

The rights and lives of children have been affected by COVID-19

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A new study from Ryerson suggests that children should be more involved in conversations about the virus

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After the SARS outbreak in the early 2000s, professor Donna Koller who teaches in Ryerson's School of Early Childhood Studies, hoped she would never have a reason to study children in pandemics ever again.

"I thought, 'what are the chances of another pandemic coming?' Here it is," she said.

Koller and her research partner, registered nurse and graduate student Maxime Grossi, recently completed a study on children and COVID-19. With support from pediatricians Dr. Peter Wong and Dr. Meta Van den Heuvel at Toronto's SickKids Hospital, Koller and Grossi spoke to school-aged children between seven and 12.

The children participating were asked questions about everything from school to playtime to their feelings about the pandemic and virus.

"The pandemic has disrupted everyone's way of living, children included," said Grossi. "We wanted to provide children with the opportunity to share their experiences on the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight the value of their perspectives. The goal was to showcase how capable children are."

The study found that the majority of children preferred to be in class with their friends, and felt very sad that they weren't able to be in school. When shown an image of the coronavirus amplified, every single child recognized it.

"This notion that kids don't really get complex health issues and aren't aware and don't need to be given information is just purely wrong," Koller said. "We didn't ask about death and dying, and yet the children were very aware that this was a deadly virus."

Koller said one unexpected issue to emerge was that a lot of the kids said they missed touching and hugging their friends. So the inability to play tag or contact sports was very meaningful for several children.

"This really human element came out," she added. "And this type of information is much more difficult to learn about when pre-designed surveys are given to children in research"

The study revealed that the kids understood that they had a job to do. This included handwashing, mask wearing and social distancing. Koller calls it a collective sense of responsibility.

"So many of these kids, despite the fact that their whole lives are upended, they were still able to adapt."

Koller says this "adaptive resilience" is further testimony of the fact that children should be involved in public health decision-making.

"Children know how to respond to a crisis, and therefore deserve to receive the information that can make them active social agents in their communities," she said.

Grossi agrees. "Children have the right to be included. They should be able to participate in the discussion and in the decision-making, and their opinions should be taken seriously," she said. "Their responses to the questions we asked are a testimony to how smart, capable, and resilient they are - we can learn so much from them."

A full report on the study done by Koller and Grossi will be released in the coming months and is affiliated with ISSOP, an international social pediatric research society. This study was made possible with an internal grant from the Faculty of Community Services (FCS) and additional support from the Yeates School of Graduate Studies (YSGS), as well as the early childhood studies graduate program.

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