

LIFE IN COLOURS

Children's and adolescents' experiences, perceptions and opinions on the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy

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Children's and adolescents' experiences, perceptions
and opinions on the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy

English translation of Italian version dated 18 November 2021

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Ours is a life regulated by colours ... that is, from personal experience, one day I didn't know if I could go out or not because I didn't know what colour we were, because the colours of the regions change like this ..."

(A, 15 years old)

The words of A, 15, inspired the title of this report.

The phrase '*vite a colori*' (life in colours) captures the complexity of the experiences of the research participants, while maintaining a positive and flexible approach, which is precisely the way in which the young people faced this period, trying to renegotiate with themselves, their lives and their spaces, in the light of the pandemic.

We dedicate the report to the 114 children who participated in this research project and to their extraordinary enthusiasm.

Acknowledgements

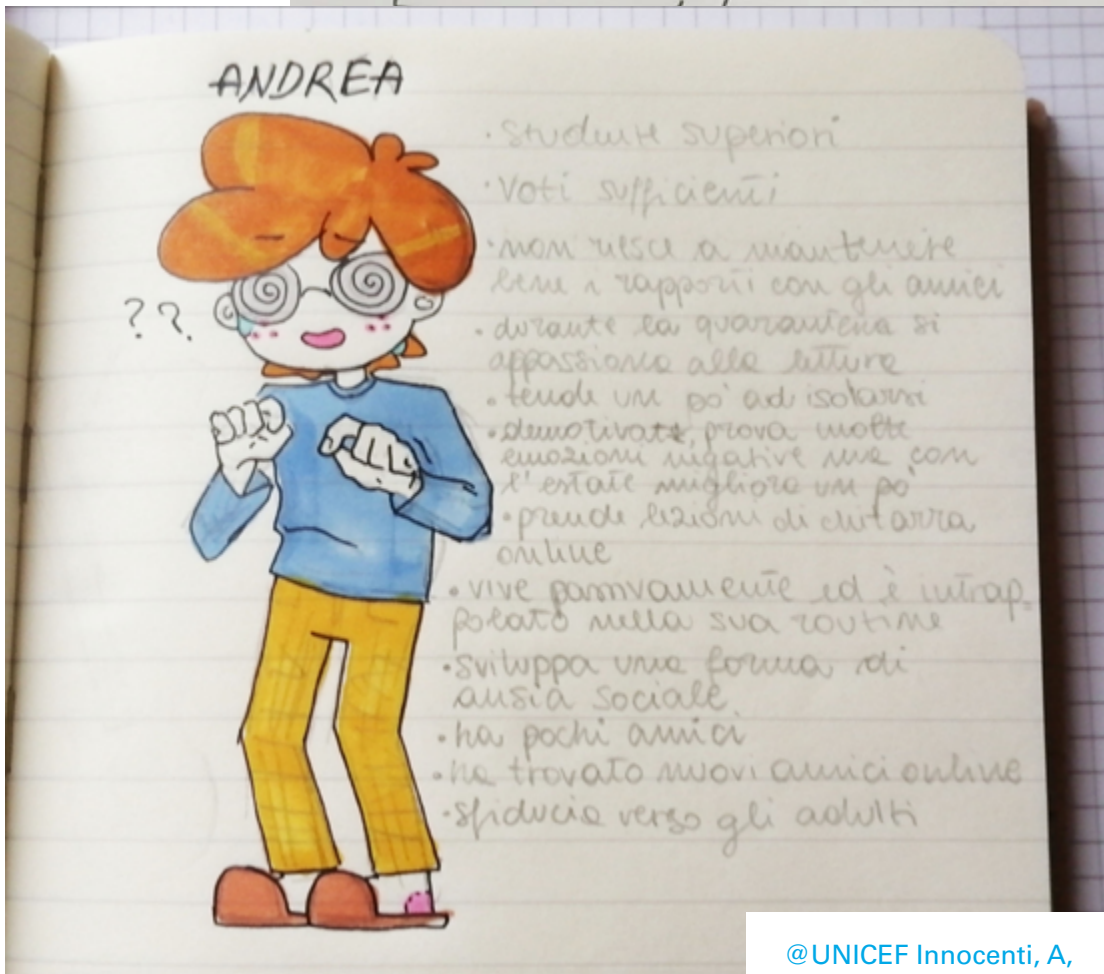
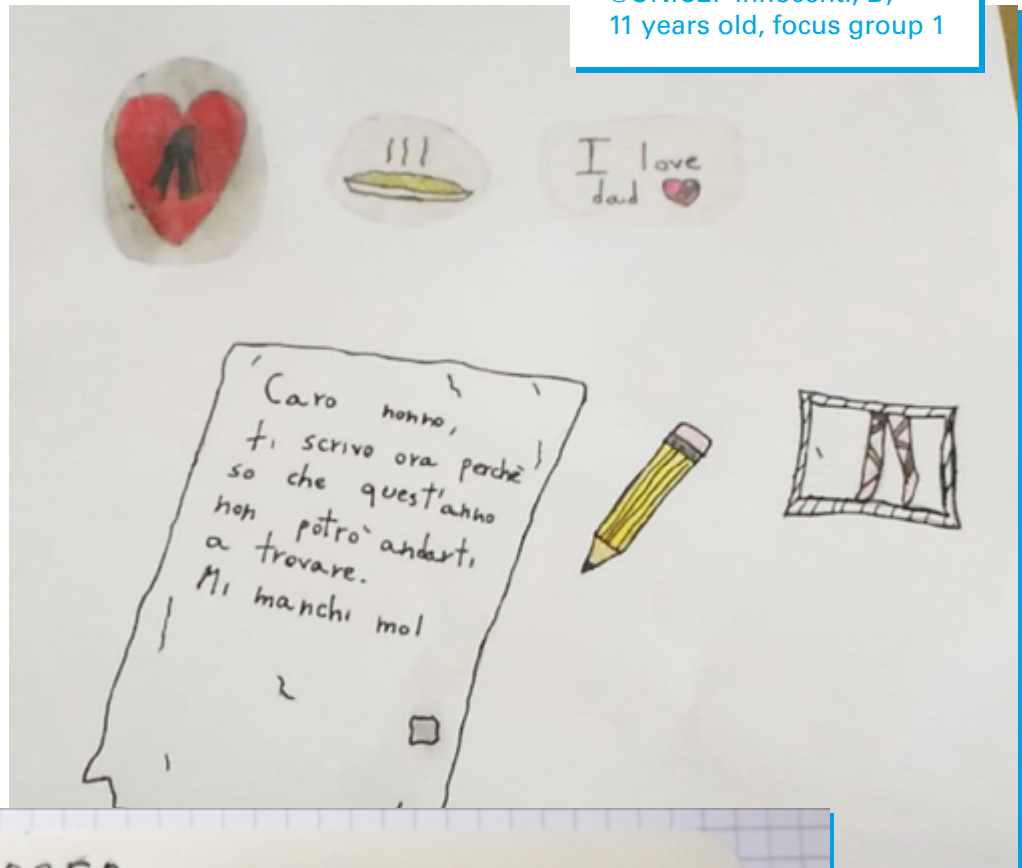
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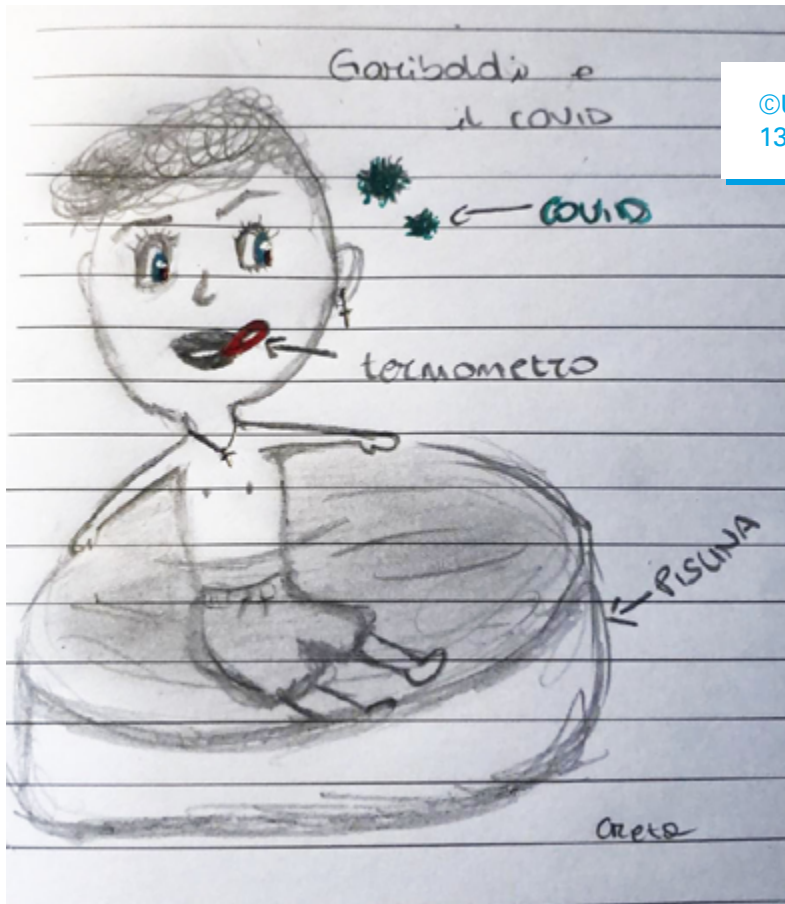
Special thanks go to the members of the Young Advisory Board (YAB) – Italy – and of the International Advisory Board (complete list in Appendix B). The authors would like to dedicate this report to the memory of Christine Hunner-Kreisel who was a valued member of our Advisory Group and made an important contribution to this research.

Finally, we thank all the teachers and third-sector organizations who have supported us in coordinating with the research participants (complete list in Appendix B), and the participants themselves who have given us their time, experiences and opinions.

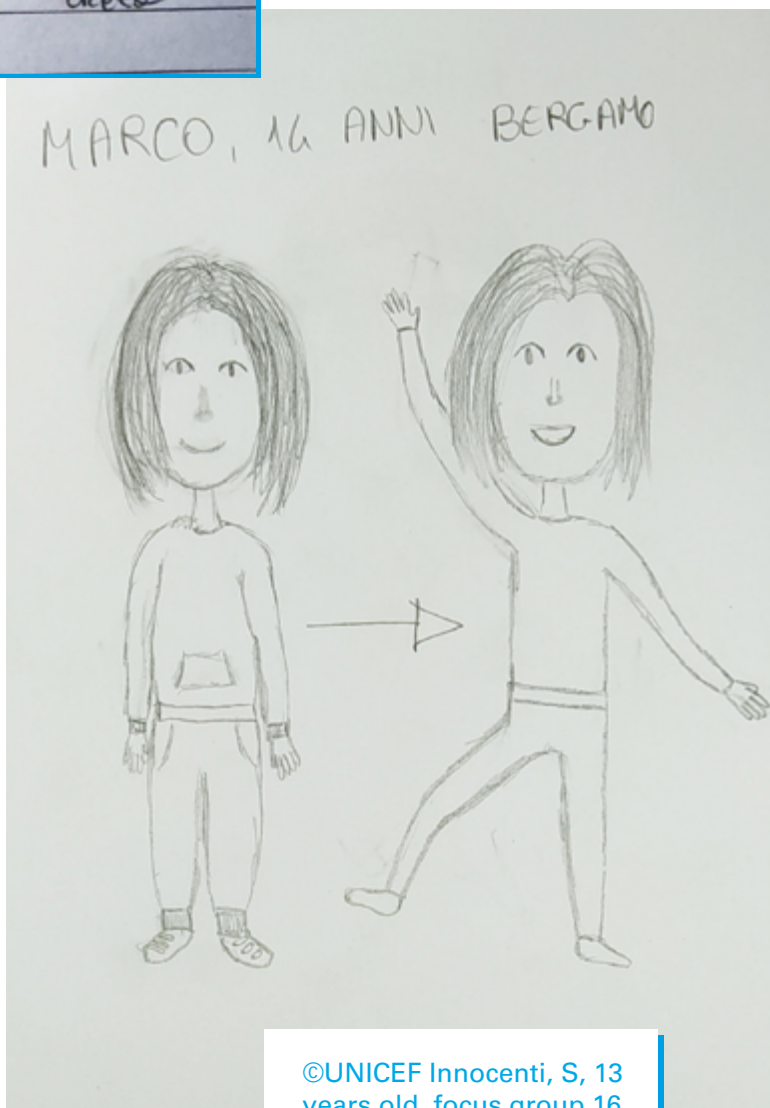


Contents

Executive summary	01
1. Introduction	06
2. Methodology	09
3. Data analysis	20
4. Conclusions	66
References	86



©UNICEF Innocenti, G,
13 years old, focus group 10



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years old, focus group 16

Executive summary

This report recounts the journeys of a group of adolescents through the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, one of the first countries to be affected by the virus. It is the first product of an in-depth qualitative study that aims to understand the experiences of children and young people from their point of view and through their words.

Issues relating to children and young people and COVID-19 are often discussed in the media in Italy, as in other countries. Newspapers have regularly published stories about the ‘irresponsible’ behaviours of young people who meet in large groups in public spaces and for ‘*la movida*’ (nightlife / nights out). A second key theme of public debate, in terms of the consequences of the pandemic for this age group, has been disruption to school life. The results of this research seek to go further, offering a complex and varied picture – one that does not focus solely on young people’s ‘irresponsibility’, or on the need to ‘restart’ and not ‘waste time’ in training future productive members of our society – but that looks instead at the contribution that adolescents can make to the fight against the pandemic, based on their reflections and actions so far.

