

## Growing up in times of COVID-19. When a window of opportunity is temporarily closed.

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**Abstract:** During the COVID-19 crisis, the governmental restrictions seriously affected the daily lives of adolescents (age 12-25). They could not attend school, had to limit face-to-face contact with peers, and had to stay at home with their parents. This chapter combines insights from theoretical models on adolescent development with some of the first empirical findings of the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents. We will discuss how lockdown and social distancing measures affect mental health and well-being in a formative and vulnerable period in life. Specifically, the authors focus on delayed attainment of developmental tasks toward adulthood, the importance of friendships, and how parents can promote developmental growth and resilience in a 'new common'. Advice is included on how future society can and should be shaped around the developmental needs, risks, and opportunities that characterize adolescence.

**Key-words:** adolescent, development, COVID-19, parenting, family, mental health well-being

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In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 spread across the globe and many governments took restrictive measures to prevent a further spread. Even though adolescents, here defined as youths aged 12-25 years, are not a high-risk group from an epidemiological viewpoint, school closures and social distancing measures did result in a tremendous impact on their daily lives. Adolescence is characterized by opportunities for personal growth, for establishing friendships that last a lifetime, for falling in love for the very first time, and for learning how to cope with stress. Simultaneously, adolescents are vulnerable for psychological problems, with approximately one out of five facing emotional problems, such as anxiety problems or depression (Kessler et al., 2005). In terms of social health, loneliness affects adolescents more than any other age group (Qualter et al., 2015). This chapter reflects on the psychological and social consequences of COVID-19 on adolescents, while we are in the midst of the first wave. The aim is to provide concrete advice on how society, parents, and professionals can create optimal circumstances for promoting growth of next generations in a 'new common'.

## **ATTAINMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS.**

*"When the body is ripe, and society requires, and the self is ready to achieve a certain task, the teachable moment has come" (R. Havighurst).*

Adolescents grow by the accomplishment of developmental tasks, by society predefined stepping stones, which are needed to successfully mature (Havighurst, 1948). These tasks include forming friendships and romantic relationships, achieving independence from parents, rituals of entry into adulthood (e.g., graduation), and selecting and preparing for an occupation.

Society, but also parents and adolescents themselves, have a timetable of expectations regarding when a child should be able to accomplish these tasks (Deković, et al., 1997). For instance, 15-year olds should be able to maintain friendships, and solve a conflict on their own. Being 'on schedule' provides youths with a sense of pride and meaning in life and is related to emotional well-being (Seiffge-Krenke & Gelhaar, 2008). Delay on the other hand, comes with a price of increased psychological problems and lower self-esteem. Hence, even in times of a crisis, society, educators and parents need to allow that these critical maturation tasks can be attained at the right moment.

## **SOCIAL DEPRIVATION**

As any other human, adolescents have a fundamental need to belong, that is, to form and maintain high-quality intimate and stable relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Whereas adults typically rely on their romantic partners for comfort, intimacy, and understanding, close friends play this pivotal role in the lives of teens (De Goede, et al., 2009). In the context of close friendships, adolescents develop a set of social skills needed to function later in life, such as keeping promises, solving conflicts, and disclosing secrets (Frijns, Finkenauer, & Keijsers, 2013). Through exploration of sexuality and romance with age-mates adolescents gradually learn how to engage in intimate relationship that are pleasant and long-lasting (van de Bongardt, 2019). Moreover, in the ongoing search for the self, conversations with friends help to form a stable identity (Reis & Youniss, 2004). Friendships, in sum, are not only a source of great joy in adolescents' lives, they are fundamental for learning how to cope with stress, how to maintain relationships, and form the basis for future growth and maturation.

During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, we assessed how the lockdown had affected friendships as part of the ADAPT project (Keijsers, Boele, & Bülow, 2017). Among 178 Dutch adolescents (age = 14.25 (*SD* = 1.63), 31% boys) we observed strong declines in time spend with friends, from 8 hours of face-to-face contact before the lockdown to 2 hours after during week-days, and from 6.5 hours to 2 hours in weekend-days. Adolescents rapidly adapted and online contact with

friends increased from 3 hours per day to 5.5 hours. This may compensate for some of the negative effects of the sharp decrease in face-to-face contact (Orben, et al., 2020). However, it is still likely that adolescents have missed important opportunities to obtain support and comfort from friends and romantic partners, under circumstances when these social resources are needed most. Social deprivation may have also affected their well-being. A rapid systematic review highlighted that 30-50% of the adolescents aged 12-24 were lonely during the COVID-19 lockdown (Loades et al., 2020), which may predict mental health problems especially when it lasts longer (Qualter et al., 2015; van Roekel et al., 2013). For this reason, scholars have warned for a steep increase in mental health problems in the upcoming period, including anxiety and depression (Golberstein, et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020).

