EXPANDING YOUR TOOLKIT

These toolkits are excerpted from the "Are the Kids Alright?" report published in November 2020. The full report is available at: https://www.calpartnersproject.org/arethekidsalright.
A GUIDE FOR TEENS

BUILD BETTER HABITS WHILE LIVING ONLINE: SLEEP, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND MINDFULNESS

Daily exercise and achieving a good night's sleep are interconnected. The challenge of disconnecting from tech is real. It requires patience without self judgement. Building up the skill of staying in the moment will help you manage your mental health. You can do this!

SLEEP

PRIORITIZE SLEEP. You should get at least nine hours of sleep every night, but many teens are sleep-deprived. Getting enough sleep improves your ability to concentrate, maintain a good mood and healthy weight, and even improves the quality of your skin. Sticking to a bedtime routine that is screen-free, and staying away from devices overnight, promotes a sense of peace and calm in your life and lets your brain fully recharge.

If you have difficulty falling asleep, try this:
• Aim for consistent sleep and wake times
• Keep your room a comfortable temperature
• Keep lights lowered during the evening
• Avoid sugary drinks, caffeine and heavy meals near bedtime
• Exercise each day; even 10 minutes of physical activity a day boosts deep sleep

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

KEEP MOVING. Try to engage in an hour of moderate physical activity every day to keep your mind and body feeling good. If going to the school gym, swimming or playing with your sports team are not possible during COVID-19, let’s get creative! Find new ways to be active with a friend, or better yet just get off the couch and get moving.
There are a ton of free and fun lessons online to keep you active. Here is a sampling of dance and workout videos to get you started:

- Hiphop
- Bollywood
- African Dance
- KPop
- Reggaeton
- Home Workout

**EXERCISE AND SLEEP GO TOGETHER**

“For athletics, six hours of sleep or less decreases your time to physical exhaustion by 10–30%, relative to eight hours of sleep (e.g., if you trained for a 10K run, you’re done by 7K, rather than 10K). A lack of sleep decreases aerobic output and decreases peak muscle strength, including jump height and running speed. Additionally, a teenager is 30% more likely to get injured during a sports season when they are not getting the recommended amount of sleep each night.”

—Dr. Matthew Walker, Professor of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Founder and Director of the Center for Human Sleep Science
MINDFULNESS

IF SPENDING TIME ONLINE IS CAUSING YOU STRESS, the usual advice is to unplug. While that’s good advice, it’s not very realistic, especially during a pandemic when we are all doing a huge amount of our socializing on screens. Jill Emanuele, PhD, a Child Mind Institute psychologist, recommends trying mindfulness to make the time you spend online (and offline) happier.

Mindfulness is a technique for living in the moment, without judgment. It helps you become more aware of what is happening around you and how you feel. It also gives you a way to reflect on what you’re doing, which can be hard when you’re scrolling around online. You can use mindfulness as a tool to manage your emotions and your stress levels.

NOTICE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. Take time to consider how you feel and what you think when you’re using tech. Dr. Emanuele recommends asking yourself: How am I doing right now? How is this app making me feel? How did that picture make me feel? If something is consistently making you feel bad, practicing mindfulness can help you identify that and figure out if there is something you can do that might help. Maybe you’ll want to unfollow an account or spend less time on a certain app.

Taking the time to notice — and respect — how you are feeling is an important skill that will make you happier and more confident in all areas of your life, not just when you’re online.

DO A MINDFUL REALITY CHECK. People often try to use social media as a way to cheer up when they’re feeling down or bored. For example, if you’re feeling bad about yourself, you might post something that’s totally opposite, like a cute selfie or a picture of your friends. Sometimes putting out a different image and getting compliments online can get you out of the funk. But that happiness doesn’t always last, and you can find yourself feeling like you’re just fooling everyone with posts that don’t match your real life.

If you notice that you actually feel worse after you post, know that this is common, and look for more reliable ways to improve your mood.
**USE TECHNOLOGY.** It might sound surprising, but using technology is also a great way to become more mindful. Download one of the apps that are designed to help you track how you use your phone. “Do an experiment to see how much time you actually spend on certain things,” says Dr. Emanuele. “When you’re on it, what are you actually doing? What are your emotions like?” Likewise, mood-tracking apps and diaries remind you to take time to check in with yourself. They also create a record of how you’ve been feeling which you can revisit later and use to make different choices going forward.

If you want to learn more about mindfulness, there are also apps that guide you through the basics of how to practice mindfulness. Headspace, Calm, and Smiling Mind are three popular ones.

**TAKE BREAKS.** The best way to get a little perspective is to take occasional breaks from tech. Make sure you get enough exercise (one hour a day) and sleep (nine hours a day) to maintain your health and wellbeing. Do yoga, go for a run, or hang out in nature. Whatever it is, doing things in real life can be a big stress reliever.