The data for this project were collected online between February and June 2021, through 20 focus groups, 16 individual interviews and 25 other contributions (writing and artwork) received via email. The project involved a total of 114 participants between the ages of 10 and 19, who attended lower and upper secondary schools in 16 regions of Italy, and included children and young people

who identify as LGBTQI+, unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), and adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The results show a great diversity of situations, opinions and feelings, but also common themes that unite the stories of the participants and shed light on what it means to be a teenager in Italy during this particular, if not unique, period. The title of the report – *Vite a Colori* – aims to represent the variety of stories and points of view analysed, while at the same time reporting the words of one of the participants: “*Ours is a life regulated by colours ... that is, from personal experience, one day I didn’t know if I could go out or not because I didn’t know what colour we were, because the colours of the regions change like this ...*” (A, 15 years old).

Following an initial comprehensive analysis of the data, it was decided to tell the complexity of these stories, simplifying them and uniting them by using a single metaphor: surfing. Through this metaphor, the young people interviewed are visualized as novice surfers who have to learn how to tackle their first waves, and find themselves doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is compared to a tidal wave. Using this idea, the report therefore refers to tidal waves, surfboards, techniques for staying on one’s feet, and different surfing spots.

The phrase ‘*vite a colori*’ captures the complexity of the experiences of the research participants, while maintaining a positive and flexible approach, which is precisely the way in which the young

people faced this period, trying to renegotiate with themselves, their lives and their spaces, in the light of the pandemic.

The children and young people participating in this research project show that they are highly aware of their responsibilities to others. Despite the upheavals that COVID-19, and the Italian Government's measures to contain it, have brought to their lives, they are concerned for their older relatives and have willingly made sacrifices to protect them, following the rules and adapting to an unstable and constantly changing daily routine. The pandemic forced the participants to interrupt many of their activities and habits, leading to feelings of stress and frustration. However, this new situation gave them the opportunity to create new habits and discover new activities and skills, although also creating new difficulties. Especially during the first lockdown, children and young people talk about engaging in activities that they would never otherwise have done. They recount discovering new passions and discuss positive stories of adapting and of creating 'new normalities'. Another important theme in young people's accounts is their experience of *'didattica a distanza'* (distance learning), or 'DAD' as it has come to be abbreviated in Italian, an experience about which the participants have different opinions.

Inevitably, the pandemic also changed the way children and young people interacted with the people around them, from their closest family and friends to people more distant but still significant in their lives and daily rituals – such as *"the sandwich seller outside school"* (L, 16, focus group 6). The research participants have had to learn to reorient themselves in a new 'geography', where the spaces in which social relations occur have been profoundly reconfigured. The digital space has made it possible to maintain relationships that would otherwise have

been interrupted. For some, digital technology has even expanded their possibilities. Many participants spoke of how some relationships were initiated and strengthened online. On the other hand, the social spaces offered through school were diminished, leaving a void. It seems that the restrictions on conventional socializing have increased awareness of the importance of relationships and helped improve young people's ability to seek, establish and maintain them.

Beyond the renegotiation of daily practices and social spaces, this research highlights another kind of change that many children and young people recognize in themselves – an inner change. The data analysis tells the story of research participants who matured as a result of the particular challenges they faced during the pandemic. They have become increasingly self-aware and, although they have often felt fragile and 'small', they have discovered important inner resources. The pandemic has provided more time for them to think, to learn about themselves, and to understand what matters most to them.

This report also focuses on future perspectives – seeking to understand how and what the participants imagine, fear and hope for the days and years ahead of them. Uncertainty about their immediate future is evident and often a return to 'normality' seems to be the only possibility that the participants can imagine. However, they are also aware that the pandemic is likely to last much longer and they fear new variants of the virus. They have dreams for their longer-term future, as adults, but perceive that it will be characterized by great challenges, especially due to economic and environmental crises. They hope and believe, however, that these challenges can be overcome, by remaining united and prioritizing collective well-being over individualism.

The data analysis furthermore underlines the leitmotifs that bind the participants to one another and that give them a common identity, in which they can recognize themselves and be recognized. It is an identity forged through very strong common experiences linked to the pandemic, which will probably remain with them and with which they will continue to identify, even as adults. The picture is that of a group of young people who feel that they have made many sacrifices and are living an atypical adolescence, while also feeling that these sacrifices are not fully recognized by adults. They are generally concerned about their mental health and interpersonal skills, especially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, considering aspects not directly connected with the pandemic, the young people interviewed also reflect on issues of diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender, and view this diversity positively.

The themes discussed above emerged from the analysis of the data as a whole; however, through a more detailed analysis of specific subgroups within the sample (LGBTQI+, UASC, adolescents with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds), it was possible to identify issues of more specific relevance to these subgroups. The pandemic, in fact, risks amplifying existing inequalities and creating new ones. One mechanism that creates such inequalities is that individuals have had less opportunity to mix with other individuals, particularly those from different backgrounds, which has increased segregation. UASC spent more time among themselves, limiting contacts with the world outside that community, and children who identify as LGBTQI+ spent more time in their bubble of friends – those who understand and respect them. Children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds spent time in small and often overcrowded houses due to their parents not having paid work, and without receiving the usual

support from their peers at school, in public places or in other social contexts. They were unable to mix with peers and engage with people from different backgrounds.

On a more positive note, however, it did not seem that these specific participants were more negatively affected, at least emotionally, than the other young people interviewed. They share the fact that they have already faced some major challenges in life: some have had to face a long and dangerous migratory journey, often in solitude; some have faced a troubled inner journey searching for their sexual orientation and gender identity; and some have had to face family crises, have had to work from an early age to support the family and have become accustomed to living with limited money and possessions. Some of these young people have also developed a political consciousness – including some UASC and transgender adolescents – and are aware of the importance of making efforts to promote their political and civil rights. Their previous experiences have probably given them good coping skills and adaptability, which they were able to draw on and utilize during the pandemic.

In conclusion, it is clear that the children and young people who participated in this study have many hopes and ideas for the future. Today's adolescents will face the consequences of the pandemic throughout their lives. It is essential that they are actively and fully involved in the decisions that will shape their future. In this sense, the research emphasizes the need for change in how young people are involved in democracy and the development of their country. The authors hope that these findings will offer support in this direction.

Overview of the general recommendations emerging from the study

Support: The experience of the pandemic has been traumatic for everyone. Young people will need support to deal with various aspects of their lives. They will need it not because they are 'vulnerable' but because, like everyone else, they have been profoundly affected by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, support with school learning is critical, but particularly important will be interventions that focus on their psychosocial well-being in order to improve their lives at school, in the family and in the community. The widespread concerns about the loss of formal education at school must not overshadow young people's other needs. There is a risk of subjecting people in this age group to additional pressures to achieve the educational outcomes that their peers have achieved in years gone and this could have disastrous effects. This research shows that free time, without constant planned activities, is something that has helped children and young people to cope with the crisis. It is important to preserve it, and in fact to ensure that adolescents have more of it at their disposal.

Recognition: It is important to recognize in a positive way the efforts and contributions that adolescents have made for the common good, and the skills and strengths they have developed. This recognition should replace the narrative that generally exists regarding this age group, namely that of a group that increases the risk of infection through asserting their need for social interaction at the expense of respect for rules, or of a cohort of young people who are less educated and competent than previous generations. It is vital to speak about young people in a more positive way precisely because of the enormous learning and competencies that they have acquired as a result of having to deal with an epochal event such as the pandemic during such a sensitive phase of their life. The research participants have developed important new skills compared with the generations immediately preceding them in Western countries, through their involvement in efforts to confront a situation of enormous collective risk.

Participation: The research participants felt that they were listened to and taken seriously. Participation in the research was a positive experience for them. It will be crucial to engage young people in a similar way in the process of ‘rebuilding’ the future and of social transformation that lies ahead following the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, it will be important not only to explore existing opportunities and mechanisms in schools, towns and cities and on social media, but also to create new spaces to listen to and engage with them, in order to involve them as much as possible in democratic processes. Even before the pandemic, it was clear that young people wanted to be heard and involved in discussions about the future of their country and the planet (e.g., Fridays for Future). The pandemic could be a watershed in this regard. It represents both a potential risk and a great opportunity. The risk is a return to the old ‘normal’, in which key decisions are made by the usual policymakers through a process from which children and young people feel excluded. The opportunity, and it is an important one, is the potential for a positive step change in the democratic involvement of children and young people. They are ready and able to understand and contribute to the implementation of Italy’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan to counter the consequences of the pandemic – consequences they will have to live with for longer than older generations.

Research and monitoring: In this unique and extraordinary period, it is important to promote longitudinal surveys and research to understand the long-term effects of the pandemic. It would also be useful to conduct research studies with younger children (kindergartens and primary schools) and to make sure to include groups of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti adolescents, and those in public care, in the youth justice system and with disabilities. It was not possible to include these groups of young people in this research project due to lack of time and resources. It is also critical that all interventions planned in response to the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are adequately monitored to ensure that the use of invested resources is as relevant, efficient, effective, impactful and sustainable as possible.

Focus on specific groups: It is essential to take into account the full range of children’s and young people’s needs, including those of adolescents from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, UASC and LGBTQI+, and those of other specific groups not included in this research. All the legislative, political, economic and social actions planned require an approach that is not only inclusive, but also aims at eradicating those structural barriers that prevent certain groups of adolescents from fully enjoying their rights.

1. Introduction

Faced with the sudden and unexpected arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept across the world in 2020,¹ each person responded in a unique way, charting their own path through the global crisis. These personal trajectories were shaped by country of residence, health status, housing situation, socio-economic status, age, gender and many other factors. Initially, governments focused on the physical health risks of the virus, particularly for older age groups. However, it quickly became clear that this crisis would affect the lives of everyone, regardless of age. Based on evidence so far, children and young people are the group at lowest risk of the negative physical health effects of the virus, but their lives have been turned upside down: by school closures; by government measures that confined entire families or communities to their homes for months at a time; and, for some, by direct experience of the virus, either through being ill themselves or through a person close to them being ill. These experiences, changes and restrictions have profound and lasting implications for the present and future lives of all adolescents.

This research project highlights the difficulties and challenges that children and young people faced during the pandemic. It details their reflections on what they learned, and how they matured as a result of their experiences, as well as their hopes and fears for the future. The study broadens and enriches our understanding of the implications of the pandemic for adolescents, and the challenges

that will need to be resolved with their active participation and involvement.

The international project

The research described in this report is part of an international project, coordinated by the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, which was initiated in March 2020. It is a component of UNICEF Innocenti's response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which includes a series of studies on the impact of the pandemic on children around the world.²

This particular project is a collaboration between various UNICEF country and regional offices and a network of external researchers and experts from universities and research institutes across several continents. At the time of writing (late September 2021), it includes studies in Angola, Canada, Italy, Lesotho and Madagascar. The studies in Canada and Italy are the first to be completed and published. Field research in the other countries is still ongoing, and the results from those countries will be published in the first half of 2022. It is possible that the project will be extended to include other locations, particularly those countries most affected by the pandemic during 2021.

Scope and objective

The project aims to collect and analyse the experiences and opinions of the COVID-19

1 The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 crisis a 'pandemic' on 11 March 2020.

2 https://www.unicef-irc.org/covid19?utm_source=unicefinnocentihomepage&utm_campaign=covid19

pandemic from children and adolescents aged 10 to 19 in various contexts and countries, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the following aspects:

1. How did they perceive and cope with their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? How did the health crisis, and government measures in response to it, affect them; and how are these continuing to affect them? What are the key issues in this respect from their perspective?
2. What are young people's ideas and proposals regarding government responses to the current situation, and how similar situations could best be handled in the future, to ensure that children's rights and well-being are protected?

The objective of the work is to provide governments, public institutions and other stakeholders with evidence to implement actions and policies that can protect and promote the psychological and physical well-being of children and young people, counteracting the harmful effects of the pandemic and the measures taken to contain it.

The project in Italy

The project in Italy, of which this report is the main output, was carried out by a UNICEF team consisting of: UNICEF Innocenti; the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) National Coordination Response in Italy; and the Italian National Committee for UNICEF – Onlus Foundation. The study received funding from the Italian National Committee for UNICEF, the British Embassy in Rome, and UNICEF Innocenti.

This publication follows other reports on the impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents in Italy published by UNICEF (Mascheroni et al., 2021; Tiberio et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020). These studies are mainly based on surveys. In contrast, this research directly involved participants through focus groups and individual interviews, using a rigorous qualitative research approach to both data collection and analysis.

The study, for which data were gathered from February to June 2021, covers a broad time span, aimed at exploring the experiences, perceptions and opinions of children and young people in Italy regarding the pandemic, as understood in the most general sense. Rather than being limited to discussing the first lockdown, the research team wanted to understand the various phases that have characterized the evolution of COVID-19 and the measures taken by the Government to restrict its spread in Italy.

The first two cases of COVID-19 in Italy were reported on 30 January 2020, when two tourists from China tested positive for the virus SARS-CoV-2 in Rome (Severgnini, 2020). A cluster of COVID-19 infections was subsequently identified in February 2020 in Lombardy, leading to the first death attributed to the virus in Italy (Anzolin and Amante, 2020). At the time of writing this report (late September 2021), 4,660,314 positive cases have been recorded in Italy and 130,697 deaths of people who had tested positive for COVID-19³ have been registered. Based on total numbers of cases, Italy is the 12th highest country globally and the 6th in Europe, while based on number of deaths, it is the 9th globally and 3rd in Europe.⁴

3 <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/it> (accessed 28 September 2021).

4 <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed 28 September 2021).

During the period of the pandemic, the Italian Government has implemented various measures, which have been varied and adjusted over time, aimed at containing the spread of the virus but also at providing economic support to counteract the restrictions on people's movement and on the opening and use of commercial, sporting, cultural and leisure activities. The first national lockdown was initiated by the Government on 9 March 2020 (Republic of Italy, 2020a) and continued until 4 May 2020 – the starting date of the so-called Phase 2, characterized by the gradual reopening of various activities (Republic of Italy, 2020b). This was followed by Phase 3 in the summer of 2020, during which many of the restrictions were reduced or ended (Republic of Italy, 2020c). As a result of the increase in COVID-19 cases and deaths in the autumn of 2020 – the 'second wave' – from the beginning of October 2020, a series of government decrees reintroduced and extended measures to control the spread of the virus (e.g., the requirement to wear a mask either outdoors or in public indoor spaces, a ban on parties and other social gatherings, powers for mayors to close specific public spaces and streets in urban centres) (Republic of Italy, 2020d; 2020e).

