# Adolescence Disrupted: Covid-19 and Protecting Teenagers

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Among changes underway is the phased easing of governmental restrictions in the Republic of Ireland including greater leniency toward social contact and the permissibility of travel. Owing to weeks of 'lockdown' are adverse effects on teenagers in Ireland arising from both restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19 and unsettling consequences of the virus in the first instance, including fear for loved ones, bereavement and anxiety about infection.

There has been little sense in the media vilification of teenagers who have been slammed as being reckless carriers of the illness with no regard for others. Indications are that teenagers have borne a substantial burden of Covid-19 as major disruptions to their education come at a time when the trajectory of their lives is often dictated by State exam results. No triviality can be assigned either to the mental health problems of younger generations which research suggests may be exasperated by pandemic conditions. Rapid review of evidence, for instance, published recently in the Lancet (available here) found that stressors for young people in quarantine included those related to the duration of quarantine, frustration and boredom, fear of infection and stigma.

It is also well established that adolescence is a time of identity formation in which peer-group relationships are critical and transformative. Whilst this may mean that it is harder for teenagers to keep their distance from one another as they may not see risk the same way that adults do, it also highlights the struggle for teenagers who have nonetheless been carefully and respectfully following rules put in place by the Government. The severance of social contacts through social distancing restrictions has also ushered many young people deeper into the precarious and potentially addictive virtual worlds of social media that have been linked to depression and anxiety (see here for one international systematic review).

The bottom line is that teenagers have a stake in the country's response to the pandemic, both as rights-holders and bearers of loss and uncertainty. As a grim employment market and unpredictable higher education landscape takes shape for those emerging into adulthood, it is evident that the next generation has had little say in how their lives have been affected. Troubling here is also the loss of innocence for many young people who may no longer see the world as a safe, predictable and protective place in which they can grow and develop. Combined with young people's concern about climate change covered in recent media, it is unfortunate that this generation may not be as confident about having a stable base in the world to rely upon as they are growing up.

Overall, of particular interest to question is how teenagers amid the key developmental life phase of adolescence, will be impacted in the long run by major disruptions to their lives. Whilst only time can conclusively tell, as the novel nature of the pandemic leaves us resting heavily on speculation, initial indications are that many teenagers continue to combat multiple adversities.

Contributions from Irish experts, for instance, with a dedicated focus on particularly disadvantaged teenagers and children, raise potent concerns such as the loss of social support infrastructures that may be vital for some teenagers, including the role of protective adults like grandparents. Whilst home is generally a loving place filled with emotional warmth and acceptance, this is not the case for every teenager. Within this, there are young people who have been confined to stressful and even abusive home environments for some time now. Emerging literature, for instance, indicates that among teenagers that may be exceptionally affected by pandemic conditions are those subject to child protection and welfare service involvement due to risk of enduring neglect or abuse (see Professor

Gilligan's article here and Dr Mooney's article here). Other groups such as young people with disabilities (see Dr Flynn's article here) and teenagers struggling to preserve their mental health (See Dr Donoghue's article here) are also particularly disadvantaged during the Covid-19 pandemic.

More broadly, there are unique considerations for the safety and welfare of those teenagers that fall outside the radar of immediate concern but nonetheless may be adversely affected in complex and hidden ways. Mass media coverage in recent weeks of frazzled parents struggling to discharge their responsibilities to their employer whilst at home appeals to the lived experience of many. The picture entails working parents attending reactively to the pressing needs of their small children who no longer attend creche or school whilst battling with upkeep of the family home involving an inordinate level of cooking, cleaning and maintenance provoked by its constant occupation. Missing from this picture, however, is those teenagers that need proactive rather than reactive parenting approach to draw them out of their shell so to speak, or to prevent them further disengaging through becoming hooked on social media, gaming and technology.

These are the teenagers who may be overlooked- those who appear undemanding and inclined to retreat into private worlds where they isolate themselves in their bedrooms and on their phones and games consoles. Whilst reaching the accolade of perfect parenting is far from practicable in pandemic conditions, it is also true that parent's capacity to give attention to their teenagers may be undermined by competing demands that pull them in multiple directions, taxing all of their resources beyond depletion. It is important therefore not to forget the quieter and more disengaging young people in our lives that could so easily be lost amidst the surrounding chaos of Covid-19.

In entirety, the purpose of this article has been modest: to try to summon some pause for thought about the safety and welfare of teenagers more broadly, as well as special populations of young people and those that often fall outside the radar of concern, but nonetheless are at risk of 'falling through the cracks'. Here, the task at hand continues to be of the utmost importance.

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