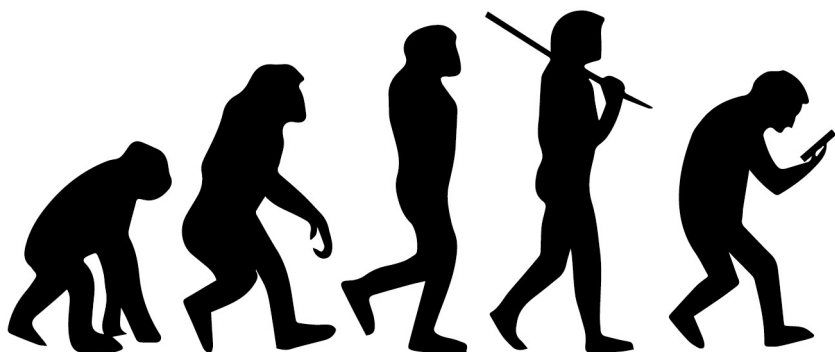


PARENTING THE SCREENAGER

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR PARENTS OF
THE MODERN CHILD

SPECIAL ARTICLE

**Parenting through the
Coronavirus Lockdown**



RICHARD HOGAN

Parenting the Screenager

*A Practical Guide for Parents of the
Modern Child*

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ORPEN PRESS

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Parenting through the Coronavirus Lockdown

There is no doubt about it, we are in unprecedented times for our generation – but not unprecedented in our brief history on this planet as the human race. We have faced and survived many threats to our existence on this pale blue dot: Black Death, typhoid, the Spanish Flu, SARS, bird flu and swine flu to mention a few. And we will survive this particular threat, and maybe we might even come out of this experience a little bit more in touch with what is important and appreciate all that we have. But it is important to acknowledge that we have had a difficult time over the recent past. I really feel for our teenagers today; they were children of the recession and then just when we had dragged ourselves out of that cataclysmic economic downturn they were bombarded with all this doomsday talk about the climate, Brexit and now a pandemic. So, it has been a challenging number of years for all of us. It is important to acknowledge that. And now we are being informed that we have to endure lockdown for another while longer and the Leaving Certificate has been postponed to some date in late July/August. All of this information could derail the most dedicated student, but as parents we have to help them to stay focused. And the

weather is beginning to improve. So the next number of weeks may be challenging. But I hope the few simple tips I offer here might help you to manage this time conflict-free.

Remember, we are mammals, which means we are social beings. We don't do isolation or confinement well. We like to organise ourselves in clusters of people – that is why cities are so populated; we are drawn to each other. Contact tracing has illuminated just how much we actually engage with each other and how tactile we are as a species. So, now we are being charged with something that goes against our nature. We have to stay home to stay safe. This brings with it many challenges. I always like to gain some perspective on anything I have to do that I find problematic. This helps me to understand the issue in a wider context. Our grandparents and great-grandparents would have endured very challenging times. Indeed many of our ancestors would have fought in the War of Independence or World War I, or would have had to endure life in Ireland during the 'Hungry Thirties' and 'the Emergency'. So, staying home may not seem so great of a challenge in that wider context.

In this free download I will be outlining how you can navigate this time as a family free from conflict and tension. I will delineate what parents can do to create a healthy environment for the family and I will look at each age group and give some tips on how to engage the children in the house so that everyone can exist in such close proximity in harmony. You will also be able to contact me if you have a question that I haven't answered in this download.

A NOTE TO MOTHERS

The first thing I want to say to parents is that more than likely you are not a home-school teacher. So, please relax about the amount of material your child is learning over this time. I hear it in the emails that come into me: the pressure on parents (women in particular) to keep up with the syllabus. Women, as I said in the final chapter of my book, *Parenting the Screenager*, have a tendency to take on too much and can often find themselves overwhelmed with the amount they have been charged with. I spoke to a client recently and she explained



