

A GUIDE TO PROMOTE THE DYNAMIC SOCIALIZATION OF ADOLESCENTS

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OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE PANDEMIC SITUATION

Once COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, the province of Quebec went into general lockdown until May 2020. The Quebec population has been subjected to restrictive health measures and further lockdowns to reduce the spread of the virus, which has required many adjustments (e.g., mask wearing, frequent hand washing, physical distancing). Since this new situation in the spring of 2020 was unpredictable, it may have generated a feeling of loss of control. There were many factors that caused stress in individuals, a stress which still persists (Dickerson and Kemeny, 2004). A great deal of fear and anxiety has arisen in this context, whether concerning our own health, that of our loved ones, our personal future or that of society in general.

The repercussions of the pandemic may even be greater among at-risk populations. Adolescents are one of these at-risk populations, due to the developmental period they are going through, among other factors (Guessoum et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). The period of adolescence is crucial in a human's life, as it leads to major physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. The pandemic has had a drastic impact on teenagers: they have not been able to continue their schooling in person, participate in extracurricular activities (sports, music, theatre, etc.) or see their friends. Although health and social restrictions are necessary during a pandemic, it is important to acknowledge that some of these restrictions directly conflict with the basic needs for optimal development during adolescence, such as building an identity outside the family through social relationships and participating in activities outside the family unit.

Since teenagers' daily lives have been greatly disrupted by the pandemic, many of their reference points have subsequently disappeared. These disruptions have been and may still be a major source of stress and distress for them. Furthermore, stress may significantly contribute to the development of various physical and mental health problems. Adolescents are particularly sensitive to the effects of stress, due to the developmental period in which they find themselves (Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar and Heim, 2009; Lupien et al., 2013). Consequently, the current circumstances of the pandemic are exacerbating pre-existing problems and giving rise to new difficulties. These unique circumstances are compounded by challenges that typically exist during adolescence. For these reasons, it is essential that Quebec adolescents receive appropriate support in order to deal with these risks, which may have significant long-term repercussions. The current situation is an unprecedented ordeal that requires our full attention, support and assistance in order to help our teenagers develop the resources and skills to "bounce back" from the pandemic.

2. IMPACT ON YOUTH

2.1 Psychological distress

A 2020 study reports that during the pandemic, more than one fifth of teenagers' mental health was affected (Zhang et al., 2020). In particular, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression were frequently reported by adolescents during the pandemic (Guessoum et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). Many of these teens expressed feelings of sadness, isolation, loneliness, crying and feelings of loss that reflect their distress or even despair.

Over the years, adolescent distress has evolved, and this is still true in the context of a pandemic. In 2010-2011, 20% of Quebec youth had a high level of distress (Traoré et al., 2018). In 2016-2017, this proportion rose to 29%, while in the summer of 2020, a few months after the beginning of the pandemic, the proportion of youth with a high level of distress was even higher (Traoré et al., 2018; Laurier and Pascuzzo, 2021). An increase in distress was also noted in the winter of 2021 compared to the previous summer. In particular, depressive and anxiety symptoms were the highest and even increased among adolescents between the summer of 2020 and the winter of 2021 (Laurier, Pascuzzo, Beaulieu and Labonté, 2021). This suggests that the increase may be due to the extension of health and social measures. When the symptoms of boys and girls are compared, girls usually have more severe symptoms, both before and during the pandemic. (Laurier, Pascuzzo and Paré-Beauchemin, 2021; Traoré et al., 2018). However, all boys and girls exhibit high levels of distress and need support.

During the pandemic, teens may also have been exposed to death for the first time by reports in the media or personal loss among those around them (Guessoum et al., 2020). Similarly, it seems that the more teenagers are informed about the pandemic (e.g., nature and spread of the disease), the more they have symptoms of anxiety and depression (Zhou et al., 2020). These teens are better informed about the pandemic and its associated dangers, but they do not yet have the cognitive and emotional maturity to cope with it, which increases their risk of experiencing anxiety and depressive symptoms.

2.2 Loss of bearings

Another impact the pandemic has had on teenagers is that it has imposed a significant "developmental pause" on them. To help reduce the spread of the virus and protect society from COVID-19, the health and social restrictions have forced teens to put aside what they enjoy, what motivates them, what defines them and what contributes to their well-being. Teens have been required to limit, reduce and even completely stop various core and essential activities for more than a year. They have had to endure many hardships: not spending time with their friends, not going to places where they mature outside the family environment (e.g., schools, youth centres, cultural centres) and not participating in sports or cultural activities, etc. However, this is contrary to what is desired and expected during adolescence, when, for healthy development, they need to establish greater autonomy from their parents, develop close relationships with a larger social network (i.e., peers and other significant adults), discover their interests, skills and talents by trying out various activities and hobbies, in order to better guide their decisions about their future.

