
YOUNG PEOPLE AND COVID-19 BEHAVIOURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROMOTING SAFE BEHAVIOURS

Policy brief



World Health
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response, WHO identifies young people as a priority target audience with specific concerns, experiences and behaviours. With behavioural evidence from COVID-19 still emerging, evidence was sought from other health domains to improve understanding of risk-taking behaviours of young people. The aim of this policy brief is to provide relevant insights from behavioural evidence and a set of behavioural considerations for those designing initiatives promoting COVID-19 preventive behaviours among young people.

A rapid and non-systematic review of evidence was conducted to examine whether young people – broadly defined in the review as individuals ranging from 15 to 30 years of age – are sufficiently different from older age groups in their perception of risk and decision-making to warrant tailored approaches. The review concluded that by the mid-teen years, young people’s cognitive decision-making processes are similar to those of adults in many ways; however, some behavioural factors that influence risky or unsafe behaviours are particularly relevant to young people.

Programme managers may find it helpful to refer to the youth-specific barriers and drivers identified in this policy brief and to consider prioritizing these for testing when designing initiatives targeted at young people. On the basis of the evidence available, this policy brief suggests that knowledge-based efforts might not be sufficient to influence the behaviours of young people, and that programme managers would probably increase the success of youth-targeted initiatives by addressing, in their respective contexts, how to:

- create an enabling environment;
- establish positive social norms in peer groups;
- promote feelings of empathy and prosocial motivation;
- engage young people in communicating risk-prevention messages;
- build young people’s confidence in their ability to act and to protect themselves from risks; and
- facilitate safe social connections to reduce negative impacts on mental health.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of millions of young people around the world. Stay-at-home policies, restrictions on social gatherings, closures of schools, universities and businesses, physical distancing and other measures slow the spread of the virus, but have far-ranging consequences for young people who are going through a phase of exploratory learning and growth. As young people struggle to meet their needs for social connection, fear of loneliness and social isolation can potentially drive COVID-19 risk-taking behaviours (1, 2). For example, preliminary evidence suggests that, compared with the general population, young people might be at greater risk of developing fears related to the COVID-19 pandemic (3) and of suffering the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness, which are the consequences of social distancing. (2, 4).

Additionally, across all regions and income levels, young people who work have been hit particularly hard by the crisis, experiencing greater unemployment and loss of income (5), while those who are studying or learning have been negatively affected by poor or non-existent digital delivery (6). Young people have also reported greater levels of stress, anxiety and depression than other segments of the population (7, 8).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO identifies youth as a priority target audience, with a range of specific needs, concerns, experiences and behaviours. To align with some of WHO's upcoming COVID-19 youth initiatives (e.g. the Global Youth Mobilization) this document broadly defines "young people" as those aged between 15 and 30 years.¹ This wide age range – encompassing different stages of development, from adolescence to emerging and young adulthood – was selected to ensure that findings can be relevant to a large number of organizations working with young people.

Risk-taking behaviours such as not wearing masks or not respecting physical distances increase potential exposure to the disease. Evidence on risk-taking behaviours in other health domains was considered for this policy brief, to explore what behavioural drivers may be relevant for young people in relation to COVID-19. A rapid review of evidence was conducted by the American Psychological Association (10); it concluded that while, by the mid-teen years, the cognitive decision-making processes are similar to those of adults, there are

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