how, as well as cleaning up, cooking, and working remotely, she was now also trying to homeschool her children. She was exhausted and on the brink of collapse. When I asked her what would happen if she stopped cleaning everyone's mess up and didn't cook every dinner, there was a long pause and she said, 'I don't know – they'd probably just leave the mess get bigger and bigger until I couldn't handle seeing it anymore and I'd just end up doing it all.' She ended with a sigh, 'it would just make more work for me in the long run.' I think this is the pattern of behaviour that many women find themselves getting caught in at the moment. And it is causing so much tension in the house. Inequity is never conducive to harmony. So, you need to change the pattern in the family unit. In psychotherapy it is called a second-order change and as a family you need to share out the responsibilities because a healthy family system respects all in that unit and we all know it is not healthy for one person to be responsible for the majority of the work. So, you have to sit down with everyone in the family and outline the responsibilities that each one has so that the house can operate peacefully. Easier said than done, I hear you say. If your children have lived free from consequences and the ramifications of their behaviours, and if you have given them the message that they can do what they want in the house, it will be a little more challenging to get them to pull their weight, but not impossible. A family system that operates under an inverted hierarchy is not a healthy one and it needs to change. Before you sit down with your children, you should have a conversation with your husband/partner and outline the changes that need to take place within the family. Then as a unit you come together and in simple and clear language you both tell the children what their role will be and the consequences of not meeting those roles. You both have to be saying the same thing and you both have to be ready to implement a consequence when they do not fulfil their obligation. If it falls on one person, let's say the mother in this case, she will be positioned as the disciplinarian – this is a very unfair position for one member of the parenting unit to find themselves in and will eventually mean she will revert to doing everything so as to avoid conflict. Both parents must be consistent. It's an exercise in futility otherwise and will cause resentment in the couple.



HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MARRIAGE DURING LOCKDOWN

I always say that a healthy family allows for each member to be a part of and separate from it. The same can be said about a healthy marriage. We rarely spend as much time as we currently do with our partners so we need to recalibrate how we think about each other and the time we spend together. When you think about modern life, we are surrounded by so many distractions: the busyness of our working lives, meals out, friends, devices, the gym, etc. all help to dilute our intimate relationship with our partner and family. So we get used to it. We might meet friends on Friday night after work and go for a run Saturday morning or some other activity, then spend the evening with the family and Sunday visiting relatives or going to the gym. Our time alone as a couple decreases significantly as we move through life. The moment we bring children into the relationship we can never truly understand the pressure that is going to bring into our relational life. And they are many. But like everything, we get used to living a certain way and a routine quickly forms. I meet so many couples in my work as a family psychotherapist and often they seek out therapy because they know the banal routine of family life has disrupted their intimate relationship. They are coming to therapy to reorient their relationship so that they can find themselves again after becoming lost in the dance of parenthood. This is such a common issue in my practice. I think, as parents, we can all understand and relate to this dilemma. Parenting is a challenging and consuming role at the best of times. And now we do not have any of the activities I outlined above to dilute that experience. There are no meals out, meeting friends or going to the gym. We are now stuck inside together. But I truly feel there is, in this experience, an opportunity to find that relationship again. This is an opportunity to reconnect with each other.

When I am talking with a couple in trouble I generally hear the same dense and problem-saturated stories. I often punctuate those particular narratives by asking a simple question: what was it about him/her that you were attracted to in the early days? This can be a jarring question, because the couple have become so consumed with



narratives like 'he's lazy', 'he never does anything around the house', 'she's always nagging me', 'she's not my mother', 'I can't trust him', and so on. So all descriptions become negative and those earlier, happier narratives are eroded and forgotten. But when I ask them to describe what they first liked about each other the tone changes and generally a smile appears because they are remembering what it was like to first fall in love and what they liked about each other. When they come through the therapeutic door they are dragging a loaded bag of adjectives to describe what they do not like about each other. They have had plenty of time to build that list and they are very happy to share it. So that question brings them back into contact with their earlier romantic selves. And lockdown is an opportunity, I believe, to do the same. However, if not managed correctly it could do the exact opposite. In fact, divorce specialist Baroness Fiona Shackleton recently said, in the UK's House of Lords, that there will be an increase in divorces because of lockdown. She went further and stated that, 'one has only to imagine what it will be like when families are sealed in a property for a long period of time'. In China, where the coronavirus outbreak began, sources reported a huge surge in couples seeking divorce after months of lockdown. So, the warning signs are there for us all to see. This is a challenging time and if we do not manage it correctly it has the potential to destroy our family unit. However, if managed correctly it can widen and deepen those relationships and create lasting bonds that will improve our relational dynamic.

Tips for Couples During Confinement

- Give each other space. This is vitally important over the next few months. Once a day each of you should have an hour to yourself. Whether that is going upstairs and plugging out of the house for an hour by delving into a book, or listening to video on mindfulness, whatever your source of relaxation is you should have at least one hour a day to engage with it.
- Draw up a plan. Conflict arises when one member of the couple feels they are doing more than the other, or one feels they are being repeatedly 'nagged' unfairly. Often men, and I'm



thinking about myself here, might need a little structure around what their duty is in relation to tidying the house. I often hear men utter the words 'she acts like my mother'. That's a great sentence to getting a therapeutic session going. Nothing can drive a wedge between a couple like a sentence like that. The resentment in the room is tangible. The woman resents the man for positioning her like that and the man resents the woman for treating him like a child. No woman wants to be her mother, and, sorry Freud, no man wants his wife to be his mother either. Establishing boundaries around who does what would really help the family dynamic.