## **INDEPENDENCE FROM PARENTS**

Parents play a pivotal role in helping adolescents to grow up into adults who are resilient to stress and who function adaptively in society. During adolescence, families are challenged by the increasing developmental need of adolescents to decide things for themselves. Conflicts can easily emerge on topics, such as cleaning the bedroom, spending time on social media, or curfews. These negative interactions are in fact helpful in pushing the parent-child relationship from a hierarchically structured relationship in which the parent has the final say, to a more horizontally structured relationship with more democratic decision making (Branje, et al., 2011). Hence, developmental growth and maturation takes place when parents release control, and trust their child to make wise decisions on their own (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013).

In the ADAPT project (Keijsers, Boele, & Bülow, 2017), we observed the opposite pattern of change. Instead of releasing control, parents became more protective and controlling. New rules were installed by parents, most of them to reinforce governmental rules of hygiene and social distancing, such as not allowing seeing friends. Parents also introduced rules to structure the lives of their child, such as making homework and getting up in time. Longitudinal analyses of eight repeated assessments indeed revealed significant decrease in autonomy supportive

parenting during the lockdown (Bülow, et al., 2020). As prohibition of contacts with friends and restriction of autonomy directly undermine the opportunities for growth, we had anticipated a rise in conflicts and opposition (Petegem, et al., 2017). This was only found for some families. Apparently, most parents manage to introduce and explain rules in a democratic way, and children find most of the novel rules legitimate. In these families, the increase in time spend together may even be related to opportunities to reinforce the relationship and improved communication (Keijsers, et al., 2010). However, stress due to health or financial concerns may also trigger the use a repressive parenting strategy including guilt induction and love withdrawal (Van Der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). Such psychological control may impede on maturation processes and lead to internalizing problems among adolescents. *C'est la ton qui fait la musique*, when it comes to finding the balance between protection and promoting independence.

## **PROMOTING DEVELOPMENTAL GROWHT IN THE NEW COMMON**

Adolescents are in the midst of laying this important fundament for developmental growth and future well-being. Adolescents need friendships, independence from parents, and rituals that mark entry to adulthood and new phases in life, such as graduation ceremonies. The COVID-19 situation has strongly affected each of these domains. One can never truly predict how a life course of an individual is affected by such a temporary situational change. In general terms, most will be resilient and these negative experiences and short-term reduced well-being do not doom them to an adult life full of mall-being and psychosocial problems (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). Likewise, adolescents who are resilient during this stressful period cannot comfortable rely on a problem-free future. The longer-term impact can only be derived from rigorous future scientific studies on adolescents. However, this does not take away the opportunity for society to create optimal circumstances for growth, while we are still in the midst of the crisis.

First of all, as they are vulnerable to psychological problems, it is of pivotal importance to monitor and support adolescents. It is a time of many changes for adolescents. Social distancing undermines social support of their most intimate companions, which may lead to loneliness and

decreased well-being. Accessible tools and informal and low-key professional guidance are needed to prevent psychosocial problems, such as depression (Golberstein et al., 2020). Examples include eHealth tools that challenge adolescents to cope with stress, such as our recently released Grow It! application (Hillegers, Keijsers, & Legerstee, et al., 2020). Second, face-to-face contact with friends is not a luxury for adolescents; it is a developmental need. Social media is a blessing for adolescents, but it cannot compensate for the richness of learning experiences and support face-to-face interactions provide. Third, during the first lockdown measures adolescents' potential for growth and resilience was hindered because parents could provide fewer opportunities for independent decision making. In sum, parents, teachers, and professionals should protect adolescents when needed, but also provide autonomy, independent decision-making, and contact with their friends whenever possible. By building their own social skills and personal resources, with help of adults, the next generation is better able to adaptively cope with stress and societal changes to come.

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