



From the Editor

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A Year Like No Other: In Their Own Words

If you want to know what kids think about a topic, ask them. Pediatric nurse researchers know this, and thus, we keep ‘the interview’ tucked into our toolbox of research methods. Children, as do many adults, like having someone ask their perceptions and are typically very honest in their responses.

Recently, two *Time* magazine reporters found this was true. For their article, “A Year Full of Emotions,” Jeffery Kluger and Allison Singer interviewed 16 young people ages 5 to 14 years (Kluger & Singer, 2021). Nine girls and seven boys from regions all over the United States, plus one teen from Nepal, were asked to talk about their thoughts and feelings regarding the past year of the pandemic, and what they had learned from the experience. They were very candid in their responses. Although each child’s experience was unique, several common themes among them emerged, which are discussed below.

Goodbye to Life as I Knew It

For some very young children, many parts of life did not seem to change much. Five-year-old Valentina continued to roller skate, ride her scooter, and bike in her driveway and in the park. In the winter, when it snowed, she made a snowman and had a big snowball fight with her family. She also mentioned she lost a tooth, a quite normal and exciting event for a child her age.

However, another 5-year-old, Sammy, remarked that the past year had been very different for him:

Daddy never went on any work trips. I homeschooled all year long. I only got to go into two stores. I read hundreds of books from the library. I went to lots of empty playgrounds. I went on lots of hikes in the woods. ... I barely got to play with any other kids outside of my family.

For most of the older children, 2020 was anything but normal. “I can’t believe all that has changed in one year,” noted 11-year-old Abby. Not surprisingly, most children, like the rest of us, expected 2020 to be totally normal. Said 15-year-old Nirav:

Just another ordinary year. However, 2020 was just another Pandora’s box waiting to be opened. The pandemic began taking a toll, and I was already disheartened knowing that things wouldn’t be the same for a very long time. Nothing could go worse, I assumed. I was dead wrong.

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Maria became a teenager in the middle of the pandemic. She questioned how much of the angst, isolation, and moodiness she was feeling was because of adolescence or how much was due to very real fears for everyone she loved, lockdowns and quarantines, and bad news from around the world.

Rory, 11, described 2020 as feeling so strange that it was like the world had been turned upside down, as if we had entered a parallel timeline. Others mentioned 2020 as a year they will never forget, a year filled with changes, many of which they are still trying to adapt to.

Dealing with the Disease

This frightening disease affected young people in many ways. Children spoke of parents and other relatives contracting COVID-19, and two children described their own harrowing experiences with the virus. Among many topics, they spoke of fear, isolation from loved ones, and the difficulty of virtual visits and virtual funerals.

Some children were especially fearful about getting COVID-19, including those with pre-existing conditions. Explained Abby: “Every day the news would report about the virus spreading quickly throughout the world, and it was scary for me because I have reactive airways disease.”

Grateful for Family Time

We have heard that families have spent more time together over the past year. What we hear from these interviews is that children are grateful for this time. In fact, when in-person school became an option, Afton, 12, decided to continue online classes because she enjoys spending more time with her mom and baby sister.

Carolina, 11, said she had endless family time. Rory, also 11, said, “This ‘virtual’ world made me feel anxious, lonely, and bored at first.” She added, “Then it hit me that this past year my family has had a chance to spend more time together than ever before.” Maria, 13, was also grateful for the time she got to spend with her family. She loved how creative her family was about birthdays and holidays – most of them socially distanced and masked in parks.

Twelve-year-old Afton said the pandemic changed her life, but not in entirely bad ways. She explained: “I’m grateful to realize all the things I took for granted, like how lucky I am to be healthy and to spend time with my family.”

Learning Something New

Children found that school shutting down meant other things they enjoyed – swimming, sports, dance, and music lessons – came to a standstill as well. They needed to find other activities to replace them. Victoria, 11, learned to bake. Maria, 13, learned to sew masks for herself and her family. She donated many masks to the seniors' program in her city. "That got me outside my own skin, helping someone else," she explained.

