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Premium 

Locked in by Covid for almost a year, the kids aren't all right

Stella O'Malley



Children are reaching breaking point and have now lost all interest in life beyond their screens, writes Stella O'Malley



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The kids have, in fairness, tried their best. They're aware they're lucky compared with other generations and they know this is a very millennial sort of crisis. And so they've baked their bread, they've practised gratitude, they've done their Joe Wicks and tried to maintain their sanity by watching millions of films on Netflix.

But it is just not enough - and now that their emotional resilience has been tested for too long, many of them are starting to break.

A working definition of trauma is "too much or too little for too long", and the listless unresponsiveness that is notable in many young children suggests that a secondary epidemic of mental health issues is now an inevitable consequence as too many children have been traumatised by these endless lockdowns.

We are formed by our childhood experiences; as children, we incorporate any distress - and any happiness - into our personalities and, ultimately, the combination of these experiences shape the type of adult we become.

The concept of a person's locus of control was first identified by the psychologist Dr Julian Rotter, who showed how a person with an internal locus of control believes they can influence how they live, that they are in control of their lives, while people with an external locus of control believe that outside forces are in charge.

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Children of the Covid-19 generation have been given a sharp lesson that they are not in control of their lives, and their personalities are likely to feel disempowered and nihilistic compared with previous generations; what's the point in making future plans when the Government can shut everything down with 12 hours' notice?

My nephew was to have his first big boy's party last St Patrick's Day; that didn't

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A teenager I know was very excited at the prospect of going to the Gaeltacht for the first time last summer. It was cancelled of course, but now she is worried that it will be cancelled this year, too.

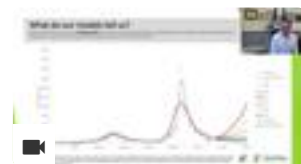
Next year she will have left school and so she may never experience Irish college. This disappointment upon disappointment means that children have become wary of the idea of future celebrations - they have learned not to look forward to celebrations and not to rely on any plans.

This means they have learned not to trust the future, not to feel hopeful - and this will create a pervasive defeatist attitude among this generation. They think there is no point in trying as nothing will make any difference.

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By now, many children have lost motivation to learn, they have lost interest in life beyond their screens and a general sense of apathy is shaping their personalities and their outlook on life.

They don't want to go out any more. They have little interest in sports or the playground and their main source of pleasure is screen-based.

Staring at a screen all day from Monday to Friday is bad for adults, but it is much worse for children. Their eyes are tired, their bodies are tense, their nerves are shot and their brains feel numb.

The psychological consequences of living such a confined life will leave an even deeper wound than the long-term impact of the patchy education many are receiving. Emotional distress such as anxiety is often manifested in destructive behaviour such as insomnia, behavioural tics, repetitive questions and anxious rage.

These kids know they are missing out on lots of fun and they don't believe they will get it back - and they've had one too many pseudo-experiences on Zoom to buy into any more screen celebrations.

The lack of fun in our current lives is casually dismissed and yet a sense of fun and challenge has been identified by psychologists as essential elements to maintain an individual's sense of well-being.

This lack of fun - anhedonia is the psychological term - combined with a palpable sense of loneliness and isolation is shaping our children's attitudes to life.

Our sense of time changes as we get old, and so a tenth of my life is nearly five years while a tenth of the life of a 10-year-old is just one year. Consequently, children have experienced this past year as a good deal longer than older people.

While a little boredom can be very good for us, we need only to look at animals in a zoo to see how extended boredom can bring about self-harming and compulsive behaviour.

The problem with this is that once a child - or indeed an adult - finds a dysfunctional coping mechanism such as self-harming, inappropriate eating patterns or screen-based addictions, they have then opened a door that will provide them with immediate short-term relief and it will take an awful lot of effort to convince them to use more long-term solutions.

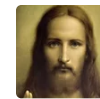
Dysfunctional coping mechanisms are tricky concepts. They make us feel better in the short-term - that's why we become reliant on them - but they

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cause us more harm in the long term.

Children aren't really able to conceptualise the future and so they just know that they have a compulsive need to carry out certain behaviour as it immediately makes them feel better.

If it weren't for the lockdown then many of these children wouldn't have landed upon these dysfunctional coping mechanisms, but now they have them it will have a long-term consequence on how they handle any future inner conflicts.

The kids need engagement in the community and we adults need to find some creative solutions if we are to help them.

Perhaps children could meet with their masks, gloves and scarves on, perhaps on local pitches and do some communal exercise for PE once a week?

Obesity has long been a problem among Irish children and this enforced confinement has led to a lot of weight gain.

Once a child gains a certain amount of weight, they have inadvertently started a lifelong battle with weight - yet another example of how avoidable long-term issues have been generated in certain children's lives over these last few months.

Of course, lots of kids will leave these problems behind once they are finally liberated from the shackles of Covid lockdown, but there are thousands of children who have really suffered as a direct result of Covid and this will cast a long shadow over their lives. Sadly, this extended lockdown has triggered serious mental health issues for some that will last their entire lives.

One day, we will look back on all this and we will analyse what we should have done and when we should have done it.

It has all gone on much longer than we ever thought and, now that we have been locked in by Covid for almost a year, it is time for us to admit that the children are not coping any more and urgently need some emotional support.

With some creative thought and collective commitment, we can provide this for the kids.

The best place to start with this is by vaccinating the teachers and getting the kids back to school.

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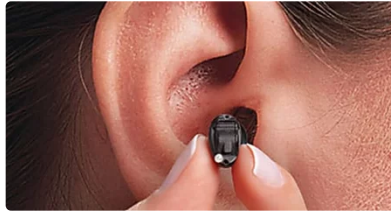
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