In addition, in November 2020, the national government adopted specific criteria to monitor, at the regional level, the status of the pandemic (Republic of Italy, 2020f). Based on these criteria, each region (and, in some cases, provinces and municipalities) were assigned various colours – red, orange, yellow and white – with each colour indicating a set of rules (e.g., limitations on movement between municipalities, closure of restaurants and bars, the requirement for schools to use distance learning). This '*sistema di monitoraggio dei colori*' (colour-coded monitoring

system) is still in operation at the time of writing this report (late September 2021).

In the middle of data collection (March 2021), cases, hospitalizations and deaths once again began to rise, leading to most regions being placed in the highest 'red' risk category (Republic of Italy, 2021). In the same period, a new government of national unity was formed, with Mario Draghi Prime Minister. From April 2021 until the end of the collection of data for this report, the spread of the pandemic in Italy has gradually reduced and the vaccination campaign has been rolled out extensively.

According to the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Stringency Index,⁵ which is calculated based on a range of indicators of policy measures in place to contain the pandemic, plus an indicator that records public information campaigns, during the period of data collection for this study (25 February to 16 June 2021), Italy had a rating that ranged from 82.14 out of 100 to 71.3 out of 100, indicating relatively stringent measures and restrictions.

The remainder of this report is divided into four chapters. Chapter 2 explains the research methodology and methods. Chapter 3 forms the heart of the report and presents the initial findings of the study, illustrating them with the words of the young people who participated. Chapter 4 discusses the key themes that emerge from the findings and offers an integrated and comprehensive interpretation of the data analysis. Finally, the report ends with some general and specific policy considerations and recommendations developed from the data analysis and based on the suggestions of the research participants.

5 <https://covidtracker.bsg.ox.ac.uk/stringency-map>

2. Methodology

Since the first lockdown began in March 2020, various surveys and polls have been conducted in Italy to gather information on the impact of school restrictions and closures on the well-being and learning of young people (Mascheroni et al., 2021; Osservatorio nazionale per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, 2020; Save the Children Italia, 2020; Tiberio et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020). However, so far, there have been few publications of studies oriented towards a direct account of their experiences.

Particularly given the context of a global pandemic – the impact and consequences of which are uncertain and unpredictable – we considered talking and listening to young people as essential, to gather their perspectives on the effects of COVID-19 on their lives and to explore their ideas and proposals on how to tackle this and other similar crises in the future. The information gathered in this way can complement and enrich that gathered through surveys and related quantitative analysis.

Therefore, this research project adopts a qualitative methodology aimed at gaining a direct insight, in their own words, into the experiences of children and young people in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study has attempted to capture and convey, through phases of analysis, reflection and synthesis of the data, the rich insights that can arise spontaneously through the relatively open processes of semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

The qualitative approach makes it possible, in particular, to explore aspects that would not

emerge from the synthesis implicit in quantitative models, issues that are difficult to bring to the surface with a top-down approach based on pre-formulated questions. The qualitative approach taken in this research enables the investigation of the experiences, perceptions, ideas and opinions of the research participants, without imposing on the participants a point of view or concepts predefined by the researchers (DeJaeghere et al., 2020). It is an 'emergent' rather than a 'predetermined' approach.

This research project draws on the 'grounded theory' method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and adopts an open and inductive research approach, oriented towards gaining a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the contexts and experiences of a group of children and young people in Italy, over a period of several months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of focus groups provided the opportunity for young people to construct shared stories of the pandemic period. These narratives spring from an interaction between: (1) the researchers, who employed an open semi-structured approach; (2) the individual participants, who brought ideas, beliefs and representations of their own or taken and re-elaborated from their family/social networks or from the media (which therefore become in practice two additional groups of shadow participants); and (3) the group as a social space in which the act of conversation, with all the freedoms and the objective and subjective constraints that it generates, creates the body of information that enables the interactive construction of meaning. As

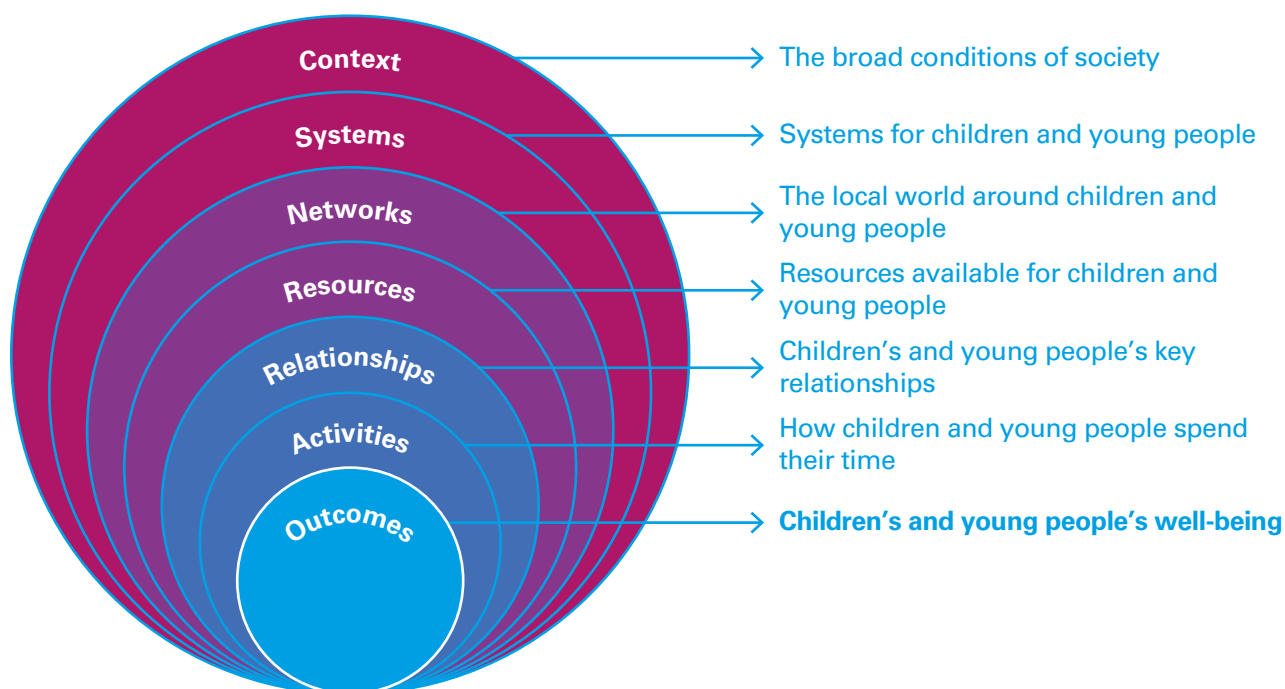
INSIGHT BOX 1

The ecological model of human development

Although the research project has an open and flexible approach, it was important to have a framework within which to develop it. To this end, we chose to adopt a modified version of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) 'ecological model of human development'. UNICEF Innocenti has already used this model in a previous report on child well-being (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). It seemed particularly useful for this research because it is comprehensive but flexible. It offers a complete framework, with the child

at the centre of a network of systems and relationships. At the same time, it does not make assumptions about the particular problems faced by specific children. An example of how this framework can be applied to the possible impacts of the pandemic on children is shown in Figure 1. This framework was used particularly in the development of data collection tools.

Figure 1: Example of application of the Bronfenbrenner ecological systems framework to the possible impacts of the pandemic on children and young people, based on Innocenti Report Card 16 (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020)



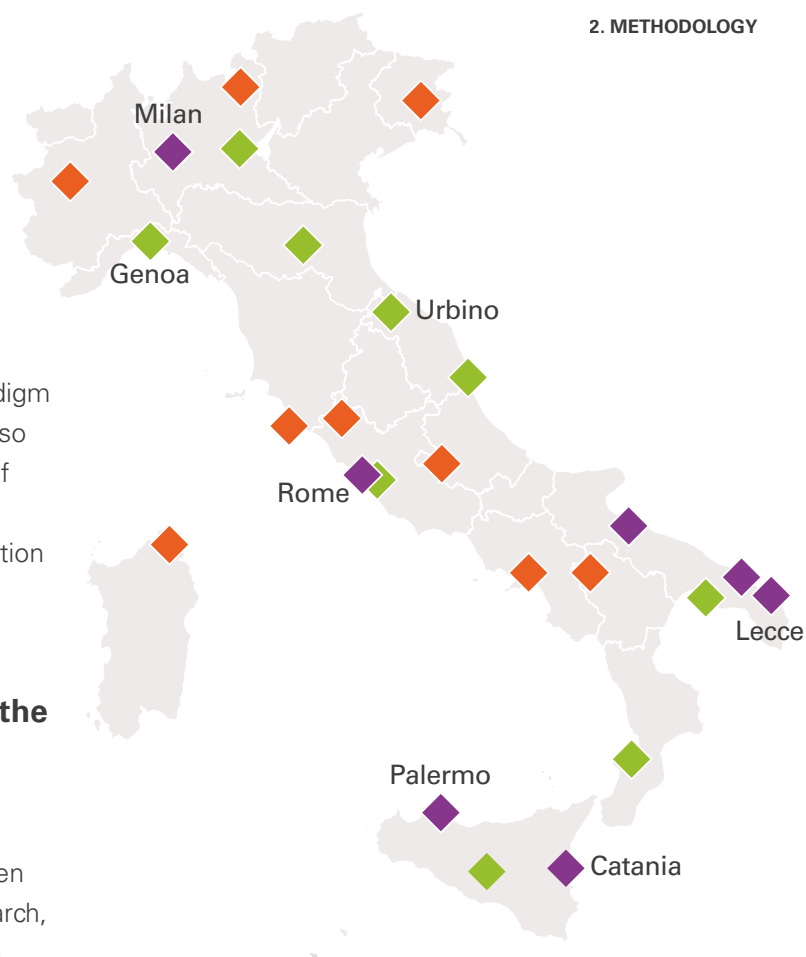
- ◆ Schools in urban areas
- ◆ Schools in rural/inner areas
- ◆ Third-sector partners

is evident from this description, the main paradigm that we use is social constructionism, which also informed the individual interview component of the research, in the sense that, even here, the information was generated through the interaction and negotiation between the researcher and participant (DeJaeghere et al., 2020).

Which young people participated in the research and in what ways?

A total of 114 children and young people (39 between the ages of 10 and 13, and 75 between the ages of 14 and 19) participated in the research, which was undertaken entirely online between February and June 2021, one year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. The research involved participants from 16 out of 20 regions and 2 autonomous provinces of Italy (Figure 2), from both inland and metropolitan areas, and also included children and young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds,⁶ unaccompanied and separated children (UASC),⁷ and LGBTQI+ young people (including 5 transgender young people). Participants were involved through the support of secondary schools and third-sector partners throughout the country.⁸

The participants in the research were selected through a purposive sampling strategy on the basis of specific characteristics (age, gender, type



Note: The designations employed in this publication and the presentation of the material do not imply on the part of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) the expression of any opinion whatsoever concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or of its authorities or the delimitations of its frontiers. The boundary and names shown on the designations used on the map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

of school, type of geographical area, and specific subgroups as described below). As a result of the help given by the headteachers, teachers and third-sector professionals who supported the initiative, a diverse group of children was involved, in terms of socio-economic and migration background, experience of the virus, school performance, and interest in participating in group activities, their gender identity and sexual orientation. Given that

⁶ These young people were contacted through third-sector organizations that work in close contact with regional social services and manage day centres and other facilities and provide support to socio-economically disadvantaged young people.

⁷ In this group, reference is also made to adolescents aged 18 and 19 who arrived in Italy as UASC and for whom '*prosieguo amministrativo*' (administrative continuation) has been arranged until the age of 21, meaning that in practice they continue to have the status of a minor, which grants them protection, and can receive certain services on this basis.

⁸ The schools were selected among those participating in the Scuola Amica project of the Italian National Committee for UNICEF Foundation Onlus. Attention has been paid to include no more than one school per region due to limits linked to the maximum number of children and young people to be interviewed, but ensuring a balanced participation of girls and boys, schools in the North, Centre, South and Islands, and a wide variety of schools (classical, scientific and artistic high schools, technical and professional institutes, in various types of areas, including rural and urban areas, provincial capitals and smaller centres). Only four Italian regions were not involved in the project (Molise, Trentino-Alto Adige, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto). As far as third-sector organizations are concerned, not all of the organizations contacted joined the project. In fact, many associations and cooperatives were not able to participate because of logistical difficulties in finding volunteers and working during the pandemic. The full list of schools and third-sector partners can be found in Appendix B.

these characteristics are not mutually exclusive, some participants represent intersectional identities.⁹ All the research participants chose to participate on a voluntary basis.

In order to set up a trusting relationship between the researchers and the participants, individual introductory video calls were organized with the young people who expressed an interest in participating in the study, to explain the research project and to review jointly the main points included in the information that had been shared. In some cases, participants chose to invite their parents/legal guardians to the interviews as well.

Between February and May 2021, the researchers conducted 20 online focus groups with between 4 and 8 participants in each. The activities conducted during the focus groups served to bring out collective themes, highlighting shared aspects and differences in both the perceptions and the lived experiences of the participants. The focus groups were organized as follows:

- 6 mixed (males and females together) focus groups with young people aged 10–13 selected from secondary schools in rural and urban areas;
- 8 mixed focus groups with young people aged 14–19 selected from high schools in rural and urban areas;
- 2 focus groups with male UASC aged 17–19;
- 1 mixed focus group with young people aged 10–13 from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds;
- 1 mixed focus group with young people aged 14–19 from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds;
- 1 focus group with lesbian and bisexual participants aged 15–19 years; and
- 1 focus group with transgender participants aged 16–19 (including people transitioning from male to female and vice versa).

The focus groups with the 10–13 age group involved some people who knew each other and others who did not, while the focus groups with participants aged 14–19 comprised only people who did not know each other. As far as possible, in the groups organized through schools, an attempt was made to group participants by place of residence: rural or urban areas.

