

# Voices of youth in the time of COVID-19

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It is with great pleasure and anticipation that we launch this joint initiative between BMJPO (British Medical Journal Paediatrics Open) and ISSOP (International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health) to capture the voices of children and youth in the era of COVID-19. For more than 30 years, the rights of young people to have a voice and be listened to have been established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>1</sup> In many respects, we have only recently begun to understand the importance, relevance, and power of their voices to change the discourse and trajectory of public opinion and policy. The response to the climate crisis, accelerated by the passion and influence of children and youth, is perhaps the most recent and profound example.

And now, the world is faced with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic—no single demographic has been impacted more than children and young people—directly to a degree, but indirectly to an extent we are only beginning to understand and document. Thus, it is crucial that we hear from children and young people and engage them in our global efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

In response to this imperative, ISSOP, jointly with the International Network for Research in Inequalities in Child Health, has convened a global working group on the impact of COVID-19 on children. Research projects, covering themes from Voices of Children and Children with Disabilities through to Mental Health and Violence against Children, have been coordinated through this initiative bringing researchers together to answer key questions confronting children and young people in different parts of the world. The fruits of this collaboration are reflected in the articles in this special collection.

There is much we still have to learn as to how to optimise our approach to capture, amplify, and engage the global voices of children and young people and ensure their

active participation in decisions that affect them. How do we maximise diversity and equity in the voices we capture? How do we ensure children and young people have access to information they require to make certain their voices are informed? How do we actively collaborate with children to guarantee their voices are heard by policymakers? What are the ethical standards that must be maintained when engaging children in systems evaluation, research and policy generation? How do we safeguard their privacy and protect them from any potential repercussions and harm? What is the role of child health professionals and paediatric journals in securing and disseminating the voices of children? How should children and young people be compensated for the time and expertise required to be engaged in global dialogue, discourse, and systems and policy development? How do we integrate the voices of children and young people into the context of all we do to advance child health and well-being? What formal structures are required in the academic and public health sectors to engage the genuine voices of children?

The answers to these questions are among the insights we hope to garner through this series of papers. We understand this is the beginning of an exciting and important journey for many of us, as we learn how to fulfil our roles and responsibilities as duty bearers to advance the rights of children. The main aim of this special collection is therefore to amplify the voices, needs, and strengths of diverse populations of children and young people during the pandemic, in particular, those who are marginalised and from the majority world. The collection will contain a mixture of original research, including research carried out by young people, editorials, commentaries and critical reviews of the published literature on young voices.

Medical journals have an important role to play in launching and sustaining this journey, and we are proud that BMJPO has taken a



lead in this regard. Publishing manuscripts as open access ensures vital health information is available to all in all professional and community sectors. Enabling young people to describe their experiences in relation to health and well-being is essential and requires the support and involvement of mentors to cultivate their capacity to do so. BMJPO has established a Young Voices section—we encourage you to nurture the voices of young people by helping them publish in this venue.<sup>2 3</sup>

No profession bears witness to the impact of local, national, and global systems and policies on child health and well-being more than health professionals. The COVID-19 pandemic is just one among many global issues that negatively impact children. In some respects, we are engaged in a rehearsal for the next assault on children and childhood—including the climate crisis and globalisation. The time is now to learn how to involve children and youth in all aspects of current and future responses to the global health challenges they face.

We are humbled by the power of children's voices, the prescience of their insights and the passion of their commitment to effect change in the world. We look forward to learning through this ongoing series how to be the best stewards of children's voices and participation.

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