2.3 Changes and interpersonal problems

2.3.1 Family relationships

In addition to psychological distress and loss of bearings, the health and social measures needed to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic have greatly affected family relationships. Due to social distancing and lockdowns, people have had no choice but to isolate themselves with their close family and pets. During this global crisis, family has become a more important refuge than ever. In particular, studies show that adolescents who have a strong and positive attachment with their parents have fewer symptoms of distress, depression, anxiety and irritability and that this link is associated with greater psychological well-being among youth (Laurier, Pascuzzo and Beaulieu, 2021). In addition, during periods of stress, positive interactions between parents and their teens may help them cope better (Moreira et al., 2020; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017).

The pandemic has also brought its share of difficulties for parents, making this situation particularly stressful for them. Parents not only had to manage and cope with the challenges, losses and additional professional and economic pressures, but they were also forced to take on a greater role in the education of their teens, since schooling had to be done remotely from home. Furthermore, they have had to deal with changes at work (e.g., teleworking) and the redistribution of tasks and responsibilities at home. As challenges increase while resources diminish, parents may become much less emotionally and cognitively available to properly support their teens, potentially affecting their relationships with them. This is cause for concern, since parents are crucial sources of support and comfort for their children, even during adolescence, and particularly in high stress situations (Zeifman and Hazan, 2008). An additional effort is constantly needed to maintain the emotional connection and bond with extended family members and the management of “pandemic fatigue” that may set in. While these challenges are mounting up for parents, their own support network has been drastically reduced. It is therefore not surprising that during the pandemic, a large proportion of parents reported experiencing distress (Pascuzzo, Laurier and Bédard, 2021). Faced with the challenges and hardships caused by the pandemic, it is important to acknowledge the impact that COVID-19 has had on family environments, parents' well-being and parent-adolescent relationships.



2.3.2 Relationships with peers

Although the quality of parent-adolescent relationships is essential for the well-being of youth, adolescence is a developmental period in which contact with peers and the development of close relationships outside the family environment are vital. Friends are an important source of comfort, emotional support and encouragement, helping teens to manage, cope with and positively overcome various developmental challenges during this period (Allen, 2008; Zeifman and Hazan, 2008). Adolescents who have strong attachments with friends report fewer symptoms of distress, depression, anxiety and irritability (Laurier, Pascuzzo and Beaulieu, 2021; Lee and Hankin, 2009; Wilkinson, 2010).

To comply with health and social measures during the pandemic, direct contact of adolescents with their friends has been limited or non-existent. This has increased the distress of some. As a result, adolescents perceive social contacts to be less human, since they are not in person, causing them to feel abandoned, alone and unable to anticipate when the situation will return to normal or improve (Laurier, Pascuzzo and Beaulieu, 2021). Some even report feeling like they are missing out on their teenage years (*I feel like I'm missing out on my "youth." Since I was young, I've heard that when I'm about 18, it'll be the best years of my life... That's not the case right now...* [18-year-old girl, winter 2021; Laurier, Pascuzzo and Paré-Beauchemin 2021]). When teens delve deeper into how they feel about not being able to see their friends or lovers, their responses are very revealing about their state and fall under the following themes: less social life; loneliness; breakups; mental health problems; depression symptoms; sadness; anger; worries; boredom; and desire to disobey rules. Moreover, some studies have suggested that prolonged periods of diminished social contact increase the risk of adverse mental health impacts on youth (e.g., more symptoms of post-traumatic stress, confusion and anger; Beam and Kim, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Fernández et al., 2020).

While lockdowns and social distancing have been necessary in order to reduce the pandemic's impact, this imposed "developmental pause" needs to end as soon as it is safe and possible to do so. We should remember the sacrifices that teenagers have had to make in order to help "fight the war" against COVID-19. We need to acknowledge their contribution and invest resources to help them bounce back from the hardships and disappointments they have experienced. We can do this by supporting them and providing various opportunities to re-establish their social relationships with their peers, thereby more actively resuming optimal development. Over the long term, our future society depends on our ability to help Quebec adolescents achieve their full potential.