The focus groups were followed by an individual in-depth phase, which took place in June 2021. This involved two parallel pathways involving a total of 41 children and young people:

- 16 young people participated in individual in-depth interviews. The aim of this phase was to individualize the discussion of some of the themes that emerged in the focus groups and to explore some aspects that, for ethical reasons, were not discussed in depth in the group. Based on the preliminary analysis of the data collected in the focus groups, and given the resources available, the researchers chose to carry out individual interviews exclusively with LGBTQI+ adolescents, UASC and children and young people from disadvantaged

⁹ The intersectional approach is rooted in feminist theories of power and diversity. It is attributed to K.W. Crenshaw (1991) and the critical race theorists who inspired it, who rejected the idea that class, race and ethnicity are separate categories (Hill Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1985; Davis, 1981). Conceptually, the intersectional approach proposes that the various categories of oppression should be understood as interconnected and interdependent, rather than as separate categories, given the limitations in privileging one system of oppression over another and the impossibility of explaining inequalities through a single framework of oppression (Bastia, 2014). In practice, therefore, the intersectional approach in this research aims to highlight the interconnections of participants' multiple situations/sources of disadvantage and focuses on including the experiences of those who are often marginalized by more general analyses (UASC, LGBTQI+ adolescents, adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds).

Table 1: Structure of the sample

Participants	Age	Number			Total number of participants
		Focus group	Individual interviews	Individual contribution	
Middle school	10–13	6	0	12	34
Secondary school	14–19	8	0	12	51
LGBTQI+	15–19	1	2	1	6
Trans	16–19	1	5	0	5
UASC	17–19	2	4	0	7
Socio-economically disadvantaged	10–13	1	1	0	7
	14–19	1	4	0	4
Total		20	16	25	114

socio-economic backgrounds. This second phase was useful because in focus groups it was not always possible to explore in depth the aspects linked to the participants' intersectional identities, and therefore it was decided to give a space for dialogue to those children and adolescents that the research team felt could make further contributions.

- 25 adolescents participated with individual contributions via email, telling about their individual experiences and feelings a few months after participating in the focus group with written texts, comics or drawings.¹⁰ This option was offered partly for ethical reasons to ensure that all adolescents who had expressed an interest in participating in the research could do so. This group does not represent a specific sub-sample but the detailed insights from these individual contributions have been useful in expanding and enriching some important themes identified in the focus groups.

Table 1 clarifies the sample structure, showing how many people with various characteristics were involved in each stage of data collection.

What ethical approach was followed?

Bearing in mind the risks of collecting data on the COVID-19 pandemic while the crisis continued, and due to the logistical difficulties linked to existing regulations and the risk of infection, the research team worked for several months before the start of the data collection to ensure that the study followed the highest possible ethical standards.

The research followed UNICEF's key ethical principles (Berman, 2020), which include:

- minimizing risks;
- informed consent of young people and their parents/guardians;
- confidentiality, privacy and anonymity;
- respect for diversity; and
- data protection and security.

The research protocol was approved by an ethics committee – the Health Media Lab¹¹ – and was closely followed throughout the research process.

¹⁰ These individual contributions were sent via email, based on a list of options developed by the research team and shared with all the focus group participants. However, 4 of the 25 individual contributions were provided by children who did not participate in the focus groups. This occurred because the research team had indicated a maximum number of participants per school, so as to constitute balanced groups in terms of age, gender and geographical origin. Volunteers not selected for the focus groups were therefore given the opportunity to contribute individually through written contributions.

¹¹ <https://www.healthmedialabirb.com/>

Each young person who expressed an interest in participating in the research received an information sheet covering: the objectives of the project; the voluntary nature of participation; what was involved for participants; arrangements for processing and storing the data; and the benefits and risks associated with participation. Each participant sent a signed copy indicating their informed consent. In most cases, informed consent was also obtained from the parents/guardians of the participants, even though, in agreement with the ethics committee, for some adolescents this was not compulsory, in order to guarantee their safe and free participation in the project (this was the case for LGBTQI+ young people). Given that the focus groups and interviews took place online, data protection was ensured through the use of a secure, password-protected platform, preventing private messages from being sent between participants and setting up a closed list to ensure that only participants in the focus group or interview were present. During the individual preparatory phone call, it was also explained that participation in the focus group or interview would take place in a safe and private space and that participants were free to leave at any time.

Finally, before beginning data collection, the research team developed a referral protocol to follow if one or more participants reported being in danger or showed a state of psychological distress of concern. Fortunately, there was no need to use this protocol in any case.

How was the data collection conducted?

Two researchers acted as facilitators in each focus group. The individual interviews were carried out in a one-to-one format: one researcher and one participant. In conducting the focus groups and individual interviews, the researchers used semi-

structured guidelines to capture information both retrospectively (from the first lockdown to the time of the focus group/interview) and looking into the future, to explore if and how participants' aspirations and perceptions had changed as a result of the pandemic.

Guidelines for focus groups and single interviews were developed drawing on insights from relevant qualitative methodological literature (Adler et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2019; Pincock and Jones, 2020; Woodgate et al., 2020) and literature specifically focusing on conducting research in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jowett, 2020; Małachowska et al., 2020).

The focus groups took place between February and May 2021 and lasted about two hours each. At the beginning of each focus group, the facilitators briefly explained the project and reminded participants of the key points of the ethical procedures. Then the researchers and participants introduced themselves to, and familiarized themselves with, each other through an 'ice breaker' activity. The focus groups involved the use of interactive and creative activities in which participants were asked to:

1. Choose an object that represented their experience of life during the pandemic and show it on video during the focus group, explaining why they had chosen it. At the end of each focus group, participants shared a photograph or drawing of the object with the researchers. Various pictures of the objects are included in this report, along with explanations of why they were chosen.
2. Suggest individually, through the use of the Mentimeter platform, three words/phrases to complete the sentence: 'COVID-19 makes me feel ...'. The word cloud that was generated was

Example of one of the objects of the pandemic

from time to time shared on the screen by one of the researchers and discussed in the plenary with all the participants.

3. Create a fictional story of a teenager in a time of pandemic. By telling the story of a fictional character they created, participants had the opportunity to represent their experiences and moods, and those of people close to them, without feeling the need to talk about their own life to others, unless they wished to do so. The researchers guided the creation of the story through questions related to daily life, personal relationships, and the physical and virtual spaces of the created character. Participants were also given the opportunity to draw the character, if they wished, and make a timeline of key moments experienced in the pandemic year from March 2020 to the time of the focus group, to share with the research team. See the image on page 16 for an example of a drawing depicting one of the fictional characters.
4. Imagine being able to propose to the Italian Government thematic areas on which to focus and measures to be implemented to reduce the spread of the pandemic and to protect the well-being of adolescents in Italy. In addition, participants were asked to share their fears and hopes for the future.

The individual in-depth interviews took place in June 2021 and lasted approximately one hour. Participants were asked to share their personal experiences in the following areas: interpersonal relationships; well-being (analysing positive and/or negative experiences during the pandemic); attitudes and perceptions towards the pandemic; aspirations for the future; access to information; and participation in decision-making processes that affect them.

Individual self-completed contributions were



“My object is the egg, it’s a bit unusual. Because during the lockdown I always had access to the garden, and so I was able to go out, and ... I have a deep ... that is, a passion was born, for chickens. So, having the opportunity to go out, and having a chicken coop that was disused, and using my mobile phone to learn more, I ... discovered this passion of mine, now I have some unusual breeds that I bought after the lockdown and so ... I am a little closer to this world [...] I had ... 16, all of very different breeds. And now I have also built some chicken coops. Instead, before, I only had a single hen house, built out of old masonry, which I never paid much attention to. There were the classic laying hens that you see around, there were three chickens [...] No, oh well, I asked my father for advice on building the chicken coops, as he knows more about these things.”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/L, 16 years old, focus group 6)

Example of a fictional character

©UNICEF Innocenti/P, 11 years old, focus group 1



solicited in June 2021 and included four options developed by the researchers in collaboration with the Young Advisory Board that supported the research project (for more information, see Insight Box 2). Participants were able to contribute by writing essays in the form of a diary, generic text, comic strip, drawing or other format, discussing one or more themes that emerged during the focus groups or sharing their feelings at that point, which was about 15 months after the start of the pandemic.¹²

Given that, in most cases, those who participated in the one-off interviews or provided self-completed contributions had already participated in the focus groups, the researchers were able to investigate whether and how their perceptions and moods had changed over time. As a result, the researchers were able to monitor and explore participants' experiences dynamically over the period between February and June 2021. This is a period that encompasses important seasonal variations (winter, spring and summer), and it was also accompanied by variations in the spread of the virus and the subsequent measures taken by national and regional authorities.

How was the data analysis carried out?

All conversations in the focus groups and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim;¹³ transcripts were subsequently anonymized. The research team also collected all the texts, drawings and photographs produced by the participants during the focus groups or as self-completed individual contributions. All the material collected at the various stages was used for analysis and has been taken into account for the writing of this report.

The data were analysed following the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2012) and with the support of ATLAS.ti software, as follows. Three researchers were involved to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis process. The data analysis was an inductive, descriptive and interpretive process, and this allowed the results to be constructed on the basis of what was said,

¹² See Appendix A for the full version of the focus group and single interview guidelines and for the individual asynchronous contribution options.

¹³ In order to make the quotations from participants more readable, in this report many of the symbols used in the focus group and interview transcripts – for example, to indicate emphasis, longer or shorter pauses, background noise – have been removed.

proposed and shared by all research participants. All data, sentence by sentence, were coded to identify reference categories. As the next step, all identified codes were grouped based on their common characteristics. For example, reference categories – such as friendship, time, school, distance learning, life in society, relationship with self during the pandemic, and so on – were identified. These categories were then further analysed to identify common or dissimilar elements that revolved around the same interpretive theme. Through this process, the five thematic areas on which we focus in this report were identified, of which two are more descriptive and three are more interpretive. These will be presented in the next chapter.¹⁴

What are the limitations of the insights gained from this research project?

A first key limitation is the risk of selection bias. The selection of participants followed a targeted strategy, aimed at including a group as heterogeneous as possible and to ensure the participation of people with different characteristics following an intersectional approach. The selection of participants was carried out with the support of intermediaries – teachers from middle and high schools and staff from third-sector organizations. The young people who participated also chose to do so autonomously. It is plausible, therefore, that decisions about whether to participate reflect personal predispositions. For example, people who were very severely affected by the pandemic may have chosen not to participate in the project in order not to have to recall painful and difficult moments.

Moreover, reaching adolescents between 14 and 19 years of age from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds was particularly difficult because, as indicated by the professionals, they had ‘gone off the radar’: some, in fact, had dropped out of school and associations and, after more than a year of the pandemic, it was very difficult to involve them in many types of activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the choice of data collection modality, which took place exclusively online. The unpredictability of the pandemic restrictions and the need to protect the health of participants and the research team meant that face-to-face focus groups and interviews were not possible, resulting in implications for the choice of children and young people to be involved (such as the requirement that participants have access to IT facilities), the creation of research tools and, as a consequence, also the results.¹⁵

Despite the initial plans, during the data collection process it was not possible to include the experiences of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti children and young people, and those with disabilities, in the purposive sampling strategy, due to the difficulties in finding ethically appropriate ways to involve them within the time and resources available, although some participants may in fact have belonged to one or more of these groups. Although this difficulty limits the spectrum of experiences and may not take into account important points of view, it was considered the most appropriate solution, given practical constraints. Certainly, the experiences of these young people should be properly investigated

¹⁴ The need to condense the large amount of data collected, and the analysis, into a streamlined and accessible report does not allow a full coverage of the variety of detailed contributions. The research team had to make a choice about what to include in this report – both in terms of the direct quotes from participants and the in-depth analysis of individual themes – aiming to provide the reader with a complete, but necessarily not entirely in-depth, picture. In this regard, we hope to prepare subsequent publications and in-depth studies based on the data collected.

¹⁵ For example, the research project collected a limited amount of data to effectively discuss topics, such as differences in access to distance learning tools or difficulties related to the digital divide in general, precisely because the online nature of the research presented inherent barriers for participants who did not have access/familiarity with the internet.

in the future.

The fact that communication between researchers and participants (and mediators – teachers and other professionals, etc.) was conducted using online platforms introduced an additional barrier to data collection, which may have limited the researchers' ability to interact with research participants. On the other hand, however, one positive aspect of the use of the internet was that it allowed adolescents living in different contexts, who did not know each other, to come together, which introduced a variety of perspectives into the conversation and was often commented on positively by the participants themselves.¹⁶

Furthermore, the research team, throughout the project, reflected at length on the difficulty of reporting the full variety of the 'voices' of the children and young people who participated, as the research was successful in involving a heterogeneous and complex sample. The researchers, while experienced in the field of qualitative research, are still adults with socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that are not always akin to those of all participants (Ingulfsvann et al., 2020).¹⁷ For this reason, they have taken into account their positioning as researchers vis-à-vis the research participants, and they reflected on and aimed to implement the most appropriate ways of engaging with and respecting the LGBTQI+ young people, children and young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and UASC (Pincock and Jones, 2020).

Finally, it is worth noting that the research team, from the time the project design was

developed, questioned how and whether to investigate potential differences between males and females. However, the decision to include transgender young people as participants made a binary methodological approach difficult, if not contradictory, from a gender perspective. As a result, it was decided to create focus groups with participants mixed from a gender perspective. Data analysis reinforced the belief that this approach was appropriate for dialogue with the participants, among whom there were – beyond the group of transgender young people – some who explicitly defined themselves as 'non-binary'.

16 Participants from three focus groups explicitly asked the researchers to be put in touch with one another, following the positive experience and feeling created between them during the discussion.

17 Beyond these considerations, it should be emphasized that the debate on the disadvantages and advantages of the positioning of the researcher – internal or external with respect to the studied group – is wide and varied in the methodological literature in the field of qualitative research (Holmes, 2020).