Try to practice mindfulness during offline activities, too.
A GUIDE FOR PARENTS
HELP TEENS BUILD BETTER HEALTH HABITS WHILE LIVING ONLINE

Many of the behaviors teens describe in *Are the Kids Alright?* are unhealthy, and they know it. They talk about the headaches, eye strain, lack of sleep and, often, lack of enjoyment that comes with heavy tech use – but they are also struggling to set good boundaries.

SLEEP

**SUPPORT SLEEP.** Teens are not getting enough sleep and this impacts everything from their grades to their moods to their long-term health. Blue light from devices can alter the body’s natural circadian rhythm and disrupt sleep. Even as teens develop more independence they still benefit from a sleep schedule.

Helpful tips:

- Support regular bedtimes, even on the weekends
- Make sure your teen isn’t consuming caffeine within four hours of bedtime or eating large meals late in the evening
- Commit the family to screen-free time – especially within an hour of bedtime – and device-free zones. It’s a family affair!
- Keep in mind that achieving a good night’s sleep and daily exercise are interconnected

“Pulling an all-nighter will shut down the memory centers of the brain, leading to a 40% decrease in the ability to learn new facts (i.e., the difference between acing the exam and failing it miserably!) In contrast, a full night of sleep helps hit the save button on new memories so that you don’t forget (30-50% benefit in remembering, relative to remaining awake).”

~Dr. Matthew Walker, Professor of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Founder and Director of the Center for Human Sleep Science
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

ENCOURAGE EXERCISE. Yes, it is a challenge more than ever to ‘keep it moving’. Still, teens need at least one hour of moderate exercise a day to promote restorative sleep and to aid their overall health. Help teens reach this goal by taking a walk together, or finding a local park or neighborhood to explore each week. Suggest tai chi, yoga or dance videos teens can do with friends – or better yet, join the action with a family dance party.

There are free and fun lessons available online to inspire you and your family to keep moving. Here is a sampling of dance and workout videos to get started:

- Tai Chi
- African Dance
- Irish Dance
- Salsa
- Cowboy Boogie
- Hula Dance

HERE ARE SOME OTHER WAYS TO HELP TEENS

BE A ROLE MODEL. The best way for parents to promote healthy screen use is to model it themselves. Try designating special screen-free times of the day (like during dinner and an hour before bed) or rooms of the house and stick to those rules yourself. Always make a point of putting down the phone when you’re having a conversation with your child. Find a designated location in your home for everyone’s digital devices during the night. You want to share your values about how tech should (and shouldn’t) be used, and you also want to show them that you aren’t setting up a double standard something teens are particularly sensitive to.
BRAINSTORM ALTERNATIVES. Teens (and adults) know it is easy to turn to tech automatically during free time, and it can be hard to pull yourself away once you’ve started scrolling. Stephanie Lee, PsyD, a psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends encouraging teens to develop an “activity menu” that lists their preferred non-screen activities. That way, when they’re feeling bored or overwhelmed, they know they have easy non-tech choices at the ready.

KEEP TO A SCHEDULE. Another way of thinking about screen time is to look at how your child is spending their time in general. If teens are spending enough time taking care of themselves, screens are less likely to be a problem. Parents can help by setting expectations for how days at home should be structured. Teens do better when they are getting adequate sleep, eating healthy meals, and exercising regularly.

ENCOURAGE TECH MINDFULNESS. Alex Hamlet, PsyD, a psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends that parents encourage teens to become more mindful about why they use their phones – and model doing this, too. “Before you pick up your device, understand why you’re picking it up. What emotional state are you in? Are you anxious? Picking up that phone to check to see what’s on social media is probably going to heighten that anxiety. The same with sadness. It’s just going to make it worse.”

SUPPORT TEENS’ OTHER INTERESTS. Make sure kids are continuing to work on their hobbies or talents during COVID-19. This is important to maintaining their self-esteem and sense of identity, which is especially crucial during adolescence. Even if kids want to do something in theory, it may be easier for them to turn to TikTok out of inertia, so parents can help by trying to eliminate any barriers. Making sure they have the materials they need in an accessible location, helping them set aside time during the day for practice, and letting them know that you take them and their interests seriously can all go a long way.
WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Remember that this is a difficult time for many teenagers. Here are some signs that your child might need professional mental health support:

• Feeling very sad or withdrawn for two or more weeks
• Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
• Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships

• Drastic changes in behavior or personality
• Severe, out-of-control behavior
• Repeated use of drugs or alcohol

If you notice any of these signs in your child, talk to your pediatrician, the school psychologist, or a mental health specialist.