With his newfound time, Pranav, 11, decided he needed a hobby:

I used all my savings to buy a 3D printer. It was so exciting! I started to design things even before the printer was delivered. I started off making simple designs like a pencil box for my sister. My passion for 3D printing also allowed me to help out my community during the pandemic. I worked with the Good Karma Engineering initiative to create reusable masks with 3D-printed designs.

In other instances, not the children themselves but others in their lives helped them explore new interests. Abby's aunt introduced her to scientific livestreams, "where I could learn from scientists from all over the world." Milo, 5, made a movie together with his father.

Wanting to Make the World a Better Place

An opportunity for a year-long look at the many things that were happening and more time to reflect on it generated deep concern among some children, as well as a desire to do something about it. For example, from her scientific livestreams, Abby learned a great deal about climate change and other environmental concerns. She found the more she learned, the more she wanted to do something to help make the world a better place. She described the steps she took:

I started by trying to become as eco-friendly as possible. I cut down on my single-use plastics, ate less meat, and became an avid recycler. I have recently gone back to school two days a week, and I'm super excited to be there. However, I was a little concerned as to why there wasn't a recycling bin in my classroom, but my teacher kindly allowed me to bring one in!

Rory, 11, who lives in California, believes that the world is as real as before, if not more so, despite the virtual activity:

The issues around me, such as the California wildfires and Asian hate crimes, are very real even though I learned about them online. The pandemic is not the only battle we are fighting. It's time to get real and stand up for our future.

Resilience

Children thrive on certainty, safety, and the comfort of routine. The pandemic took that away, along with attending summer camp, seeing grandparents, and other events they looked forward to. Most children had to attend school online and to learn to cope with technology in a new way. This proved especially difficult for children with special needs. Some children dealt with grief for the first time.

Although there were a great many issues for young people to deal with, children showed resilience; many even grew from the experience.

Thirteen-year-old Jeremy found attending school on Zoom difficult. The social cues he depended upon in a classroom were missing. Yet he adapted:

At in-person school, I took notes when I could see that everyone around me did. During Zoom, I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing. That made me take risks like asking my English teacher for help or raising my hand first to share my thinking. I learned change happens, pandemic or not. People adapt and become stronger even with uncertainty. I can deal with it, too.

Shanaya, 12, felt that 2020 has matured her by a few years:

I learned the virtues of compassion, patience, hard work, selflessness, dedication, gratefulness and passion towards one's profession and family from my parents and people around me. There are so many things we take for granted – like family and friends – but 2020 has made me realize how important these things are. This whole experience has made me realize that we humans are capable of overcoming any adversities as we all strive to get over this catastrophe.

Living History

Of all the themes that emerged, Living History is the one I found most intriguing. The children realized this pandemic was a special time that would be recorded in history, and that they were part of it.

Maria, 13, was one of the first in her age group to get vaccinated. "I rolled up my sleeve and got my first shot," she said. "It's surreal that I've lived world history that I can tell my children and grandchildren about."

Shanaya had never imagined that at age 12, she would be witness to something so unusual, something that would become history – a pandemic, something people only read about in textbooks. Unimaginable, unfathomable, unforgettable is how she described 2020.

Eleven-year-old Carolina kept reminding herself that everything 2020 has been will make for great lockdown stories to tell later and to look back on when she's older. She added: "Twenty years from now, a kid just like me will be learning about what I went through, in a history class. And I think that's pretty amazing!"

I think about children who have gone through tough times in the past, and in particular, children born from 1901 to 1927 who comprised what has been termed 'The Greatest Generation.' This age cohort experienced a pandemic and the Great Depression. It is believed that such events shaped them with positive characteristics, such as personal responsibility, integrity, humility, and faithful commitment to something larger than themselves.

Will the COVID generation be 'The Greatest Generation 2.0?'

Reference

Kluger, J., & Singer, A. (2021). 'A year full of emotions.' What kids learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Time*. <https://time.com/6071300/kids-pandemic/>