INSIGHT BOX 2

Participatory research and the role of the Young Advisory Board

The research design followed a participatory process in which young people of similar ages to the research participants were invited to join a Young Advisory Board¹⁸ that supported the research activities throughout. Twenty young people aged 11–21 met with the researchers on several occasions and helped them to devise a child-friendly research design.¹⁹

The Young Advisory Board:

- provided suggestions to the researchers about how to organize the focus groups, how to ensure that the research participants felt comfortable in the various stages of data collection, and how to set up the options for independent self-completed data collection;
- participated in the validation phase of the results; and
- collaborated with the research team in defining the details for the dissemination of the results with policymakers and in schools.

The research findings were presented to participants on 16 July 2021, during an online workshop structured to gather their views and comments on the research team's interpretation of the data and proposed ideas for representing the results.

The workshop was designed to offer a meaningful and enjoyable experience for all participants, trying to adapt modes and language to their needs and making sure that they participated in the processes that characterized the various choices during the research (Slettebø, 2020; Birt et al., 2016; Goldblatt et al., 2011; Bygstad and Munkvold, 2007).

Participants were able to comment on the results of the research by giving their own opinions, either verbally or via online chat, and by participating in short sample surveys.

They were very supportive of the editorial and interpretive choices of the research team (e.g., the use of the 'ə' symbol, which is used in the Italian version of this report to provide a gender-neutral alternative in cases where nouns and adjectives have masculine or feminine forms), which they were able to enrich with additional details.

18 The members of the Young Advisory Board were involved thanks to the support of the YOUNICEF programme of the Italian National Committee for UNICEF Foundation Onlus.

19 A complete list of Young Advisory Board members can be found in Appendix B.

3. Data analysis

To present the results of this research project, it was decided to use the metaphor of surfing. The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the lives of children and young people in Italy, a sort of unexpected tidal wave that they had to learn to ride in order not to drown.

The following data analysis is the story of the process of learning, self-awareness and self-definition, both individual and collective, that we have extrapolated from the words and contributions of the participants. The image below shows some of the key concepts of the metaphor created by the researchers, as interpreted and designed by one of the participants in the Young Advisory Board.

The tidal wave, and the way it swept through each teenager's daily life – their habits, relationships and very being – had a strong impact on everyone, although the effect was more devastating for some than for others. Section 3.1, 'Renegotiating one's life: Everyday life and the pandemic', describes the effect that the COVID-19 wave had on everyday activities, such as school, sports, routines, and the related process of negotiation that adolescents put in place in their everyday lives to respond to the 'new normal' that the pandemic imposed.

The next two sections, on the other hand, describe other negotiation processes that the participants undertook, respectively, with their network of relationships – the surfboard – and with themselves – focusing on surfing technique.

"Surfing's a more profound kind of sport than it looks. When you surf, you learn not to fight the power of nature, even if it gets violent."

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

Section 3.2, 'Reorienting oneself in a new geography of social spaces and relationships', discusses the importance of relationships – the surfboard – in the lives of research participants, and the role these play in keeping young people safe in a time of crisis. Faced with a tidal wave like this, the size of the surfboard becomes very important, as does knowing how to handle it. Using, or dealing with, your surfboard when a large wave hits is very different from using it in flat or slightly choppy seas. But the participants try and succeed. They try new surfing techniques, focus very much on the moment and on themselves, and learn how to ride the wave.

Section 3.3, '*I was there, I made it.*' Getting to know oneself, growing and improving during the pandemic', describes the transition from amateur surfers or simple paddlers²⁰ to professional surfers, those who are now familiar with the tidal wave and can stand on the board. There is a determination to stay afloat and a realization that those who learn to ride such big waves at a young age will be able to surf anything.

²⁰ Paddling means lying on the surfboard, belly down, moving on the surface of the water. It is usually the first movement that aspiring surfers undertake to familiarize themselves with the board and the waves. Paddlers are precisely those who do paddling.



"I thought of developing [the drawing] in a circular way because it gave me the feeling of universality ... In the drawing I represent the rocky coast, 'divided' by the surfboard from the sandy one ... The variety of social and cultural contexts is represented by the stylized 'men' and the use they make of their surfboard: there are those who fearlessly ride the wave, those who lie down on the board and let themselves be carried ashore by the waves, those who are about to jump into the sea and those who, finally, own the table but do not have enough strength to use it ... I, for example, have yet to identify myself among these personalities."

Francesca Pace, Young Advisory Board

The tidal wave has changed the lives of participants in the present, but also their vision of the future. Section 3.4, 'What colour is the future? Between fear, great challenges and the hope of facing them together', tells of the fear that another tsunami might come unexpectedly and the difficulty in imagining the future when the present is so uncertain, but also of the growing awareness that the rough seas might never end and that one must be ready to face them. The COVID-19 pandemic struck the participants just as they were learning to surf, perhaps switching from a bigger to a smaller board or experimenting with new techniques, in the middle of their adolescence.

Section 3.5, 'The pandemic generation: Defining oneself and being defined', describes the leitmotif that unites individual experiences and brings them together in a collective, generational experience. Each section includes an explanatory chart that illustrates the main issues that the research team identified from the data analysis. The data analysis also covers those for whom the COVID-19 tidal wave is potentially more dangerous because they have a smaller or poorer-quality board or for whom the social, economic and political environment in which they surf – the so-called surfing spot – corresponds to a rocky coastline rather than a sandy beach. UASC, young people who identify as LGBTQI+ and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to have learned to surf difficult waves earlier than others, precisely because they can get very hurt if thrown ashore.

In the following sections, it was decided to identify and tell mainly those elements and themes that concern the whole group of 114 participants, including therefore those belonging to the aforementioned specific subgroups. During the data analysis, the research team in fact noticed that the prominent themes are valid for everyone and it was possible to tell and describe them by including words and concepts present in all the focus groups, interviews and individual contributions. However, some specific experiences, opinions and perceptions of the pandemic from UASC, LGBTQI+ adolescents and children, and young people living in disadvantaged socio-economic contexts are summarized in greater detail in the Insight Boxes.

The report concludes with a reflection on the story of the data collected, in order to understand the impact, experiences and opinions of adolescents in Italy on COVID-19. It is a story of growth in a context of crisis. The participants have learned to stay afloat, to surf, and will continue to do so, despite everything. The tidal wave has taught them what is important and changed them to the core. Will it also change the way we adults look at teenagers in Italy? What can the COVID-19 pandemic teach us about adolescence?

3.1 Renegotiating one's life: Everyday life and the pandemic

The impact of the pandemic on the lives and experiences of the research participants is brutal, like that of a tidal wave that arrives with a disruptive force without sparing anyone or anything. Obviously, the impact is much harder for some and less so for others, but it leaves a profound mark on everyone. The substantial amount of rich data collected during this research allows us to explore children's responses to a shocking and unexpected alteration in their lifestyles and rhythms of life. Thus, we discover stories of the renegotiation of time, space and daily life.

This section recounts how the new state of affairs induced by the pandemic has changed the daily life of the participants and how they have responded to these changes by renegotiating their daily practices. The pandemic has, in fact, forced participants to stop doing many of their activities and habits, subjecting them to feelings of stress and frustration. Diagram 3.1 summarizes the key concepts discussed in this section.

However, this new situation has also given them the opportunity to create new habits and discover new activities and skills, although not without new difficulties. Especially during the first lockdown, the participants tell us they had time to devote themselves to activities that otherwise they would never have started. They talk of the discovery of new passions; they also report positive stories of adaptation and creation of 'new normalities'. An important theme is distance learning, about which the participants have various opinions and attitudes.

All the participants shaped new routines, each in their own way, despite the *"hands ... like those of*

a snake's skin" (G, 13 years old, focus group 10), due to using too much sanitizing gel. This chapter offers an overview of these routines and allows us to explore the more practical aspects of the lives of research participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"You never really know what's coming. A small wave, or maybe a big one. All you can really do is hope that when it comes, you can surf over it, instead of drown in its monstrosity."

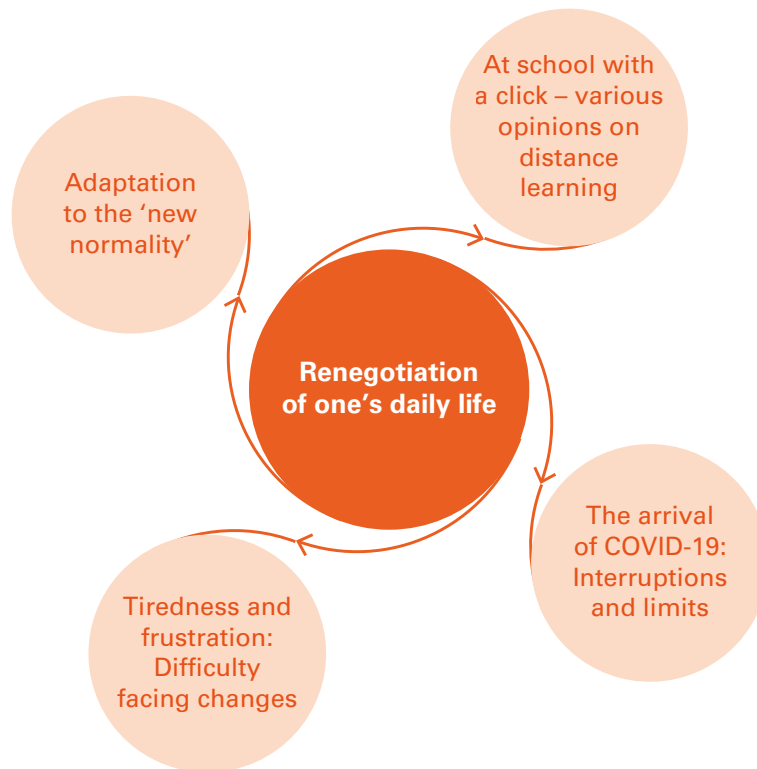
Alysha Speer, author

The arrival of COVID-19: Interruptions and limits

COVID-19 is perceived as an invisible danger, all-pervasive yet immaterial, increasing all the time with the relentless rhythm of the data provided by the daily news, and materializing in the images transmitted unremittingly by the media or, for some, in the illness – either of themselves or a person close to them. In addition to COVID-19, there are also the consequences of the government measures adopted to curb the pandemic and limit its damage, which have changed daily routines. The group of young people who participated in this research had to, among other things:

- interrupt their usual sporting, recreational or extracurricular activities in general;
- study through distance learning, for shorter or longer periods;

Diagram 3.1: What are the key themes of this section?



- accept not being able to leave the house with the usual ease and meeting only the closest friends and relatives; and
- change their use of time and space following the introduction of the curfew and the limits imposed on mobility, including within regional borders.

New actions emerged in the participants' daily routines that became new habits over time: washing hands continually, using hand-sanitizing gel, wearing a mask and, in many cases, undergoing COVID-19 swab tests.

It all started with what seemed like an isolated episode, almost a short "vacation" which then "gets longer ... it becomes a kind of prison and he begins to suffer", says L (11 years old, focus group 2) speaking of the fictional character created during

the focus group.²¹ Participants continually talk about the upheaval that the pandemic has brought to their lives. They do so especially in reference to the first lockdown which, one year after the start of the pandemic in Italy, still remains a burning and indelible memory, but they also do so in reference to the moments in which their regions, provinces or municipalities have been labelled a "red zone",²² with the consequent tightening of restrictions. In general, they speak of the entire pandemic period while being well aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has not yet come to an end.

With the arrival of the pandemic, the first common feeling was that of "interruption". The participants generally describe feeling immobile and immobilized, as A explains, by choosing an object to represent this period:

21 During the focus groups the participants created the story of a fictional character; therefore, referring to those characters, they very often speak in the third person. The only first names that the reader will be able to read in this report are those of the characters of the stories created.

22 In Italy, starting from November 2020, the reference system for government measures assigns a colour to the regions. The method associates red with the most restrictive measures, orange with intermediate measures, yellow with less restrictive measures, and white with the absence of specific limitations. The colour is decided on the basis of indicators that take into account the spread and circulation of the virus in the region and the level of occupation of beds and intensive care units in hospitals.

“The object I chose is, I would say, big enough because I chose my chair, I’m sitting on it now ... I chose it because basically it was the object I was on practically day and night because I was standing in front of it on the computer, studying and doing different things you do sitting, right? Indeed, it is also a ... sort of ... object that also limits your possibilities, while when you are standing you have the possibility to move a little more and do everything, and so I took this object because precisely this period in a certain sense limits us a lot in doing what we want” (A, 16 years old, focus group 4)

Many children and young people interviewed had to give up on activities they did daily, and they express feeling:



©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 16 years old, focus group 4

“Unhappy because I miss everything I did before Covid, like going out freely without a mask, or going for a walk outside my local area, going to the gym, even meeting friends to chill at home, I don’t know, to watch a movie with friends, to eat a pizza” (G, 19 years old, focus group 13)

Beyond the rules imposed at the government level, the fear of infection and the sense of responsibility that many research participants clearly displayed does not allow them to behave as they would have done in the past, even at times when the restrictions are less severe. For example, one of the characters created by the participants, although he was allowed to, avoids *“leaving the house and maybe going to the park near his house, where he used to meet with his friends, where he maybe used to go every day to have a moment of relaxation, maybe after a bad day, away from school and family”* (F, 17 years old, focus group 8)

Speaking of themselves, or of the character they invented, across all the focus groups, the research participants consistently tell stories of interruption, of giving things up or making sacrifices, of dreams that perhaps have become more unattainable than before. Many of them have had to interrupt a sporting practice, in some cases limiting their opportunities for growth in the competitive or professional field:

“Yes, in fact I used to play in a team ... professional championship and after the lockdown I no longer do since I haven’t been training ... and, not doing the championship, it was difficult when we had the preparation in August. It was very tiring ... and for this reason many players were sent home because ... they could no longer play at the same level as before ... maybe even as someone who, I don’t know, had a dream maybe of becoming a footballer ...” (A, 16 years old, focus group 6)

For S, who arrived in Italy as UASC, a sports career is not only a dream, but also a pass to obtain documents. Being put in isolation and not having trained properly for a while made this path even more demanding for him:

"I do competitive athletics, it means that we always have to train to get the best result in competitions. Without training, it becomes difficult. I did it once: I haven't trained in a month and for lack of training I have missed the races and ... this time I want to make the sacrifice and train always, if it is true that it's not enough, then it's not enough ... I will go back to work, but for now I am making the sacrifice to be able to train" (S, 19 years old, interview)

Some have had to give up important goals, such as the *"driving licence which is the first goal when one turns 18"* (N, 18 years old, focus group 14) or obtaining *"certificates, English exams that perhaps he could not do..."* (M, 15 years old, focus group 14). Others talk about activities that have continued to take place but in a different way, having to adapt to circumstances, and no longer being fun, as L says about scouting activities:

"Doing scouting it is the same thing, in any case you find yourself doing great ... things at home, for example, I did the 'San Giorgio'²³ on video ... conference, and therefore it was strange because in any case the 'San Giorgio' used to mean meeting with many other groups, and... so instead, ... something new because the organizers created activities to let us work in groups anyway..." (L, 16 years old, focus group 6)

The interviewees talk about a wide range of difficulties as a result of the pandemic. They are aware that they have made, and are continuing to



"A badge, a badge with the emoji of a punch that basically represents strength, also the strength that I had to have to get through the quarantine. And then whenever I was feeling low I would put this badge on and say ... like ... we can do it, that is, humanity, and that comforted me a bit in the moments when I was not able to accept that COVID existed. Sort of, with this badge ... representing strength ... I feel good again."

