



Webinar Series

COVID-19 When You Are Under 19: *Adolescents' Relationships and Well-Being During the Pandemic*

In March 2021, Drs. Alexa Martin-Storey, Université de Sherbrooke, and Melanie Dirks, McGill University, presented a webinar discussing what recent research tells us about adolescent well-being during COVID-19, along with risk and protective factors associated with

1. Following COVID-19 guidelines
2. Mental health and psychosocial functioning, *and*
3. Maintaining healthy relationships

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Adolescents and COVID-19 Guideline Adherence

Studies found that the **majority of youth** reported engaging in **more preventative hygiene behaviours** after COVID began.

- **Higher age** was associated with **more** guideline compliance behaviours

How to Support Engagement in COVID-19 Guidelines

1. In general, providing **accurate** information about the **efficacy and benefits** of following guidelines may be important for adolescents.
2. **Conduct problems** are associated with being **less likely** to follow COVID-19 guidelines. For adolescents with conduct issues who are less receptive to punishment or prosocial motivation:
 - Use "Let's Get Smart" and other intervention approaches that increase motivation among children with conduct problems to perceive the thoughts and feelings of others.
3. Contextualizing information and providing **specific examples** of how adolescents' actions could lead to harm in others may lead to better outcomes.

How is COVID-19 Impacting Adolescents?

COVID-19 Related Possible Difficulties for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Youth

1. **Fewer resources** for social distancing
2. Difficulties with at-home learning and **accessibility**
3. Being employed or having family members employed in **higher contact jobs** (more stress regarding COVID-19 exposure)
4. Less or no contact with **school-based support** and/or resources



COVID-19 Related Possible Difficulties for Racialized Youth

1. Negative (and disproportionate compared to white youth) impact of **increased police surveillance** of adolescent behaviour, especially for Black youth
2. Youths' role as **language/cultural translators** for family members with language barriers
3. Pre-existing stressors impacting current **medical vulnerability** for adolescents and their families
4. Exacerbation of **pre-existing inequalities** in terms of **resource availability**
5. Difficulty in **engaging in online learning** among rural youth and particularly rural youth in Indigenous communities

COVID-19 Related Possible Difficulties for Gender and Sexual Minority Youth

1. Exacerbation of pre-existing issues around **housing security**
2. Fewer opportunities to **connect** with their chosen family/community
3. Barriers to accessing **mental health services**
4. Less access to identity-affirming **medical services**
5. Feeling **stuck** with unsupportive family members

COVID-19 Changes in Mental Health

Different kinds of information suggest changes in mental health for adolescents pre and post COVID-19 measures.

1. Help lines: In Canada, **increase** from **1.9 million** calls to Kids Help Phone in 2019 to **4 million** in 2020
2. Youth perceived change in mental health since COVID-19 began:
 - Worse **mental health**
 - Less **substance use**

COVID-19 Related Changes for Adolescents

- Normatively, adolescence is a time where we see youth spending increased time with peers, and increasingly less time spent with family. This is expected as teens become autonomous young adults.
- The pandemic is **fundamentally changing the groups of people** with whom adolescents are **spending their time**.
 1. In a nationally representative sample, the percentage of youth who spent **0 time with their best friend** has **increased** since the pandemic began.
 2. The percentage of youth who spent **3+ hours a day with their parents and siblings increased**, and percentage of youth who spent 3+ hours a day with best friends decreased since the pandemic began.
- COVID-19 has led to some major changes in the lives of adolescents:
 1. Less **mobility** compared to prior to COVID-19
 2. More perceived **screen time**
 3. Reduction in time spent in **active play**
 - One study found that less than 1% of youth were meeting physical activity guidelines.

Recommendations for Parents and Educators

1. Support healthy relationships at home

- Youth are spending increased time with parents and siblings, and potentially not by choice.
- This increased time with family presents both **risks and opportunities**:
 - May present risks for those that have highly negative relationships with their families – fewer or no chances to leave, to take a break, or to get support from someone else.
 - May also be an opportunity to build stronger and more affectively positive and warmer relationships with between siblings and children/parents.
- Pay attention to sibling relationships. Research shows that **sibling aggression** can have significant long-lasting consequences on adolescents' mental health, especially during COVID-19.
 - When aggression between siblings is growing, do your best to intervene.

2. Perceived instability of relationships may be a risk marker

- Youth reporting highest levels of depression symptoms and marijuana use see their relationships as getting better and getting worse
- Youth reporting positive changes in relationships also reporting higher levels of internalizing symptoms
- Takeaway: Even if things seem positive, you may want to dig deeper: there may be other areas where things are getting worse for youth.

3. Reach youth through multiple modalities

- Use varied and individualized approaches in encouraging guideline adherence.
- Text-based support may be important for youth who are worried about being overheard/have little privacy.



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