OUT OF THE NET

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Parents' guidelines about the phenomenon of social withdrawal and hikikomori in children and adolescents

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Introduction

Growing up: new tasks, new challenges

Our children and adolescents live currently in a world which is experiences very fast changes, where they have to face several social, economic and cultural challenges. Pre-adolescence and adolescence are crucial periods of life, and their interaction with particular historical events (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) may affect their ability to face the challenges that are typical of these phases of life.

Each developmental stage of life is characterized by some specific tasks, that are culturally and psychologically influenced by a wide variety of factors and that are fundamental for the individual for his/her positive psychophysiological growing to become a positive adult member of the community. The concept of *developmental task* has been introduced by Havighurst (1953, 1972) and it represent the mediation between the individual and the society, between personal needs and what society requires to each person. Their main aim is not to homologate people to one societal model, but to promote a real inclusive process in society, where each person may express his/her potentialities and so contribute to the personal and collective well-being.

To face specific tasks is fundamental for helping children and adolescents to explore their abilities and skills, to understand their strong points and to improve their weaknesses, to become active citizens in the society in which they live. According to Havighurst (1953, 1972)[1], the main developmental tasks of pre-adolescents and adolescents are related to three main dimensions, the social, personal, and psychophysiological one.

Social dimension of life	-Creating and maintaining positive direct relationships with peers; -Developing a more mature and independent relation with parents;

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[1]   Havighurst, R. I. (1953). Human development and education. New York: McKay.

Havighurst, R. I. (1972). Developmental tasks and education 3d ed. New York: McKay

Personal dimension of life	- Developing an attitude as responsible citizen in the society - Selecting and preparing for a professional career - Developing a personal and unique identity; - Developing and/or accepting a set of values and a moral sense; - - becoming emotionally independent from the reference adults (parents, educators, etc.)
Psychophysiological well-being	- Knowing and accepting own's personal physical characteristics. - Using effectively the body; - Take care of own's psychophysiological health

Table 1. Summary of main developmental tasks according to Havighurst (1953, 1972)

It is in the years of childhood and adolescence, that young people should develop their identity also considering the main roles that the society requires them to adopt[2]. If the individual effort is fundamental for finding adaptive solutions to face the challenges that characterize children's social and educational life, events from the external world may facilitate of impair this process. The world is change rapidly and critical events force each person to develop a particular flexibility and self-confidence in order not to be overwhelmed by external issues. For example, OECD (2020)[3] reports highlight that young people have particularly suffered the limitations due to COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, stopping going out and attending to school, the lack of opportunities to face-to-face social interactions, and the massive use of digital tools for education, work, and social interactions may encourage condition of social withdrawal. This condition has led to the risk of developing critical situations in which young people's health and well-being could be impaired. It becomes necessary that parents and relative would pay particular attention to their children, in order to act for preventing the risk of social withdrawal.

2   Erikson, E. H., & Erikson, J. M. (1998). The life cycle completed (extended version). WW Norton & Company.

3   OECD (2020). Youth and COVID-19. Response, Recovery, and Resilience. OECD, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134356-ud5kox3g26&title=Youth-and-COVID-19-Response-Recovery-and-Resilience

Social withdrawal in children and adolescents

There are some periods in children's and adolescents' life in which they seem to show a reduce interest in maintaining social relationships. They may quit going out with friends, they may spend most of their spare time in their room, they may even stop going to school. Also the relationship with the family may change, and the child may become more aggressive, less communicative, limiting their interaction with the parents to the fulfilment of their primary needs (food, money, etc.). If these periods are limited in time, they can be included in the normal process of personal growth, where children have to face also specific challenges and may need a pause for re-elaborating and giving significance to particular experiences and events.

But, what if this period may last longer than a few weeks or months? In this case the child or the adolescent may be in a condition of social withdrawal. Social withdrawal is a specific condition in which a person decide voluntarily to retire from the social interactions with her/his peers. It is a different situation from that in which a child is isolated by her/his peers (Rubis & Chronis-Tuscano, 2021[4]). In social withdrawal, the person decides to stop having any direct contacts with other people or to limiting them to what is strictly necessary. In some cases, interpersonal interactions may be managed through the mediation of technological devices and the Net, in social networks, forum websites, chat, etc.

If parents notice some changes in their child's behaviours, they may pay attention to some specific attitudes that may indicate that the adolescent is in a condition of social withdrawal.

In this situation, it is important to try to grasp the indicators of discomfort from the children, such as refusing to go to school or a work, drastically reduce in-presence social interactions, often irritable or melancholic mood, excessive use of technological tools, etc. Parents may support their children in this crucial phase by showing understanding, and encouraging them in to critically reflect on the current situation.

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[4] Rubin, K. H., & Chronis-Tuscano, A. (2021). Perspectives on social withdrawal in childhood: Past, present, and prospects. Child Development Perspectives, 15(3), 160-167.

