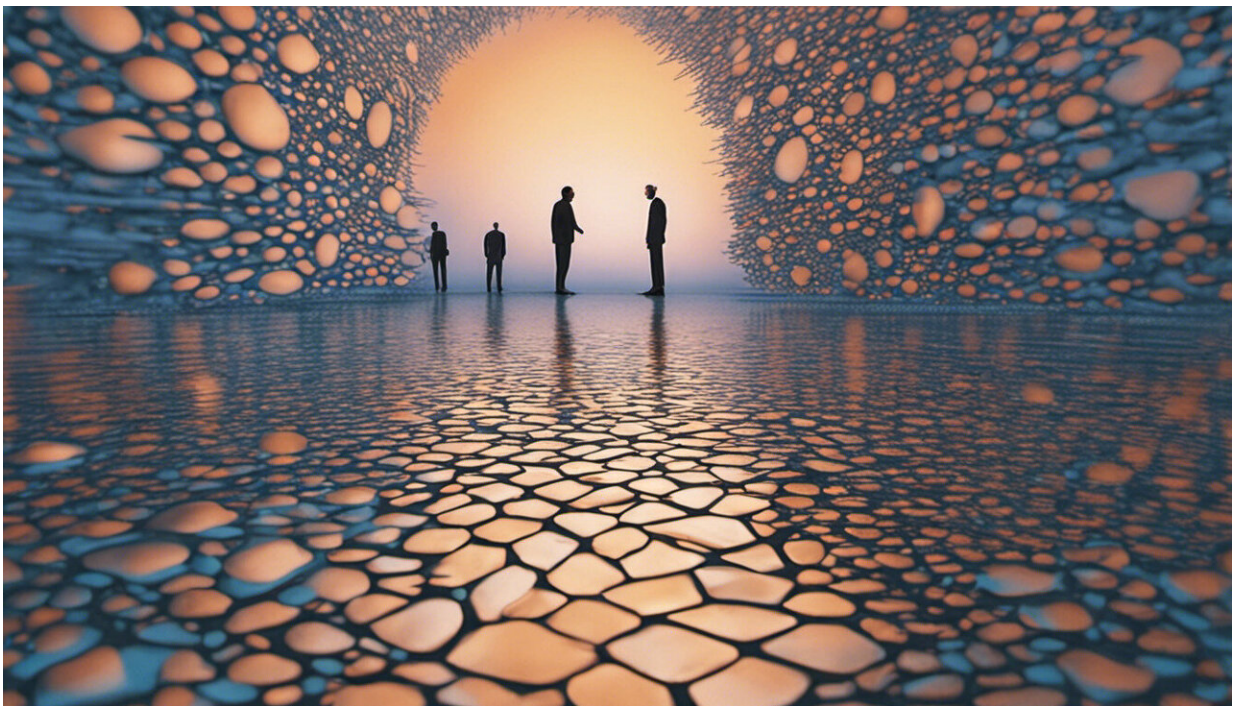


# Calling children 'vectors' during COVID-19 is turning into discrimination

November 18 2021, by Rebecca Adami, Katy Dineen

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

During the COVID-19 pandemic children have been [the target](#) of dehumanizing language and of policy which prioritizes the needs of adults over theirs.

While we still do not know the [long-term effects](#) of COVID-19 on

children, research from early in the [pandemic](#) suggested that children were [much less likely](#) than adults to suffer severely with the symptoms of the virus. Discussions of children revolved around their role in transmitting the disease to adults. Soon, children were being referred to as "[vectors](#)" of the disease.

This phrase has been used to control the movement of children. [Shops in Ireland](#) referred to children as "vectors of disease" as a justification for limiting their entry to stores. "Children are vectors not victims," a [pediatrician commented](#) when advising adults to limit contact between children.

## **Damaging words**

Referring to children as vectors, a word more commonly used to describe animals or parasites, is [demeaning](#). It is rare to see the term used to refer to human beings. Its use in this case shows that we are prioritizing adults and encourages us to consider children with COVID only in terms of the impact they may have on adults.

But children can and do suffer [adverse effects](#) from contracting COVID-19. Even when they haven't caught the disease itself, the pandemic has had a severe impact on young people. Schools have been closed, at times in part to help stop the spread of the virus in the adult population, with hugely detrimental consequences for [children's wellbeing](#).

Children have lost valuable learning time, which has been difficult for many of them, but most particularly those from [disadvantaged](#) backgrounds. Lockdowns often meant pupils could not access [mental health support](#)—and young people's mental health has been particularly affected by the pandemic. Closing schools may have put children at a [greater risk of violence](#) and it has increased hunger by leaving children

without access to the food normally provided at school.

Taken together, the impact of school closures on children has been enormous. Yet we continue to casually refer to them as disease spreaders rather than the victims of the pandemic.

The closure of schools is not the only policy decision ostensibly about children made with adults in mind. In May 2021, the UK's [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization](#), which advises UK health departments on immunization, discussed the issue of vaccinating 12-to-15-year-olds.

[The minutes](#) of the meeting show that one of the points the members considered was the "argument for allowing the virus to circulate among children," thereby broadening immunity in children and boosting immunity among adults. The committee at this May meeting ultimately decided against recommending vaccination for this age group. The rollout of vaccinations for 12-to-15-year-olds eventually began in September 2021.

## **A vulnerable group**

Discrimination against children is known as "[childism](#)": when children suffer injustices as a result of perceived age-related differences between adults and children.

The use of language that demonstrates a negative perception of children extends far beyond the pandemic. Children are often defined by their lack of adult abilities and are considered as inferior to adults. A common example is the use of words such as "childish" or "juvenile" to describe unwanted behavior.

Childism intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as sexism,

racism and ableism, increasing disadvantages for the most vulnerable children. The United Nations agency Unicef has pointed to the [risks children with disabilities face](#) as their care is disrupted during the pandemic. In England, children from ethnic minority backgrounds may have been [disproportionately affected](#) by COVID-19 infections.

Childism will continue to have an impact upon [children](#) long after the pandemic ends. However, COVID-19 should force us to confront the often ignored systems of prejudice and discrimination that affect the youngest members of society.

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