

Coronavirus isn't the end of 'childhood innocence,' but an opportunity to re-think children's rights ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought drastic changes to the lives of families across the globe and parents have had to decide how to talk with children about coronavirus.

Many experts, including child psychologists, trauma and resilience specialists and advocates from the United Nations Children's Fund agree that while parents should be mindful of their own anxieties and thoughtful about how they discuss coronavirus, children shouldn't be kept in the dark.

But shouldn't we protect children from fear and worry? In this uncertain time, some parents may feel concerned that COVID-19 is causing a loss of innocence.

As a researcher in critical childhood studies, I examine how the myth of childhood innocence informs social practices in the North American context. For some parents, talking with children about the realities of a pandemic may be a disturbing prospect, given the widespread belief that childhood should be carefree.

Combined with contemporary pressures to entertain, exercise and educate children into successful adults, many parents today may feel compelled to manufacture an innocent, even magical childhood by protecting them from sadness, grief, fear and even disappointment.

Exclusionary innocence

Childhood innocence is a modern construction largely inspired by the work of early modern thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His and others' notions of childhood innocence was rooted in a white, middle-class, Euro-centric and hetero-patriarchal worldview that excluded the lived realities of all but the most privileged.

Since the 19th century, such beliefs fuelled concerns over child labour, health and education and shaped social policy and law in Europe and North America in ways that have advanced particular white and upper-class economic interests. The ideal of childhood innocence was and is still exclusionary.

These 19th century ideas about childhood innocence also made difficult experiences — like those of historically marginalized children — seem abnormal, and made inexperience the marker of who could be a child and whose rights would be seen as most important.

The innocence myth

The reality is that childhood as a state of innocence — of not-knowing or inexperience — is a myth. All children experience sadness, grief, fear and disappointment, some earlier and in greater measure than others.

For many children, such as those who have experienced disease, natural disasters, poverty, homelessness, refugee dispossession or trauma — and for Black, racialized or Indigenous children who experience racism — the current pandemic isn't the first time they've grappled with adversity. This is particularly true for those who face multiple or intersecting vulnerabilities and barriers.

Now, however, COVID-19 is forcing everyone, young and old, to confront the realities of social isolation, illness and death.

Re-think beliefs

COVID-19 can be an opportunity to rethink pervasive and dominant western beliefs in innocence as a universal childhood ideal. We can create space for more open dialogue about children's rights and capabilities.

The global pandemic is a compelling reminder that no child is exempt from difficult emotions and experiences, because no one is immune. Even parents with the most abundant financial, cultural and even political resources cannot entirely shield their children from COVID-19's profound and widespread effects.

Yet the pandemic also reminds us that hardship discriminates. While social distancing inconveniences families who are able to work from

home, the challenges are far more pronounced for those working on the front lines in essential services or facing layoffs, as well as those experiencing homelessness or living in shelters or social housing.

These inequalities are brought into sharper focus in light of the present crisis, but they aren't new: children in Canada and across the world experience the discriminatory effects of inequality every day.

When we focus on protecting children's innocence by sheltering them from adversity, we silence difficult emotions and experiences. What's more, we may risk teaching them to ignore injustices.

Children have rights

In these uncertain times, it's logical that we should be concerned about children's well-being. But supporting their human rights today and every day means taking seriously their questions, concerns and capabilities.

Some world leaders have modelled this kind of respect, including Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, who held a kids-only press conference about COVID-19.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau responded via Twitter to an eight-year-old's handwritten letter and later spoke directly to children to acknowledge their fears, concerns and disappointments, and to thank them for their efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus by practising social distancing.

He also announced \$7.5 million in funding to Kids Help Phone to provide mental health support to children and youth impacted by school closures.

Children's poignant, urgent words

These examples are in keeping with the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Article 12 identifies as fundamental a child's right to give an opinion, and for adults to listen and take that opinion seriously. Article 13 acknowledges that children have the right to find things out and share what they think.

These two articles were the motivation for The Republic of Childhood Youth Forum 2019, which I co-organized in Ottawa to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the CRC. The event brought 171 young authors together to share their insights on the challenges of their daily lives, including climate change, health and well-being, and identity. One young person wrote:

"Small, Silent, Insignificant

Those three words are what we're told to be

You're too young, you'll understand when your older

We're told our opinion doesn't matter, but we see things differently."

I found the young authors' poignant, often urgent words to be a powerful reminder of how important it is for adults to make space for children to express themselves and to take their opinions seriously.

When it comes to COVID-19, children and adults alike have a part to play in flattening the curve. These are difficult and dire times, but holding on to the myth of childhood innocence will not make this crisis any easier.

Adults can take advantage of this opportunity to model compassion for ourselves and others, acknowledge and talk about privilege and inequality, and practise and celebrate social responsibility.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: children's rights ^[4]

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