Most frequent indicators of social withdrawal are (Saito, 1998)[5]:

- Giving up school or work

- Reduction or total elimination of face-to-face social interactions (substituted by online interactions);

- Spending a lot of time in own's bedroom;

- Insomnia and reversal of night and day

- Presence of an excessive use of technological devices (PC, tablet, smartphone) and of the Net;

- Eating disorder and refusing to have meal with the whole family;

- Sad feelings and/or outburst of rage;

- Regression to immature or childish behaviours, when the child seems to be returned to behaviours and attitudes that are typical of people younger than her/him.

If these elements urge to be faced with a specific intervention with mental health professional or psychotherapist, at the first stage, when the first changes in child's behaviour emerged, it is still possible for parents to act for preventing or reducing social withdrawal. They may support their children in developing social emotional skills, expressing their emotions, helping them to learn to tolerate frustration or to understand where frustration comes from (Segrin & Flora, 2019)[6]. Family connectedness is one of the most relevant factors for preventing the risk of isolation in adolescence (Hall-Lande et al., 2007)[7]; this means that feeling an emotional bond with the other members of the family and a caring and supportive environment at home may prevent children retire from the social dimension of life and experiment the negative consequences that derive from this situation (sadness, problems with self-esteem and self-confidence, lack of interest in daily activities, etc.). Family is not the only social context that may affect children's tendency to retire from social interactions. The group of the peers has a core relevance, especially in adolescence: to have some close friends, to feel an active part of a group, to feel accepted by

5   Saito, T. (1998). Hikikomori. Adolescence without an end.

6   Segrin, C., & Flora, J. (2019). Fostering social and emotional intelligence: What are the best current strategies in parenting?. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 13(3), e12439.

7   Hall-Lande, J. A., Eisenberg, M. E., Christenson, S. L., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2007). Social isolation, psychological health, and protective factors in adolescence. Adolescence, 42(166).

people of the same age may be protective factors for preventing a condition of social withdrawal. Conversely, situations as bullying, frequent clashes with peers, or difficulties to be included in the group, may be considered risk factors for reducing participation in social activities and interactions.

For all these reason, parents and relatives should empower their communication with children, not only being open to listen to them and to their needs, but also proposing some activities for encouraging them to be involved in positive social interactions, where they can perceive themselves as competent and supported by their family and by the group of the peers.

What can parents do?

During children's development, parents may adopt several strategies for helping them developing the most effective skills for successfully accomplishing their developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1953, 1972).

Dimension of life	Developmental tasks	Role of parents
Social dimension of life	- Creating and maintaining positive direct relationships with peers. - To get acquainted with and to learn to respect the natural environment that surround us. - Developing a more mature and independent relation with parents. - Developing an attitude as responsible citizen in the society. - Selecting and preparing for a professional career.	- Involving children in activities and situations that include interactions among children (playground, team sports, etc.). - Proposing the children open-air activities that imply a direct contact with nature. - Encouraging children's autonomy in accomplishing daily activities. - Trusting children in doing simple tasks by themselves (going to school, doing some shopping, etc.) - Being a model is acting as a responsible citizen (for example, waiting for the green light to cross the road, recycling wastes, being

		empathic with people in need, etc.).
		- Helping children in exploring different activities and being involved in different experiences, encouraging the expression of their interests, in order to help them developing realistic goals and plans for their future.
Personal dimension of life	- Developing a personal and unique identity. - Developing and/or accepting a set of values and a moral sense. - Becoming emotionally independent from the reference adults (parents, educators, etc.).	- Being respectful towards children's opinions and values (even if they are different from their own's). - Helping children recognizing their emotions and how they could affect their moods. - Acting as a model, showing respect for each person, independently from the relationship with her/his. - Trying to be involved in children's life without resulting intrusive into their intimate dimension (e.g. do not read their personal journal, do not eavesdrop on their phone calls, ..) - Making children feeling understood and accepted, even if they make a mistake or when they fail. - In case of children's failure do not adopt harsh criticism but use patience for correcting them and focus on what they can learn from this experience for the future.
Psychophysiological well-being	- Knowing and accepting own's personal physical characteristics. - Using effectively the body. - Take care of own's psychophysiological health.	- Accepting children's choices in terms of physical appearance. - Showing acceptance and respect of their body appearance. - Supporting children in understanding that they are not only their physical appearance (but much more.......).

		- - Help children adopt a proper nutrition and a healthy relation with food.
		- - Supporting children in engaging in sports activities, in accord with their interests.
		- - Offering children all the information for taking care of themselves (physically and psychologically).
		- - Help children recognize the importance of psychological well being as well as physical one.
Relation with technology	- Develop an adaptive use of technological tools; - Learn to see the Internet as a means to support communication (and not to replace face-to-face relationships); - Be aware of the potential risks of the Internet	- Give children some rules to manage the time they spend using technological devices (smartphone, TV, pc, etc.). - Be with the children in their first approaches to the Internet. - Inform the children about the possible hazards they may occur on the Net (cyberbullying, thief of personal and sensitive data, content not suitable for minors). - Be present for discussing with children any possible strange/risky situation they may encounter online. - Propose children open air activities, to counter balance the time they spend indoor online.

