

Teenage development in COVID times: Considering the mental health of our young people

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It has been a source of frustration for many people, but the teenagers of this country will have felt lockdown during COVID in their own unique way.

I had the pleasure of listening to one of the world experts in this area earlier this week, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, the Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge, discussing this factor.

What we know in terms of brain development is that it continues through the adolescent period and into our 20s and 30s, decreasing the grey matter volume and increasing the white matter.

It is the changing of the brain structures during the teenage years that supports decision making, planning, social awareness and empathy. Many of these changes are due to the physical development that is taking place and, crucially for young people of this age, are influenced by our social environments.

The challenge that we have faced in these COVID times is that these social environments haven't been available in a normal fashion. With sport not taking place, it has also put a halt on young people coming together to help forge their place in society and develop their own form of self-identity. Thankfully, and whilst it can have its clear downsides, social media has been there to help them stay connected. The social world is paramount to teenagers as it helps them find their sense of self.

Peer influence on others around them is massive and is often the rationale behind some of the increased risk taking we see in the typical teenager. However, the young person that is also kind, generous and helpful with their behaviour rubs off strongly on those around them and influences others to behave in a similar way.

A study done on a bullying programme across 56 schools showed that when the delivery and implementation of this came from young people themselves, driven and influenced by them to their peers, it saw a 25% greater decrease in the number of bullying cases. It's a strong message.

So, what does this mean for coaches? Well, as we move back towards some form of normality, continue to encourage good use of social media and video calls for teenagers during this period. **Allow them to find their versions of 'teen play'** to help them navigate the complex social world.

If you are running a team sport or have multiple teenage young people starting to come back together, create opportunities that afford them responsibility and leadership, let them model the behaviours you want to see to influence their peers and provide them a little nod to show you have noticed.

Let's use the power of coaching environments as a force for good to support the development of this generation of young people that may have had these opportunities put on hold at a crucial time. We may not know the impact of the pandemic yet on people's mental health but what we can do is deliberately plan the way back to offer some help.

Free Mental Health Awareness Online Course

UK Coaching, our awarding body 1st4sport and our partners - Mind and Sport England - recently announced that the online course '[Mental Health Awareness for Sport and Physical Activity](#)' is now free to access until 31 August for the whole coaching community. Usually £18, the course, which on completion will give you 3 CIMSPA CPD points, is ideal for anyone involved in delivering coaching in a club, leisure centre or any other community sports and physical activity setting.

Don't forget to contribute to the ConnectedCoaches thread on ['how coaching whilst maintaining social distancing will work for you'](#).

Additionally, if you register at [ukcoaching.org](#) you can download [four new infographics containing questions to help you plan, do and review for your return to coaching](#).

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