- Exercise is vitally important for your wellbeing. Get out and go for a walk or a run by yourself and together.
- Check in with each other. This is a stressful time. At the end of the evening chat about how you are experiencing everything and talk about what could be better or what is really working well. And then avoid talking about it for the rest of the night. Don't allow all conversations be dominated by the coronavirus.
- Manage your expectations of each other. This is a very important aspect of lockdown. As I have said, you haven't been together like this since the early days. You are both stressed and finding it difficult to manage this time together; acknowledge it and give each other a break when you fall short of each other's expectations. But like I said above, when you check in with each other bring it up in a calm way and without judgement. Easier said than done, right? But just think about this: when you say something with judgement and you back your partner into a corner, what tends to happen? Does communication increase or decrease? I would say it decreases. When someone feels blamed they become defensive and when they are in that position they cannot hear you. Whatever it is you wanted to communicate is lost. When you notice something about your partner that annoys you – like say they didn't clean their shoes before coming into the house or they are not picking their clothes up – wait until the time you have allocated to check in with each other to bring it up. Be calm and say it in a sensitive



way. Maybe say something like, 'It would really help if you could put your clothes into the clothes basket when they are dirty.' You are not in judgement with a sentence like this and you haven't diminished your partner.

As a couple you have met many challenges and this is another one; try to view this crisis as an opportunity to reconnect with each other.

HOW TO KEEP TODDLERS AND PRE-SCHOOLERS ENGAGED

With toddlers and pre-schoolers the aim is distract and deflect. The back garden is an incredible resource to help keep your toddler/pre-schooler engaged and interested. Set up a nature project, looking for snails or building bird nests, etc. Toddlers and young children love to be active: cooking and arts and crafts will while away many hours if you set it up correctly. Get them rolling the dough for making scones or stirring batter for cupcakes; anything that gets their hands into something will keep them engaged.

You may be receiving more boxes than usual; put them to good use. Get your child to make a bus or a kennel for a pet. My children love making things from whatever is left after the shopping; a cereal or pasta box has the potential to become anything in a child's hand. Encourage junk art; this is a really interesting way to keep your children engaged and creative. As I said, children of this age really love to use their hands, so get them digging in the earth, planting seeds or making things from objects around the house. There are plenty of videos online; just type 'junk art for kids' into YouTube and you will find so many resources to help them get ideas on how to use all the objects around the house. If you are a single parent this will be a very important resource because it will give you time to get a break. While they are busy making something you should go to another room and do yoga or Pilates, or read your book. You need time off too. And it is more difficult to find this as a single parent. But by setting them up with an activity that takes time you will make time for yourself.



HOW TO KEEP PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN ENGAGED

This age group still really enjoy being active and tasked with things to do. RTÉ has recently started to broadcast 'school on TV' to support primary school children and their parents at home. This is a wonderful initiative by RTÉ and you should avail of it, as it will keep your child occupied and give them ideas for projects to do while they are at home. My own children find this really enjoyable. They look forward to the programme because of the interactive element to it. They get asked to do a task and then send a picture into the programme and it might be shown on TV. This is very exciting and engaging for children. And don't worry if you miss an episode as it is also available on the RTÉ Player and supporting worksheets and other materials are uploaded to RTE.ie/learn. I have to commend Suzanne Kelly, Head of Children's Content at RTÉ. She has certainly made my home more enjoyable.

This age group are beginning to get into technology. You could get them to video-call their friends (there are many apps available to do this, such as FaceTime, Skype, WhatsApp and Zoom) and have a chat. It is important that they stay connected with their peer group. So getting them to video-call each other is a nice way for them to stay in touch while they are separated and it will make them feel like they have gone outside. Recently, my children used FaceTime to play hide and go seek with their cousins. It was actually great fun. And they have been playing it ever since. They also play Guess Who and giant Jenga through FaceTime. So get creative, think of the games they like to play and see would they work through a device.