(©UNICEF Innocenti/P, 11 years old, focus group 1)

make, many sacrifices; and they are also tired and worried. They are tired of screen-time, of not always understanding the lessons, of being afraid to go out and fearful of crowded places.

For some, the impact of the pandemic could lead to particularly harmful consequences in their present and future. Some participants have difficulties or are worried about not being able to find seasonal or part-time work, or not being able to obtain documents, including for transgender adolescents and UASC. Others have to deal with the difficulties that their parents are experiencing at work or in their relationships:

23 'San Giorgio' refers to a day when scouts renew their commitment and hold a celebration.

"Mmm ... we can say that she has family problems, that this lockdown is even worse for her, having to stay at home, so ... I'm not sure ... parents arguing, maybe ..." (B, 13 years old, focus group 12)

However, despite the painful sacrifices and difficult experiences, many of the research participants understand and follow the government measures, although there is a recognition of how much these limit everyone's individual freedom:

"... Because being a much bigger situation than us, basically we can't do anything except what is imposed on us. It is not that we disagree, I do not know, when there is a ministerial decree for example, 'I want to go out after 10 pm', basically we all have to do the same thing, so freedom is really limited" (M, 17 years old, focus group 14)

"In my opinion this thing could lead to a greater respect of the laws maybe, because in any case during this period we had to stick to these laws, we had to respect them otherwise we had to pay the fines so in my opinion ... this thing could help that is ... anyone maybe, he didn't respect the rules so much before, maybe in the future after this thing ... he'll be used to respecting the rules, the laws." (M, 14 years old, focus group 1)

"This world can make people more mature, understanding that COVID was a serious thing, that you have to respect the rules, all of these things, so maybe not only respect the rules about masks, things like that, but people have also understood the need to respect the rules, respect others, and respect civility, being civil in any case." (C, 12 years old, focus group 5)

"And therefore this situation helps us to understand that, even though there are regulations, they must be respected, because if they are there, there is a reason, it is not that they put them like this, and therefore ... this is ... the moral of the story." (B, 13 years old, focus group 12)

We can therefore see in our data that the participants generally agreed with the rules to limit the spread of the virus. They seem to have internalized the logic of individual sacrifice for the common good.²⁴ However, there are also some dissenting voices from participants who believe that the pandemic is an excuse to establish an authoritarian regime and who therefore do not approve of the restrictive measures:

"Because I attended this meeting only to raise this alarm at UNICEF, I took the opportunity, in fact I also thank you for ... that you organized this initiative. Because in my opinion things must be known as they really are and not as they want us to believe ... So in my opinion, I am against the mask but it is not my idea, I have read reports from doctors and also the Constitution, then from a medical point of view I tell you that the mask, at least the simple blue surgical one, is not very effective against COVID because in any case COVID is a virus so the particles are really small, those masks are made to retain dust and powders which are thicker. And ... apart from that, the doctors say, it has no real effect, plus ... after a prolonged use of the mask, continuously breathing the carbon dioxide that we have to expel, it can be really harmful and dangerous for our body, on a scientific level, in fact many people have been ill because of the mask. Another thing, so I went to get the paragraphs of the Constitution ..." (G, 15 years old, disadvantaged socio-economic background, focus group 20)

²⁴ However, in section 3.5, 'The pandemic generation: Defining oneself and being defined', we will discuss how, despite the understanding of the need to respect the imposed rules, many participants feel that the restrictions are borne more greatly by younger people and that their sacrifice is not adequately understood by older generations.

©UNICEF Innocenti/M, 16 years old, focus group 6

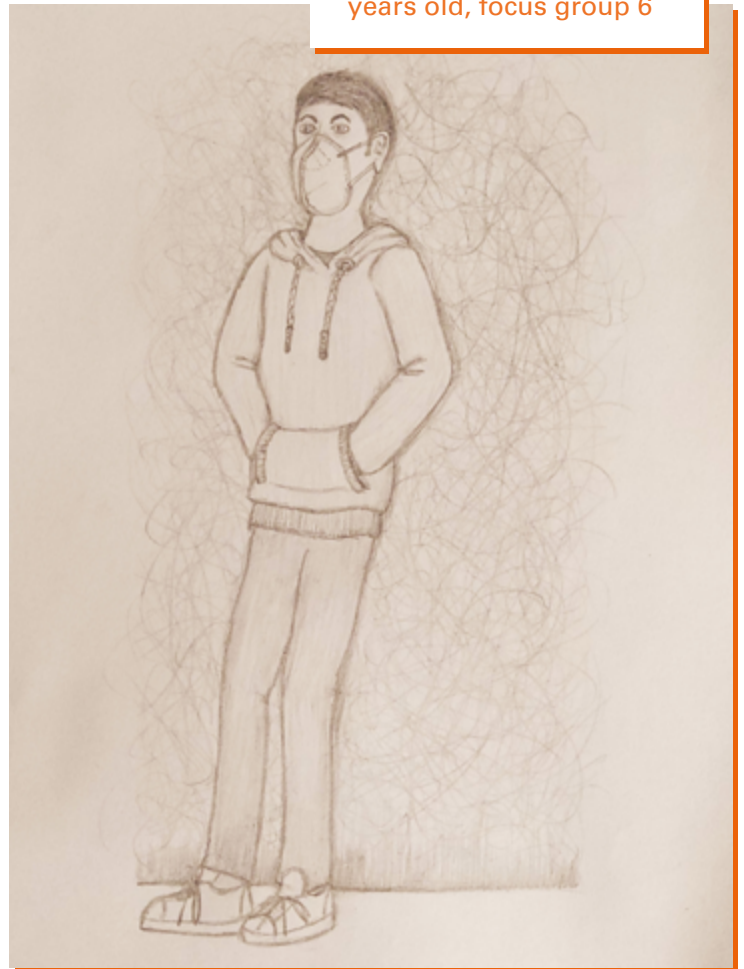
Some young participants are also afraid of getting vaccinated because they fear it will have long-term consequences, such as losing fertility:

"Then I would like to get vaccinated because it is a certainty anyway, but today they told me that you will become infertile if you get the vaccine so I said wait a minute, and then this thing shook me but I think I will do it anyway. I'm not sure if my parents want me to do it, but I hope they will end up feeling OK about it and let me do it because it is a serious thing anyway." (C, 16 years old, LGBTQI+, interview)

Tiredness and frustration: Difficulty facing constant changes

The changes and limits imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and by government measures to contain the infections are the first impact on the daily lives of research participants. All these changes made the fictional characters created by the participants feel *"destabilized," "empty," "disoriented"* (L, 16 years old, focus group 6). In addition, as more and more people are infected, the experience of the disease itself becomes more present in the lives of the research participants. The virus may reach their school class and their family. Some participants were forced to deal with the disease and therefore had to face an unexpected and unique life experience:

"We can connect the fact that, having COVID, however, he does not smell or taste, and also has movement problems, such as back pain, he has problems with his strength and therefore he can no longer train, both because he has COVID and because he has precisely ... problems ... Immune defences that are lower having caught COVID ..." (M, 11 years old, focus group 12)



Many of the participants describe themselves as tired:

"Because I go to school, I stay six hours with the mask, I come home and I'm tired because I feel this thing in front of me, I can't take it off for six hours and I feel ... trapped ... every time I think I want to do something then I remember that I can't do it..." (C, 12 years old, focus group 5)

Some are tired of always hearing about COVID-19 on television:

"No, people go crazy in my opinion, that is also from a psychological point of view. Like ... in my opinion if you notice, from the beginning of the pandemic on television you only see that, and there is nothing else. That is, you change the channel and there is only that. OK, it's important to be informed because in any case it is a global pandemic it is

not something to be ... that is, in the sense it is an important thing, however, in my opinion they should also provide people with distractions ..." (N, 16 years old, focus group 13)

The feelings and emotions in response to the pandemic that are most evident and widespread in participants' accounts are those of stress and frustration, not so much due to not understanding or sharing the need for the restrictions, but rather to the constant and sudden changes in the rules. Research participants describe initially struggling to adjust to the lack of "normality" and often feeling "mad, mad! I feel like I'm going crazy" (B, 14 years old, focus group 12).

The words of the participants reveal a generalized frustration that is not limited to the memories of the first lockdown but which persists throughout the duration of the pandemic, characterized only by some lighter periods such as "Summer" which "represented, compared to what I experienced before, a more relaxed moment, let's say, more peaceful" (A, 17 years old, focus group 11).

From the end of summer 2020, infections started to increase again, government measures tightened and some schools returned to distance learning. The frustration of the participants also increased:

"... And maybe he feels angry again because he stays home again ... that is, happy because usually one, that is, he is happy because in the sense he does not go to school, and therefore he is happy but sad to be at home, that is, he is angry rather than sad ... happy and angry again" (S, 13 years old, focus group 12)

There is an increase in anger and frustration linked to the feeling that the pandemic will last a long

time and that the summer was only a parenthesis between the so-called 'first and second waves':

"AX, 15 years old: After that, however, he realizes that he is slowly recovering his old life ... but then he hears on the news that the infections are increasing, they could increase with the arrival of the cold, and that is in fact what happened, so he begins to get more and more discouraged.

AG, 17 years old: In my opinion a turning point in this story you are making was in October if I'm not mistaken ...

AX, 15 years old: Yes when they closed everything again.

AC, 15 years old: It was in November.

AG, 17 years old: Ah OK, in any case more or less that period when they closed everything again and sent us all back to distance learning and there was a moment in which everyone understood, and therefore also Andrea, that in reality basically it wasn't over.

AC, 15 years old: In my opinion it was also the moment in which ... people, the students mainly got more angry that is, everything that has been imposed up to that moment has been pointless if we end up back where we were before.

AX, 15 years old: If not worse.

AG, 17 years old: Yes, maybe it was an even worse moment than the start of the quarantine, so maybe Andrea is now even more, yes, angry, but in my opinion a lot of frustration also comes into play because maybe, while in March it was a new situation, maybe ... even positive in some way for some people, now ...

F, 17 years old: Yes, yes, it's no longer a novelty, it is just negative ... then you see the circle tightening, that is, that slowly the people close to you begin to be infected, that is before they were all unknown, they were dunno ... very far away, you say 'oh well yes ok I'm sorry for him', then instead ... first

in your region, then in the province, then in the municipality, then in your school, in the class ... AX, 15 years old: Then your neighbour and ... you too find yourself having a test." (focus group 11)

When discussing the last months of the pandemic, all the participants talk about their confusion due to the constant changes:

"Like, from January to March [2021] I would mention a continuous push and pull of decrees and not decrees, red zone and yellow zone, her head is spinning a bit in that period, Gaia's" (V, 16 years old, focus group 4)

Many participants feel that they have partly lost control of their daily choices. They feel that it is *"someone else who manages my life at this moment and in a certain sense it bothers me because if at 10.01 I want to go round the corner to get a pizza, that is, I would like to go and get it I would not want to hear it, if I go out I get a fine or other penalties, because so ... so precisely for that reason before I wrote anger, because we have so many limits because, that is, they limit our freedom even if ... anyway that's the type of situation we are in"* (A, 16 years old, focus group 4)

With an ironic tone, they speak of their life as *"regulated by colours ... that is, from personal experience, one day I didn't know if I could go out or not because I didn't know what colour we were, because the colours of the regions change like this ..."* (A, 15 years old, focus group 14)

Adapting to the 'new normality'

After the first impact of the COVID-19 tidal wave, if we scratch below the surface of the words of the research participants, beyond the stress and frustration explicitly expressed as a result of the

more immediate changes imposed on their daily lives, we see other stories. These are stories of adaptation, stories of creating 'new normalities'.

Everything about everyday life in a pandemic is not always bad. Especially when referring to the national lockdown that began in March 2020, respondents describe feeling that they had *"much more time available"* and therefore were able to dedicate themselves to activities they previously could not do as frequently. Even though they talk of having been bored, the research participants found ways to positively overcome it. In particular, the objects they showed us during the focus groups, as a symbol of their pandemic experience, are often the emblem of how they spent their time and what they did differently, especially during the first lockdown.

For example, many of the participants report having read more books:

"I managed to read a lot of them, for my birthday they gave me a lot of them so ... I took some time for myself" (D, 11 years old, focus group 1)

Others dedicated themselves to cooking:

"Okay, I have it here, it's a saucepan. I had a pot, a bigger pan, but, in any case, let's say it's the same thing because during the quarantine, that is the whole of the lockdown, I got more familiar with cooking because before I was really hopeless, the only thing I knew how to cook was toast but now I have expanded ... the recipes I know and I am carrying on, obviously experimenting, in any case by letting my family taste my dishes and this is one of the many objects that have been close to me during the lockdown, it is a simple pot, but in any case this pot, thinking that even the most famous chefs can cook with a pot, that is, I like it." (A, 18 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17)



"I like to read, so I've brought a few books that I read during the quarantine. I had a lot more time than usual, so I was able to read a lot, for my birthday I got given loads of books as presents, so I took a bit of time for myself".

