coming out of a place of love and concern, not control or punishment. Consider the "trust but verify" approach. Encourage teens to take initiative and advocate for

themselves when possible. Outside jobs can be very helpful to instill responsibility and a sense of self in a teen, plus can offer additional personal connections and financial reward.

Time management can be tricky. Teens may not have learned how to handle time effectively (homework, activities, chores, getting up in the morning, etc.). Academics may be harder this year, and they may be feeling a lot of pressure, yet may resent interference by their parents. Rather than micromanage, consider taking milestone opportunities (like report cards) to assess and reset expectations. (Academic concerns should be addressed with teachers/guidance/deans.)

Screens/social media eat up a lot of time and energy. Keep in mind that devices have become a kind of lifeline for teens, but they need balance and limits. Consider keeping devices off limits at mealtimes and out of bedrooms at night, having a communal charging area. (Some kids are prone to check their phones in the middle of the night, which really disturbs sleep!) Model healthy behavior!

Social-emotional skills may be less developed, so teens' reactions to being back in school occur along a spectrum. Some are going wild with being in person together again, requiring stricter limits and socializing guidelines. Others may have a hard time making meaningful connections with others. Sports, clubs, and activities – school-based or otherwise – can be very helpful.

Healthy habits set teens up for life. Encourage a reasonable bedtime so that they get enough sleep and are alert to get up in the morning. Prioritize good nutrition. Have ongoing conversations about substance use. Encourage exercise and a balance of activities away from screens. Again, model healthy behavior! Teens still need and look to you for guidance and approval.

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