HOW TO KEEP TEENAGERS ENGAGED

It is very important that your teenager gets into a healthy routine as soon as possible. More than likely they will not be returning to school this academic year. So, getting a healthy routine going is vitally important. I have spoken with many families over the last number of weeks and found that creating a routine is causing the most conflict in the house. The sooner your teenager understands that they should be getting up like normal and starting to engage with school content, the



easier it will be to navigate this period of time. What is happening in many families at the moment is that normative sleeping patterns have been completely disrupted and this is causing huge tension in the house. In my conversations with parents I'm hearing a familiar story: parents and teenagers alike going to bed when they feel like it. It seems that lockdown has completely eroded any sense of routine. Of course this is understandable; we are in such uncharted territory. But we must all get back into our normal sleeping pattern. It is causing so much tension in the house. Teenagers are waking up whenever they feel like it and parents are giving out to them for not doing their school work. So it's creating a serious battle for parents. Remember, as parents we set the culture of the house. If our routine is unhealthy and we are going to bed after midnight it is very hard to implement a rule about early bedtime. Teenagers have a heightened sense of injustice. So if we want them to get into a healthy routine we must first of all model it. I was talking with a family recently about this topic and the teenager in the house explained, 'I'm not going to bed on my own, listening to them watching TV.' He had a very good point. If we want a healthy routine in the family we must lead by example. As parents you should always ask yourself, how is my parenting helping to maintain the issue? This is not about blame but about figuring out how you can break the current relational dynamics in the house. In psychotherapy we call it 'homeostasis', which basically means equilibrium/balance. A family unit falls into its equilibrium very quickly. So during these times where our normal routine has been interrupted we must strive to instil the same healthy way of life we had before Covid-19 became our new reality. Remember, your child will be going back to school at some stage; if their routine is massively incongruent to how they will live during school time they will find the transition back to school very difficult indeed. The sooner the routine is like normal life the better for the entire house.

The news that the Junior Certificate examination has been cancelled has added its own unique pressures on families. While the teenager in the house may be walking around like they have a coat hanger stuck in their mouth, they will need to stay engaged with work. If they stop now and move into Fourth Year they could end up really struggling in



Fifth Year because they will not have attempted any writing assignments over that long breadth of time. And if they move directly into Fifth Year, they will find it incredibly problematic to get into the routine and pace of school at that high level.

Parents are now being charged with motivating their student to keep going even though the exam has been cancelled. This is no easy task, and it has the potential to cause incredible strain in the house. The first thing you need to do is talk to your student and explain to them why they have to keep engaged with school work. The pressure of the Junior Cert is off, so you don't expect them to keep going at the pace they were using. It is about slowing down now but not stopping. So if your Junior Cert student started doing 2 hours a day that would be sufficient to keep them on top of their work and also wouldn't ruin their day. It is vitally important that they keep up with their coursework, but in a way that reflects the pressure of the exam is off.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY LEAVING CERTIFICATE STUDENT?

This is such a pressing and current issue for over 55,000 families on this island. Today's Leaving Certificate students have been charged with something we have never asked of our students before. They have to stay at home and study for an exam that has been postponed. I have spoken with so many students over the last couple of weeks and they are finding this element very difficult. The lack of certainty is impacting their motivation. 'Will it go ahead?' 'What does "postponed" actually mean?' 'What's the point in studying if we have to repeat?' I hear these types of questions a lot. And I always reply with the same response. I tell them that no other group of students have had as much time to study for the exam as they have. I also explain that they have to use this time productively because if they don't all the great work they have done over the last few years will be wasted. I also discuss with them the kind of a study timetable that would suit them. Often boys struggle more with this than girls. I'm not utilising an old stereotype here but in my experience girls find it easier to organise themselves for study than boys. I think this is why girls generally tend



to out-perform boys in the Leaving Certificate. So, if you have a son they might need a little bit more guidance when it comes to timetabling study over this period. Talk to them about how they like to study. Some students like to do one subject a day, while others like to follow the school day and study each subject every day. It really depends on the student.

I think the most effective way to study is to pick four or five subjects a day and study a specific element in each subject. For example, if they are studying *Hamlet*, it is not efficacious to say 'I'm going to study *Hamlet* now' but rather they should have an outcome goal. We all work in a more productive way when we know what we are trying to achieve. That doesn't mean you will achieve it but at least you'll have a target to work towards. So, rather than saying 'I'm going to study *Hamlet*' your teenager could say instead, 'today I'm going to look at the theme of appearance versus reality in *Hamlet*. By the end of this study session I will know fifteen quotes on appearance versus reality. Tomorrow I will write an essay on it and the following day I will learn that essay and test myself.' That is a three-day plan on one specific area of *Hamlet*. It is goal-oriented and will help your child to achieve an outcome.

The major problem I encounter with students when they are finding studying and motivation difficult is that they do not know how to study. It would surprise you how many students struggle with this. I always tell them that I have done very well in exams and I have under-achieved in exams. But, I explain, there wasn't a dip in my IQ in the times I didn't get what I wanted but rather there was a dip in how I prepared for the exam. I can see the lightbulb flicker when I say those words. It's not about IQ; it's about consistent, effective study. And your child may need help with developing a decent study timetable that suits them.