(©UNICEF Innocenti/D, 11 years old, focus group 1)

And someone has even built a chicken coop in the garden:

"My object is the egg, it's a bit unusual. Because during the quarantine I was always able to go out into the garden, and therefore I had the opportunity to go out, an I deepened ... that is, I developed a strong interest in ... rearing chickens. So having the opportunity to go out and having a chicken coop that was abandoned, and the phone anyway to learn more, I have I discovered this passion of mine, now I have some strange breeds that I bought after the lockdown and so ... I got a little closer to this world ... I had ... 16 hens but all of very different breeds. And I have also built some chicken coops now, instead before I had a single chicken coop, made from old bricks which I had never given much importance anyway, they were the classic laying hens that you see around, there were three hens." (L, 16 years old, focus group 6)

Research participants also felt they had more time available to write, to play an instrument, to draw, to listen to music or simply to play.²⁵ These feelings are talked about when looking at the past, and are constantly present in all focus groups, regardless of age. In general, having more time available in many cases is seen positively and seems to be a useful defence mechanism that improves psychological

well-being; instead, not having "a moment to relax" risks worsening the mood and makes "[me] very nervous ... and I can't find a sense of purpose" (B, 18 years old, focus group 14).

In the participants' narratives, we see a constant and continuous commitment to trying to find alternatives to boredom, to discover new passions, to look on the positive side of the period they are experiencing, to attempt to renegotiate and rethink everyday life in order to suffer less:

"In my opinion, even in the first lockdown, he experienced some positive emotions. Maybe as we said before, not going to play sports, he also started to ... enjoy what his reality was at that moment, that is, he felt good in what he was doing, he saw that there was something positive in everything, that in any case staying at home, ok, hurt him because it made him suffer, but it also brought him good things" (I, 14 years old, focus group 8)

Describing the difficulty some of them continue to experience in trying to see a positive side of the virus, V says, speaking of the fictional character created, *"In my opinion Gariboldi is asymptomatic, perhaps. It would even have been nice to taste foods he didn't like"* (V, 13 years old, focus group 10).

²⁵ This report contains numerous images of the 'pandemic objects' that the research participants showed during the focus groups. Many of them represent their ability to spend time, cultivating old and new hobbies, during the first national lockdown.

Taking various examples from the lives of the characters created during the focus groups, images of positive responses and discovering new skills constantly emerge:

"[The character] no longer did outdoor sports but did some gymnastics at home with his friends on video call" (K, 11 years old, focus group 2)

Or:

"Maybe before he didn't draw and now he has discovered that it can also be a way of letting off steam, also to express perhaps what he feels" (A, 15 years old, focus group 8)

Or again:

"She trains to improve her skills in playing the electric guitar ... She uses it to study, to reflect, and also to cultivate her passions" (L, 15 years old, focus group 7)

"With the pandemic he had to get closer to the world of technology. So he discovered new things" (G, 19 years old, focus group 13)

A positive note can clearly be seen, which, while not overshadowing the discomfort and suffering, highlights the ability of these adolescents to face this period as a challenge – an opportunity to implement their own adaptation strategies in response to an exceptional and highly restrictive situation. And that's learning too.

"AD, 18 years old: ... I got very used to this normality if we can call it that, compared to before I always had this feeling of, I don't know, estrangement compared to what was happening, but now that this situation is quite continuous I am living it anyway with more ..."



"So, I could think of many objects because the lockdown lasted a long time, but if I have to think only of one single object that I used during the quarantine, that has been too long to be honest, they are these old headphones. They don't work any more, they are completely knotted, but I kept them anyway because ... Then it was also a time I was sad enough for personal reasons, and ... at around seven or eight in the evening I used to do some exercising. I used to go up and down the stairs of my building. My building has 15 floors, so it is high enough. I would go up and down listening to music and during this time I would think of various things. So if I think about the quarantine, the first memory that I can think of is that I did physical activity while listening to music, and ... it was really not a good time though, in the end like everyone I managed to get over it and now it's much better even if the situation is not totally improved at least it's better than before."

(©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 15 years old, focus group 11)

AX, 15 years old: *It's the new normal, let's say.*

AG, 17 years old: *Right.*

AC, 15 years old: *It's a shame to say it though.*

AG, 17 years old: *Yes, a little bit yes.*

AX, 15 years old: *But in fact it is our new normal ... Now we are there and it is our new normal, and.... we will probably have to get used to another new normal that will be.... that it will be different ... normality is not one, normality is different for everyone...* (focus group 11)

At school with a click – various opinions on distance learning

School is one of the research participants' main activities and, when discussing the changes, limitations and innovations introduced in their daily lives following COVID-19, distance learning is among the most common topics across all focus groups. Participants continually reflect on their relationship with distance learning, as well as face-to-face learning in school, since the start of the pandemic. Their opinions on distance learning, from a purely academic point of view, vary. They express ideas and concepts that cover a wide spectrum of emotions, from the difficulties of being able to learn effectively and criticisms of the distance learning format, to positive opinions and an awareness of having acquired useful new skills. The feelings of frustration and stress due to the constant changes and the often unexpected switches between distance learning and face-to-face teaching, however, remain quite consistent.

For many, getting used to distance learning was difficult at first: *"because I think it was traumatic for everyone probably, we had the anxiety that that file is not there, etc., that is, at least for me it was very very difficult to do ... so we were a little more supervised but at the beginning I think it was*

very difficult for everyone to start in this way"

(M, 14 years old, focus group 1).

The constant shifting between learning remotely and in school confused many participants to some extent. With *"Monday at home, then Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at school, then Friday and Saturday home"* they cannot find a *"defined routine"* and this destabilizes them because *"today you go, tomorrow you don't know if you have to go"* (S and M, both 16 years old, focus group 6).

Furthermore, many believe that *"once a week at school does not change things"* (B, 18 years old, focus group 14) and it can be quite difficult for those who have to:

"take the bus to get to school, but only 15 of you could get on each bus but there weren't enough buses for the number of people who have to take that line, so it means that 10 people couldn't get on and were left standing at the bus stop, for example" (M, 15 years old, focus group 14)

There are also those who emphasize that being in class is not easy if, by chance, you get a cough *"because maybe your saliva went down the wrong way and everyone looks at you strangely, every five minutes the sanitizer, the mask for five hours in a row, going home with a headache, so for me it was just ... a disaster"* (M, 15 years old, focus group 14).

Many participants are concerned about their academic performance. As G explains, *"yes, yes in this period, for example, my grades have dropped"* (G, 13 years old, focus group). Some say that they do not understand or learn enough because *"you don't understand anything from learning at home"* (L, 11 years old, focus group) or because *"they*

find it hard to keep up with what is happening”
(S, 13 years old, focus group 12).

For others, distance learning is seen, instead, as a sort of second chance: *“yes, because in any case in the classroom, that is, sometimes they talk and so you can't concentrate and instead in quarantine I studied more, I have also changed, a lot”* (V, 14 years old, focus group 12). Many participants gained confidence in their skills, achieving better results, also thanks to the use of new educational practices:



©UNICEF Innocenti/M, 19 years old, focus group 20

“Thanks to distance learning I realized that I like studying and in fact I apply myself much more than before, when I was at risk of failing my exams so there was a big change for me ... Many teachers complain that with distance learning their eyes hurt, so if you send the photo of the notebook first they don't understand and they always ask us to make presentations, and I have learned to do them and I feel that I do them very well” (M, 17 years old, focus group 15)

While some children prefer distance learning and others feel better at school, all, regardless of age, agree that, in either situation, what remains of the school is limited to the academic aspects, while school as a space for socializing, among peers and with teachers, has disappeared. As M and L explain:

“... I think it is important also to say that distance learning is limiting for us students.... at least I don't experience it in the same way as I when I'm at school, in the school environment, It's different ...”
(M, 16 years old, focus group 6)

“Eh PK is not very happy with distance learning because he does not think it is the best solution because ... with distance learning there are no social relationships, you are all in a virtual world, PK still prefers to be in contact with his friends at school because with distance learning PK finds it hard to concentrate after hours of lessons and.... so he also finds it difficult to understand everything.”
(L, 19 years old, UASC, focus group 9)

3.2 Reorienting oneself in a new geography of social spaces and relationships

While section 3.1 focused on the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to research participants' daily lives, their routines and activities, this chapter turns to the question of how their relationships with others (family, cohabitants, friends, acquaintances, classmates and teachers) have changed. Diagram 3.2 summarizes the key concepts discussed in this section.

Inevitably, the pandemic has changed the way in which children and young people interact with those around them, from the people closest to them to those more distant but still irreplaceable relationships connected to their daily rituals – for example, *“the sandwich maker outside school”* (L, 16 years old, focus group 6). The participants had to learn to reorient themselves in a new ‘geography’, in which the space for social relations had been profoundly reconfigured.

While it is indisputable that the space available for conventional socializing has shrunk, the effect that this has had on the breadth and depth of young people's networks of relationships is not clear. Analysing the data, we saw that the digital world had made it possible to maintain relationships that otherwise would have been interrupted. In some cases, digital media also helped to strengthen existing relationships or enabled the formation of new ones. It seems that the restriction of the conventional social space has increased people's awareness of the importance of social relationships and has helped to improve their ability to seek, establish and maintain relationships. The most important relationships have had a greater chance of growth, while others have withered. Constructing the story for the focus group fictional

“I'm just a surfer who wanted to build something that would allow me to surf longer.”

Jack O'Neil, legendary surf icon

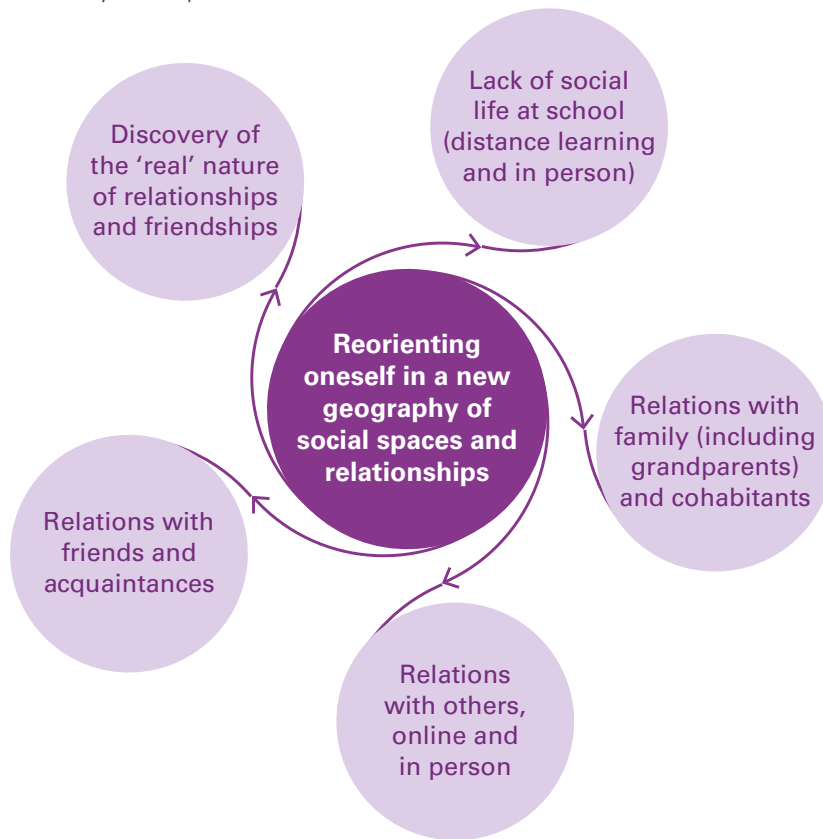
character, A says that with some friends *“he realized he hadn't talked to them at all”* (A, 15 years old, focus group 8).

Due to the pandemic, a new fear of physical contact inevitably arises, and at the same time a type of nostalgia for this aspect of relationships emerges. Some of the young people interviewed fear that the effect of the pandemic will spread in the future and that they will no longer be able to relate to others face to face as they would like. This is an aspect that was discussed a lot during the focus groups and is exemplified by E's words: *“social relationships will no longer be so spontaneous. That is, you will still have a bit of fear in opening up to other people”* (E, 16 years old, focus group 8).

Spaces and social relationships with family members and other cohabitants

Relations with family members and cohabitants during the pandemic, and in particular during lockdown periods, have fluctuated, and have depended on the specific situation of each child. During the interviews and focus groups, both positive and negative aspects emerged regarding the way in which the research participants experienced and perceived the evolution of their relationship with others inside their home. On the one hand, there was more time to be together; on the other hand, living together was not always easy.

Diagram 3.2: What are the key concepts of this section?



The experience of the first lockdown is still vivid in the memories of the research participants. The first lockdown was a period when there was more time to deepen relationships with others. Many participants remember in a positive way the moments they spent with their family. L says he felt *“more united with the family because ... we used to play more and more, like games together, board games, or together with my mother we prepared pasta, pizza, there was always something that united us all and we did everything together”* (L, 14 years old, focus group 16).

Some participants managed to spend more time with their father in the *“months of the lockdown, than in the last three years”* (V, 13 years old, focus group 1) and there are those who, during the Christmas holidays, *“rediscover the value of family a little”* (AX, 15 years old, focus group 11). Thanks to an enforced closeness, it was possible for some to rediscover *“the sense of family”* (A, 16 years old, focus group 8).