Parents, grandparents, siblings, and relatives may help children in facing their developmental process not only offering them information and support, but also acting as models, as significant adult figures for kids.

Some suggestions for avoiding the risk of social withdrawal

In current times, families have often very little time for engaging in social activities all together. But, although the time is limited, it is crucial that it should be used by parents for proposing significant activities to their children, in which they can interact with adults and peers and have the possibility to empower their abilities, building their self-esteem and self-confidence. Parents may enhance some relevant dimensions of children's life, such as:

1. Improving the recognition and management of emotions and emotional states
2. Developing social interactions and relational skills;
3. Learning how to use technological devices wisely;
4. Making significant experiences in real contexts

1. *Improving the recognition and management of emotions and emotional states:* children are often overwhelmed by a whirlwind of emotions, which are often unable to recognize and rework. Parents may help them to recognize emotions, accepting also negative feelings (sadness, anger, disappointment) as an inevitable part of one's emotional life, and face effectively negative emotional states. Some activities that may be useful in this situation are:
   a. Helping children relaxing using meditation techniques (e.g. breathing meditation) or proposing some relaxing activities (e.g. reading a tales in bed);
   b. Discussing with children on how they feel in specific situations, especially those with a high emotional load;
   c. Set rules and routines for children for creating an emotional container.
   d. In a conflict with children, show acceptance for their negative feelings and anger.
   e. Using tales and stories for helping children recognizing different emotions in the characters
   f. Take care of children's quality of sleep, for helping them to be relaxed, rested and improve their attention span throughout the day (this may be very useful also for improving their mood and daily routine at school).

2. *Developing social interactions and relational skills:* parents may propose activities in which children may interact with family members and with peers. This kind of activities may enhance children's social skills, but also they may promote a positive relationships with parents, siblings and other family members. Children may become active protagonist and they may feel a sense of connectedness which not only empowered their social relationships but also Some examples of activities are:

a. Playing board games

b. Cooking with parents/grandparents/etc.

c. Dancing together in the house;

d. Making music together (singing or playing musical instruments);

e. Helping mothers/parents in doing the homework;

f. Doing shopping together;

g. Playing games outside (football, volleyball, hide and sick, etc.)

h. Reading books together;

i. Drawing and painting together;

3. *Learning how to use technological devices wisely:* parents have a great role in helping children developing healthy behaviours towards technology. Children are often overexposed to multiple stimuli that derive from technological tools, and these stimuli do not always have a positive impact on them or present possible educational implications. It is important that mothers and fathers help their children in understanding the potentialities of technology and technological devices, but without becoming passive users. Some tasks that may be useful to this purpose are:

a. Selecting with the children the most appropriate contents online, considering their age, interests, experiences and the main characteristics of the contents

b. Defining a schedule for limiting the time when children are using technological devices. Parents and children may negotiate how many minutes each day children can access the Net through technological devices, and then sign a "family contact" for managing children's use of technology;

c. Developing computer and network-related skills and knowledge: for educating children to a responsible use of technology and the Net, it is crucial that parents themselves have an adequate level of competence in accessing the technological

word; knowing not only its potentialities but also the possible risks of misusing it and the potential hazards of the Net (scams, theft of sensitive data, cyberbullying, catfishing, etc.).

d. Do not leave devices in children's room or to them, but preferring to have them returned when they have finished using them for that day. They will then be able to request them later, when the agreed time for their use will come.

4. Making significant experiences in real contexts: parents may offer children significant shared experiences in order to encourage their involvement in real world activities. They may propose enjoyable activities outside the house, in which children may get in touch with different realities, for example:

a. Visiting a new city;

b. Going hiking in the mountains

c. Going to the seaside/to a park

d. Going to the cinema

e. Going to a concert/ theatrical representation

f. Play outside together;

g. Set up family events, with a particular routine (Saturday Pizza evening, Family Film night, the Board Games afternoon)

Conclusions

Retiring from social life is a current risk for children and adolescents, who may find in it the illusory solution for avoiding frustrations, failures in social relationships and potential rejection from peers. In this condition, family has a great responsibility in offering a support for children in order to help them developing the proper skills and the resilience for facing stressful and complex events. Prevention is as important as treatment, and families, schools, and educational may work together to offer children different perspective of life, which may go beyond the walls of their bedroom and the PC screen. The ERASMUS + Project "Out of the Net" aims to offer suggestions for teachers, educators and families in order to enhance children's participation in social and

educational activities avoiding the risk of social withdrawal. At the following link https://outofthenet.altervista.org/ more information and useful documents and materials can be found.