Top Tips for Studying

- Make the timetable doable. This is the first problem with timetables. Students write these crazy timetables they know they will never follow. A student should not be studying after 7 p.m. They should be going for a walk and unwinding at that time.



Cramming is not a proxy for their seriousness; it just illuminates their inability to organise themselves effectively. Never cram.

- Take breaks. After every subject there should be a ten-minute break and after three hours of study make sure to timetable a thirty-minute to one-hour break. Breaks are vital for keeping the brain healthy and engaged.
- Get rid of all distractions while they are studying. There should be no phones or devices in the room. This is crucial if you want them to concentrate. If a phone is in the room they will be receiving notifications and messages constantly. Research shows that it is almost impossible to resist checking your phone when it pings with a message. They will resist this rule but be resolute on the issue. They will thank you in the long run.
- Try to follow the school day. This means they should be getting up at 8 a.m. with a view to start studying at 8:30. This will keep them focused and also allow them to be free by 4:30 p.m. And they will also be tired and fall into a healthy sleep pattern.
- Exercise is more important than ever during this period of confinement. They must get out of the house for a walk or a jog. This will get the endorphins going and keep them motivated.
- Having a healthy sleep routine is vitally important. They should be going to bed at a reasonable hour. If they are getting up at 8 a.m. they should be in bed for 10:30 p.m. They need nine hours of sleep to have a mind that is ready for the day ahead. The brain requires an incredible amount of energy; if your teenager is sleep-deprived it will be almost impossible for them to study. Model a healthy sleep routine for them.
- Maintain a healthy diet. It is so easy for our diet to fall apart while we are in lockdown. But now more than ever your teenager needs their diet to be healthy and to provide them with the energy they need for studying and concentration. Make sure your teenager is eating well. Try to avoid buying too much chocolate. As you know, they will eat whatever is there.

This is a difficult time for us all and our competencies as parents and partners are being tested on so many different levels each day. It is



important that we give each other space as we live in such close proximity to each other. But remember this difficulty has the potential to bring us closer together and we just might come out of this experience as a stronger and healthier family unit.

* * *

If you have any question that I have not addressed in this chapter, you can contact me on info@therapyinstitute.ie. To purchase a copy of my new book, *Parenting the Screenager: A Practical Guide for Parents of the Modern Child*, go to: <https://orpenpress.com/parenting-the-screenager-a-practical-guide-for-parents-of-the-modern-child.html> (copies will be dispatched as soon as possible). For an ebook version, please visit:

Kindle store: [Amazon UK](#); [Amazon US](#)

Kobo: [Kobo Ireland](#); [Kobo UK](#); [Kobo US](#)



Today's teenagers are growing up in a whole new digital world different from that of their parents' generation. While every generation of parents has to learn how to navigate their children's first steps into adolescence and adulthood, the environment in which it is happening now is rapidly changing.

Parenting the Screenager: A Practical Guide for Parents of the Modern Child offers parents an accessible and down-to-earth manual on parenting strategies from one of Ireland's leading psychotherapists. Richard Hogan's background in education affords him the unique perspective of working with teenagers from both inside the classroom and clinically as director of Therapy Institute. In *Parenting the Screenager* he uses case studies from his vast experience and offers easy-to-follow, practical steps that help parents to build healthier and more positive patterns of communication within their family, covering topics such as:

- Boundaries
- Social media
- Communication
- Gaming
- Online pornography
- Bullying and cyberbullying
- Teenage anxiety
- Perfectionism
- Body image and steroid use
- Sleep deprivation and exams
- The modern family

Parenting the Screenager is a must-buy for any parent of a modern child. Technology has interrupted patterns of communication and how teenagers socialise; this has brought with it new challenges for parents. The strategies developed by Richard Hogan over his years working with teenagers are some of the most significant approaches to adolescent behaviour in recent times and will help any parent who wants to understand how to parent their teenager in a more productive way.

Richard Hogan is a systemically trained family psychotherapist registered with the Family Therapy Association of Ireland. He writes every Thursday for the *Irish Examiner*, where he explores mental health issues for teenagers, couples and families. Richard was shortlisted for a Fulbright scholarship and he is often invited onto shows such as *The Hard Shoulder* with Ivan Yates (Newstalk), *The Today Show* (RTE) and *Weekend AM* (Virgin Media) as an expert in the field of human behaviour, where he offers his expertise and strategies on how to overcome teenage mental health issues.

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Cover design: www.hayesdesign.co.uk



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ISBN: 978-1-78605-083-0



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