

# Adolescent Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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International Association for  
Adolescent Health

## Introduction

*The objective of this statement is to ensure that adolescents' health, nutrition, development, wellbeing and human rights are addressed during national responses to the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2, coronavirus) pandemic.*

## Background

- Adolescents and young adults (hereafter, called adolescents) are our best hope for this planet's long-term sustainability. The current COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected adolescents and will continue to do so as a consequence of the mitigation strategies taking place around the world.
- Although adolescents can be infected with COVID-19, the majority experience relatively mild illness, while others are asymptomatic.
- The disruptions in education and employment have increased young people's vulnerability to the impact of COVID-19.
- The International Association for Adolescent Health wishes to highlight the need to strengthen and expand ongoing efforts to minimize the potentially catastrophic short-, medium- and long-term effects of COVID-19 on young people's health, development and wellbeing.

## The impact of community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents

- *Education:* There has been enormous disruption to adolescents' education following widespread school closures.
  - Not all adolescents have access to the technologies needed to support remote learning;
  - Caring for family members and undertaking greater household responsibilities has precluded some adolescents from fully participating in remote learning;
  - Many national school examinations have been cancelled which risks limiting educational progression;
  - Family reliance on adolescents' household contributions during the pandemic may place them at greater risk of not returning to education after schools reopen.
- *Social supports and connections:* Engaging in normative activities that underpin healthy adolescent development have been greatly comprised. (e.g. chatting with friends, participating in regular sport and recreation, developing romantic relationships);
- *Missing rites of passage:* Religious ceremonies, graduations, weddings and other cultural celebrations that are significant in the lives of adolescents have been cancelled or postponed;

- *Compounding gender issues:* The effects of national responses to COVID-19 on social protection and gender norms may lead to young women not returning to education, increases in early marriage and unwanted adolescent pregnancy;
- *Lack of access to health services:* Many health and community support services have closed or limited access. This is particularly challenging for vulnerable and marginalized adolescents who continue to have complex needs (e.g. sexual and reproductive health services, mental health care, LGBTQ support services). Furthermore, school closures limit access to routine school-based health services and preventive health care including immunization and menstrual care packs, risking educational engagement and longer-term health;
- *Food and public health insecurity:* School closures result in the absence of the school meal infrastructure which increase the risk of nutrition problems;
- *Mental Health:* Social isolation, depression and anxiety are increasing in the context of disconnection from peers and education, employment stress and prolonged restriction of movement;
- *Grief:* The grief of losing family members and friends during the pandemic – especially where no visits are possible to personally comfort dying relatives – may leave deep wounds;
- *Violence and abuse:* Domestic violence and abuse has increased during the pandemic, which places adolescents at risk within their homes;
- *Unemployment:* Adolescents are more likely to be in irregular and low-paid employment than other age groups and will experience much higher rates of unemployment following any economic downturn. They are also more likely to be employed in settings that may lack appropriate infection prevention measures, which may increase their exposure to the coronavirus;
- *Public perceptions:* Media are quick to disproportionately blame adolescents for flouting social distancing laws.

### **Positive contributions of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic**

During the pandemic, wonderful examples of young people’s kindness and generosity, technological capabilities and innovation, selflessness, resilience and the strength of connection to their communities have also been evident. Adolescents are integral to community responses to the pandemic and there have been many examples of this:

- Making personal protective equipment (PPE) for local hospitals
- Using social media in constructive ways to increase awareness among adolescents about COVID-19 and ways they can cope during the pandemic
- Organizing mass call centers to ensure that people in isolation are socially connected and being cared for
- Organizing mass catering for health care workers
- Starting peer support services
- Organizing student led donations e.g. mobile phones and laptops
- Starting local services for the elderly in their communities

- Tutoring the elderly on how to use online communication platforms
- Actively working with academic institutions to improve communication between academic staff and students during the pandemic

## **Recommendations**

### ***The role of governments:***

The IAAH calls on national governments to:

- Ensure that social messaging of new public information and changes in regulations is communicated directly to adolescents in language that is directly informed by young people. This will increase the likelihood of its effectiveness;
- In the absence of the normal rites of passage of adolescence, celebrate the achievements and commitments of adolescents and support them as they take their next steps in a world that has changed very quickly and is likely to continue to change;
- *Health services:* Ensure continued access to health care for adolescents at all stages of the pandemic, through the strengthening of national and local health infrastructure. This includes funding of national preventive and public health services, immunization programs, acute medical, mental health and sexual and reproductive health services;
- Invest in a research agenda to measure the multiple impacts on adolescents from the current pandemic, which is used to inform future pandemic planning of strategies to minimize the long-term negative effects on adolescents' health and development;
- *Schools:* Re-open educational institutions at the earliest opportunity that is safe to do so. This will provide adolescents with a safe place for learning and social connections, as well as access to various resources such as meals, menstrual care and health services;
- *Employment and training:* Balance the short-term need to address economic shortfalls that will arise from the COVID-19 crisis with the medium-term need to continue investing in adolescents through the provision of training and availability of meaningful employment;
- *Social Services:* Address the needs of vulnerable adolescents through funding for social services that ensure access to safe housing, drug and alcohol services and child protection services.

### ***The role of national and international organizations working with adolescents:***

The IAAH calls on civil society and professional organizations to:

- Continue to advocate and collaborate around the Sustainable Development Goals which remain the overall vision for the post COVID-19 world;
- Advocate to governments to achieve the necessary health and social supports for all young people, and those with additional needs, such as adolescents who are refugee or asylum seeking, indigenous, experiencing homelessness, or have a chronic illness or disability.

### ***The role of health systems:***

The IAAH calls on health systems and health providers to:

- Ensure access to routine and confidential health care services for adolescents in line with evidence-based interventions and recognized good practice;
- Maintain vigilance around the health effects of COVID-19 on adolescents, including those living with chronic health conditions such as NCDs (eg asthma, diabetes) and communicable diseases (eg HIV and tuberculosis), as well as disabilities;
- Ensure that adolescents are included in any therapeutic and vaccine trials that are developed;
- Ensure that immunization programs are maintained and facilitated within health services and communities;
- Advocate for research into the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of adolescents and young adults, particularly around the intersection between their health needs, mental health and education;
- Advocate to governments to ensure the disproportionate needs of vulnerable groups of adolescents are met, such as adolescents experiencing homelessness, those from indigenous populations, refugees, and those in state care and institutions, including prisons and asylum seekers.

### ***The role of communities working with adolescents:***

The IAAH calls on the many people working with adolescents to:

- Recognize the human rights of adolescents to feel safe, express themselves and their emotional reactions, ask for help when needed (and get help), keep learning, keep planning for the future, and to keep feeling joy and being creative;
- Intentionally engage with adolescents to ensure that their views actively shape the types of community responses that are implemented;
- Celebrate young people's strengths and recognize their contributions to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***The role of adolescents:***

The IAAH joins with UN agencies and youth-led organizations in supporting a rights-based approach to coping with isolation and actively engaging adolescents themselves in the decisions that affect them in a post-COVID-19 world.

## **When the pandemic subsides, commitment must not fade:**

As the world moves into the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing restrictions will slowly be relaxed, schools will reopen, and health and community services will recommence. However, the extent of educational disruption, changes to individual and family mental health and economic impacts will result in significant effects on this generation of adolescents and young adults. Without equally significant investments, these effects risk being carried forward as today's adolescents mature into adulthood. As the current generation of adolescents are also the parents and caregivers of the future, efforts are equally needed to minimize the intergenerational risks of these problems.

Investment in economic measures, programs and infrastructure that promote positive adolescent development, family welfare, access to quality education, health care and meaningful employment will underpin healthier trajectories for the current generation of adolescents and young adults and contribute to decreasing the growing health and socioeconomic inequalities that surround them.

“Country by country, we must take look beyond our immediate concerns and invest wisely in the generation that must live in the future which we are currently co-creating” Pierre K Cooke Jr (One World Young Ambassador, NCD Alliance Global Forum, February 2020).

## **Useful Resources:**

1. Youngpeopleshealth.org.uk *A rights-based survivor-led approach to coping with lockdown*. 2020. Available from <https://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/lockdown-rights.jpg>
2. World Health Organization. *Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19*. WHO, 2020.
3. United Nations. *Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Children*. New Yorks, 2020.
4. United Nations Interagency Network on Youth Development. *Statement on COVID-19 & Youth 2020*. New York, 2020.
5. UNICEF. *Framework for reopening schools 2020*. Available from <https://www.unicef.org/media/68366/file/Framework-for-reopening-schools-2020.pdf>.
6. UNFPA. *Coronavirus Disease (COVID 19) Preparedness and Response – UNFPA Technical Briefs V March 24\_2020*.