

How to keep adolescents' social networks strong in a disrupted world

October 16 2020, by Oluwaseyi Dolapo Somefun and Marisa Casale



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People often depend on companionship and support from others to cope with the [stresses](#) of daily life. Social networks and support are linked to better [mental](#) and physical wellbeing.

These networks are particularly important in adolescence—the period between childhood and adulthood. This is when peers become a more [important](#) part of life and have a bigger impact, while parental supervision usually decreases.

But COVID-19 disrupted this social [interaction](#). [Lockdowns](#), [school closures](#), social distancing and self-isolation have kept [young people](#) apart.

The need to keep a physical distance conflicts with adolescents' natural desire to connect with friends and with other important people in their lives. This disconnection may deepen the loneliness that's been [growing](#) among young people in [Africa](#) and beyond. It can also deprive young people of various kinds of support. These include tangible support with items such as food or medicines, emotional support and guidance, and [social protection](#) provided by schools.

Social distancing measures affect people differently. But it is especially important to focus on adolescents because this is a life stage characterized by anxiety and uncertainty. They may struggle more with the absence of structure and disruption in their usual routine.

Over the years we've done [research](#) looking at the role of social support for adolescent development and mental outcomes. We gained insights into the stress-buffering effects of social networks among adolescents. For example, we've found that adolescents who perceived they had a high degree of social support in their communities appeared to be more resilient than their peers. Having a social support system in place also had a positive impact on their mental health.

Lockdown-associated risks

The pandemic has changed the way people of all ages interact and

socialize. This is likely to have lasting effects.

The "social effects" of COVID-19 come with particular risks for young people's mental health. Recent [research](#) has highlighted how loneliness and disease containment efforts among adolescents might lead to post-traumatic stress and mental health problems—even in later years.

Specific groups of [young people](#) are at particular risk. These include adolescents who are exposed to domestic violence in their homes. So are learners who depend on the protection they get at school. Then there are adolescents with pre-existing mental health conditions, socialization or learning difficulties, whose counseling and support systems may have been interrupted.

The family environment is key for adolescents, especially now when many young people are likely to be confined to their homes more than usual. But this is a stressful time for caregivers and adults too. It may be hard for them to be empathetic, listen to adolescents and pick up worrying changes in behavior.

But help is available. One such program is the [Parenting for Lifelong Health project](#). The program helps to improve parenting skills by building social support for parents, and reducing parental stress. This program has been shown to be effective and is now exploring ways to extend its reach through [digital technology](#).

School is another key environment in adolescents' lives and [alternatives to school closures](#) are already being considered and implemented in some countries. These include partial school openings, staggering school attendance and changes in school organization structures to allow for [alternative social distancing](#) measures. It is also important to consider health training for teachers and learners and, where possible, providing psychosocial support.

[Technology](#) and [online tools](#) play an important role in [adolescent](#) virtual [social interaction](#) and learning. It can be used to provide [mental health](#) services as well. There is a virtual world of opportunities, at least for those able to access them. Available [evidence](#) supports telephone and online counseling programs, online moderated chats and mobile phone applications using SMS. Some African countries, including Mauritania and South Africa, have made [phone consultations](#) with doctors and counselors available free of charge in response to COVID-19.

Adolescents can be encouraged to sustain their social connections, for example through game nights on Zoom or other apps. And all over the world, young people have been tackling fear, anger and loneliness with photography, art, writing, [storytelling](#) and video essays of their [lives](#). Some have shared how they found a purpose by making a difference to others, or inspired others to act and [hope](#). Many young people have started initiatives to tackle misinformation, support the elderly and vulnerable households, create and distribute new products such as hand sanitisers, and even spread awareness through [music](#).

Room for growth

Limited access to technology and connectivity is still a problem. But several interventions could be replicated and scaled up.

For example, some [educational content](#) is available for free online or broadcast through TV programs [adapted](#) in several sub-Saharan African countries.

Creative community-level initiatives can also encourage [social networking](#) where there are few digital resources. In Senegal, [for example](#), young people were involved in distribution of food and protective gear to vulnerable households at the height of the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition, social workers, counselors or community health workers may have to visit adolescents who are in great [need](#).

The pandemic offers an opportunity to reimagine ways of supporting and empowering adolescents in different settings. This requires us to see them as capable agents of change and bearers of creative solutions, and not simply as intervention recipients.

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