

Framing Adolescent Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This can't wait: We need a new story about adolescent development now.

Even during these uncertain times, it's a sure thing that adolescents—young people between childhood and adulthood—are still developing biologically, socially, and emotionally.

We can also be sure that some of the necessary conditions for healthy adolescent development have been disrupted by COVID-19.

Adolescence is a time when youth need safe and satisfying ways to go new places, form new relationships, and test out new ideas and experiences—but exploration and stay-at-home measures don't mix well. It's a stage when it's important to maintain academic trajectories—but unequal access to critical resources like computers and the internet means some young people will get off track. It's a time when skills to manage strong emotions and setbacks are developing—but with so many worries about family health and finances, and so many new responsibilities for sibling care, the situation could outpace young people's ability to cope in healthy ways.

Many of us who work in sectors like youth development, education, and adolescent health have launched efforts to retool our programs to respond to these new realities.

Those of us who lead communications have a role to play, too. By thinking about the stories we tell and the ways we tell them, we can offer up powerful alternatives to usual media stories about adolescents as selfish, dangerous, and at risk.

Here are five ways we can help to reframe the conversation about adolescent development in this challenging time.



#1: Hold up a positive vision of adolescents as engaged, resilient, and full of promise.

Much of the coverage of adolescents during the pandemic has recycled familiar stereotypes of young people as selfish, dangerous, and at risk: irresponsible and ignorant spring breakers infecting vulnerable victims—and then falling prey themselves.

It's tempting to acknowledge and amplify these portrayals—if only to rebut them—but it's important that we don't take the bait. Advocates are often advised to “meet audiences where they are,” but this is a trap. When we begin our positive stories by referencing the negative ones, we remind people of the very beliefs we're hoping to unseat. Don't repeat anything you don't believe. It's counterintuitive, but it turns out that the best way to kill a myth is to starve it of attention.

Instead, focus on the important social skills we develop during adolescence, and the kinds of resources and experiences adults can provide for young people even as we shelter in place. Even in these times of stress and uncertainty, emphasize the promise and opportunity of adolescence, not vulnerability. Take time to explain the community and social benefits of supporting young people's positive development.

Share concrete and positive examples of adolescents contributing to our communities and society. Use language that indicates that these behaviors are normal and widespread—not unusual exceptions.

Instead of this:

Although we often think adolescents are inherently selfish and willing to put others at risk to have a good time, there are lots of examples of young people making positive contributions to their communities during the pandemic. While we all saw the teens partying on Florida's beaches, the young people helping their grandparents learn to Zoom are getting less attention.

Try this:

Young people throughout the country are stepping up to help our communities respond to the pandemic. Adolescents are finding creative ways to make a difference—from designing digital maps that track known cases of COVID-19 to organizing groups to sew face coverings and prepare meals for health workers.

#2: Lift up adolescents' experiences and voices during the pandemic.

When young people speak for themselves and describe their own experiences during social distancing, the stories they tell naturally focus on their resilience, empathy, and agency. As adult allies, we can create space for adolescents to tell their stories in their own words. When we do so, it shifts the balance in the public conversation from risk to opportunity. There are lots of stories of young people helping their neighbors and engaging in their communities right now—let's highlight them!

Instead of this:

Across the country, young people are trying to find ways to cope with social distancing. As digital natives, they may be better equipped than their parents and grandparents to connect with their peers online and through social media.

Try this:

Even before the stay-at-home order came down, my friends and I started talking about how we can organize to get out the vote in November. We realized we don't need to go door to door. We are working on a way to use social media to reach as many people our age as possible.

#3: Help people see the factors that drive inequities among adolescents.

To come through this crisis, we need policies and practices that respond to the varying—and inequitable—health, social, and economic situations that undermine the potential of many adolescents. To do this, it's important that we carefully frame the needs of marginalized and high-risk social groups.

We need to be sure to explain “how it happens” whenever we raise the issue of “who it happens to more often.” We need to show the social contexts and conditions that communities experience, not just the disparities that are outcomes of those structural differences. When we only highlight the affected populations—say, youth of color, or rural youth—we allow people to fall back on negative stereotypes about those communities to explain away the statistics.

Framing strategies should also incorporate and reflect the concerns and perspectives of the young people most affected by inequities.

Instead of this:

In high-poverty school districts, thousands of students are absent online, and many more check in only sporadically. High school counselors predict dire consequences

for these students, whose future prospects for college or career will be shaped by how well they fare in this new era of virtual learning.

Try this:

Many middle and high school students don't have a computer at home, or don't have internet access. Others are caring for younger siblings because their parents work outside the home and child care centers have closed. These factors help to explain why students from low-income families may struggle to keep up with distance learning.

#4: Stress that adolescents need to try things out and learn—yes, even now.

Finding ways to help adolescents explore and engage is even more important since so many young people are now living under stay-at-home orders. Use discovery-based metaphors to explain how resources and environments shape opportunities for learning and growth.

The idea that young people need “discovery labs” to learn and develop explains why diverse environments are so important to adolescent growth—and why youth may be uniquely affected by stay-at-home orders. Comparing young people’s world to a lab helps people understand the kinds of support they need during this pandemic—including help finding ways to try things out, explore, and engage in their communities, even if it’s from a distance.

Instead of this:

Stay-at-home orders make it hard for young people to take the positive risks they crave. It's easy for us as adults to roll our eyes at their need to socialize, but the truth is, this is an essential part of their development.

Try this:

During social distancing, adolescents need new kinds of opportunities to engage and experiment in positive ways. Providing free WiFi, computers, and tablets to young people who need them can offer digital avenues for learning and exploring.

#5: Put your audience in the story. Connect our actions today to our shared future.

Show how supporting positive youth development through this pandemic benefits everyone—not just adolescents—now *and* in the future. Since audiences typically understand adolescent outcomes in terms of personal accomplishments (such as success in school or work, or individual happiness or independence), try to frame future impacts at the community or societal level. What good things will we see in 5, 10, or 20 years because we invested time and resources in our young people when they needed it most? Drive home our shared stake in their outcomes to build a collective sense of responsibility for doing right by our youth.

Instead of this:

Many adolescents need support right now not only to continue their education, but to deal with their fears and sadness during this pandemic. Encourage them to talk — if not to you, then to friends, teachers, or a therapist through the phone or video calls.

Try this:

When we help adolescents to manage their fears and sadness along with their schoolwork, we help them develop the skills they'll need to help pull our communities through whatever challenges the future holds.

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The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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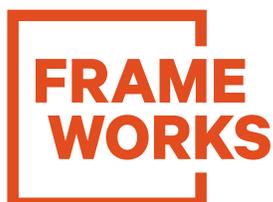
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