Some participants believe that their bond with their families has strengthened during the pandemic, especially during the quarantines, and they contrast this discovery with the situation prior to the pandemic, in which the relationships *“in some families had deteriorated a little, however we let them go and we did not pay a lot of attention to them”* (A, 15 years old, focus group 14). During the pandemic, we were all in the same boat, and somehow we understood each other better, says D, building the story of the focus group fictional character:

“Maybe ... before she had a relationship a little ... that is, she didn't get along very well with her parents and during COVID, which was a moment of mutual solidarity, she got a little closer to them” (D, 11 years old, focus group 1)

What emerges is a clear picture of relationships that have deepened, or even strengthened, as shown by M talking about how their relationship with their parents has changed:

“Let’s say it has changed a lot. Because before I almost never saw my mother, that is, in the sense that she went to work, and ... er, as they say I played PlayStation and neglected my family a bit, while now I have learned to understand that, let’s say, technology is not everything, things online are not everything, so now I am much more with my family, with my friends, etc.” (M, 11 years old, disadvantaged socio-economic background, interview)

In their stories, research participants who live in family settings, with one or two parents, often speak of having had more time to spend with them, doing more activities together than they did in the past, having had the opportunity to talk and discuss things. Thanks to their relationships with their parents, L had fun despite the difficulties of forced isolation in quarantine and J was able to chat more with them and discuss current affairs:

“During the quarantine my parents invented everything and more to make us smile and made us have fun anyway even staying at home without seeing anyone, without doing anything without being able to go out” (L, 11 years old, focus group 2)

“Let’s say that since we watch the news a lot sitting at the table, we often commented on the news. We stopped the news to comment about it and to talk about those issues. I don’t know, for example if there was news about LGBT or about Israel against Palestine we would talk about that, we would discuss what we thought” (J, 15 years old, trans, interview)

Some talk also about improved relationships with brothers and sisters, who they managed to “re-evaluate a little” (G, 18 years old, focus group 6). G, constructing the life of the focus group fictional character, says:

“Maybe before since he had his ... his things to do, sports, school, he devoted less time to his sister, while being, staying at home, he started playing board games with his sister, however, he did, he improved the relationship” (G, 19 years old, focus group 13)

Some realize that brothers and sisters are “a more than stable loved one in their life” (I, 14 years old, focus group 8), to whom it is possible to enjoyably dedicate more time.

For participants living in residential settings, such as UASC, their relationships with peers that they lived with, during the restrictions, were positive and were able to fill the gaps created by the interruption of their normal activities and the weakening of social relations with the outside world. However, during this period, their isolation from their Italian peers increased. In fact, face-to-face activities and the possibility of going to public spaces to meet friends or volunteer guardians and educators reduced. As H says in an interview:

“Yup. Because during the lockdown, the quarantine, we spent more than three months, alone among us, always with the educators. Because we are not ... so we are always at home with each other, we have spent a lot of time, at least almost four months ... We always stay well because we have a relationship between us, we talk during the quarantine, we did things, we thought, we did things together between us there are no problems [...] The people I have spent the least time with are friends outside the home and my guardian, with his family” (H, 19 years old, UASC, interview)

In general, and this applies to all research participants, there were two aspects to social relations: on the one hand, relationships with cohabitants and family members could be

strengthened; on the other hand, it was not always easy to live together *"24 hours a day 7 days a week with same people at home"* (G, 18 years old, focus group 4). Relationships may have deepened, but for some *"if at first it was a discovery, the family, then it begins to become oppressive perhaps"* (A, 18 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group).

In addition, living together with others for too long can mean that our own emotions become contaminated by those of others, and we may find ourselves in what one participant defines as *"negative symbiosis because being in contact all the time inevitably affects the emotions too, so if a person is a bit like this, the whole family is a bit like that"* (E, 15 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17).

Living with others at home was not always easy during the pandemic. There are cases where differences with parents, an increase in arguments within the home, and constraints on space led participants to have to deal with a difficult and tiring reality, as S says:

"Many times I have found myself uncomfortable because having a small house, my brother also has to do distance learning, and maybe sometimes my mother would appear behind, because there are a lot of us in the house, and it is small, so there's not a lot of space very often I ... I was also uncomfortable with the teachers because I found myself in strange situations, basically" (S, 16 years old, focus group 13)

Some argue that, during quarantine periods, *"arguments certainly increase. That is little but sure because there is much more time to have them"* (F, 18 years old, focus group 4), and staying at home in a family context where the people you live with argue is not easy, and makes the lockdown difficult to cope with: *"Mmm ... we can say that she has*

family problems, that this lockdown is even worse for her, having to stay at home, so what do I know, parents arguing, maybe ..." (M, 11 years old, focus group 12).

In the focus groups with secondary school students, numerous participants mention temporary difficulties during the periods of continuous coexistence with their parents within the confines of their homes. In particular, in an exchange of ideas between LGBTQI+ young people, they discuss difficulties of spending a lot of time with family members who do not approve of their sexual orientation or their gender identity. One participant believes that they would have waited to 'come out' if they had not spent so much time at home during the pandemic:

"I think that perhaps the biggest problem that has arisen ... oh my God, the biggest one, one of the problems that has arisen among the kids who are part of the LGBT community has been living with families who may not accept that it is something that, to some extent, touched me a little personally. I think it's an important aspect, that's all" (M, 16 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17)

"Yes, in my opinion this is also important, because maybe we have reached a confrontation that in everyday life without COVID would not have existed, maybe I would have waited for example, so yes in short, I fully agree with this thing, this thing is very important" (E, 15 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17)

The pandemic has therefore generally generated mixed feelings: *"Negative because she felt closed, that is, let's say imprisoned in the house under parental control, but on the other hand she was able to rediscover the beauty of staying at home with her family"* (N, 18 years old, focus group 14). N,

ironically, hopes for a period of detox, in which you have to “*get away for a while*” because “*you have been there for almost a year with your family, in my opinion it is really a psychological thing, you really miss air, space*” (N, 18 years old, focus group 14).

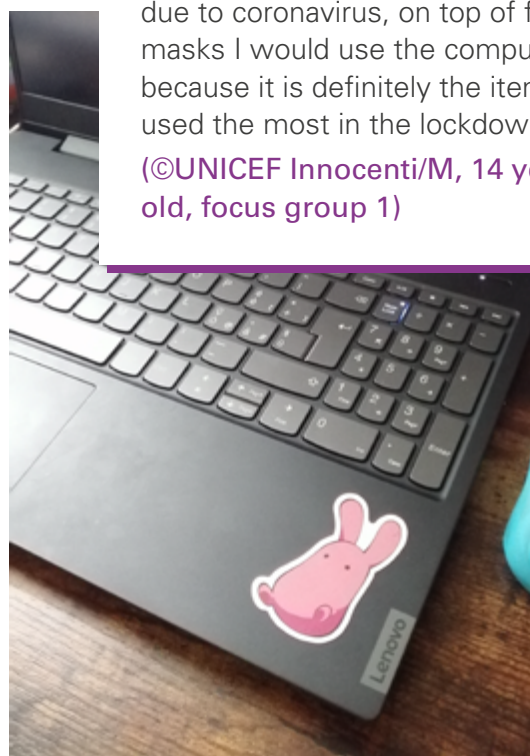
Another important set of figures, who were talked about often during focus group conversations, is grandparents. Especially for younger participants, they feel it is very difficult to be forced to give up their relationship with their grandparents. They have realized the fragility of older adults, and, for the first time, it was the children and young people who protected them:

“In my opinion ... that is, it was difficult for him also because he had to stay at a distance from his grandmother, that is, in any case, to keep more attention because his grandmother was in the house. In my opinion, also with regard to grandparents who are elderly in any case, he saw them from another point of view because in any case the elderly are more... [fragile]” (V, 13 years old, focus group 10)

However, some participants continued to feel connected to their grandparents, because they were in close contact with them or were able to communicate with them online; others, on the other hand, missed them because they couldn't see them for a long time, or simply because they couldn't hug them, aware of the fact that they are more “*subject to COVID, to get sick, and therefore lived this period with a sort of worry and fear*” (V, 18 years old, focus group 6). Many participants had to agree to keep their distance from their grandparents in order to avoid the risk of infecting them despite the “*discomfort*” (M, 17 years old, focus group 15).

“Uhm, I don't have it here because, I'm actually using it, it's the computer. Because ... in this period even with distance learning I used the computer much more, so we even had to buy a new one, so ... uhm... in my opinion, if I really needed to symbolize this lockdown due to coronavirus, on top of face masks I would use the computer because it is definitely the item I used the most in the lockdown.”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/M, 14 years old, focus group 1)



Relationships with others, online and in person

“I mentioned mostly my family and my cats, so let's say I spent a lot more time with them. Then, for example, as regards those I have seen less, there are friends, above all, so there was a period in which I moved away and another period in which everything improved. Then I completely lost relationships with others due to various quarrels, and so let's say that I lost some relationships and there were some online and others in presence. And then, towards the end with those with whom I feel perhaps they are always friends, and some are in person and some online and I met them during the pandemic through some online groups and I got to know them like this” (M, 19 years old, disadvantaged socio-economic background, interview)

INSIGHT BOX 3

Learning by surfing: rethinking education in times of pandemic

One complex issue – given that we identified sometimes conflicting opinions and attitudes within the same group of participants – is that of school from a purely academic point of view. There are some young people, especially those in secondary school, who would like to be able to make use of distance learning more frequently, beyond the pandemic, because they live far from the school building and distance learning allows them to sleep longer and manage their time better. Others would like to experiment with a hybrid model, sometimes going to school, sometimes using distance learning, following their own needs and not the choices of local governments.

Many of the interviewees claim that distance learning has been a mere translation of in-person classes and therefore has not worked well in terms of learning; furthermore, they believe that teachers and students do not have enough skills to be able to transform the experience into something more interesting. Several think that the problem is not distance learning itself but the way school is conceived and structured in general, which should be adapted to the different times and needs. Some participants also think that, in spite of everything, distance has built new capacities that are needed by everyone, and they suggest, for example, bringing laptops to school and increasing Wi-Fi connections: they have learned to take notes directly on their laptops, and going back to writing in notebooks, or having to load backpacks with heavy books would feel like a step backwards.

As another recent study by UNICEF Innocenti states, many children and young people in Italy feel motivated to participate in distance learning and feel confident in their ability to study in this context (Mascheroni et al., 2021). Moreover, students have learned that studying is something that goes beyond the classroom; the enforced introduction of distance learning – as well as smart working for adults – has certainly opened the way to new possibilities previously considered unfeasible.

In light of the above considerations, it is of course necessary to take into account the fact that distance learning, implemented as an online translation of face-to-face teaching, has shifted part of the school task onto parents and community educators, a role for which some of them are unprepared. This risks exacerbating differences in educational and learning outcomes and, as a consequence, socio-economic and cultural inequalities (Dietrich et al., 2021; Mascheroni et al., 2021; Mohan et al., 2021), limiting the role of schools as agents of social change. Studies conducted in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan and Palestine show how the pandemic has led to increased inequalities related to gender, disability and/or poverty levels, due to the difficulty some adolescents experienced in accessing online education (Jones et al., 2021a; 2021b).

Moreover – especially because research participants place more importance on the social role of school than its educational role – the pandemic reminds us of the need to rethink school spaces in order to enhance this particular function of school that is so valued and recognized by young people.

This interview excerpt manages to summarize the various ways in which research participants talk about interpersonal relationships during the pandemic. Some friendships had been initiated face to face and became online relationships during the pandemic. Others started online and transformed into face-to-face relationships later. For many, relationships with old friends have been preserved and, in some cases, even improved, while for others relationships have weakened to the point of being lost. Frequently, the participants speak of having realized *“who really is her true true friend”* (A, 16 years old, focus group 4) and of the friendships that *“did not prove to be so even at this juncture ...”* (L, 16 years old, focus group 6).

The concept of *“true friendship”* permeates almost all focus groups in a general way, and it is a concept that would probably have characterized the lives of the young participants in the research even in pre-pandemic times. In this case, however, the link with the pandemic seems to be strong: *“Well, in any case, with distance we understand better who is a true friend or who is less”* (A, 15 years old, focus group 7). It seems that the particular nature of this period helps people to realize what *“real”* friendships are:

“Maybe he understood what real friendships were, and maybe he also understood who he really cared about, for example maybe with the video calls he started making video calls only with his closest friends, that is, those ... to whom he cared more, more or less.” (F, 14 years old, focus group 10)

“And in fact, in my opinion, when he had COVID only those who were close to him are a true friend.” (V, 13 years old, focus group 10)

Another recurring theme is of friendships that end: *“some relationships that were perhaps less*

solid than others have been interrupted with this pandemic” (G, 19 years old, focus group 13). Some relationships also end due to disagreements about compliance with social distancing rules:

“It also happened to me that people got angry with me because I refused ... not for the personal thing of not wanting to go out but for respecting the rules. Or I met someone on the street and I didn't hug them, I didn't shake their hand, they took it badly and stopped talking to me or ... I don't know” (C, 16 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17)

Equally important is the theme of building new friendships, both with people they already knew but did not have a strong relationship with before the pandemic, and with new people they met online:

“Oh well he made new friends maybe playing on the PlayStation and meeting friends online maybe on Instagram” (G, 13 years old, focus group 10)

In general, the internet is recognized as essential for maintaining relationships with others during restrictions. Many participants can't imagine what it would have been like if they hadn't had that online space:

“All the people who basically moved on social media, there were reels on Instagram continuously, that is, the production of social media has increased exponentially so maybe in relation to that we felt more sociable, let's say, more social” (A, 18 years old, focus group 11)

Many research participants chose smartphones or computers as their pandemic objects, precisely because of their key role in maintaining active relationships:

"I chose the phone because it kept me in touch with my friends, my relatives, with our football teammates, because we also made video calls..."
(K, 11 years old, focus group 2)

In general, in an intricate web of changing relationships – friendships that become stronger, new friendships and friendships that end – the pandemic once again has taught us to understand ourselves better, for each of us to understand ourselves in relation to others, to understand the importance of relationships and to distinguish the special relationships worth focusing on from those that are not:

"I understood how fragile the human being is and that nothing is certain and definitive, I understood how important human contacts and relationships with others are and that there is a lot of difference between true friends and virtual friends." (G, 13 years old, asynchronous individual contribution)

Sociability at school

During the focus groups or interviews, participants were not explicitly asked to talk about school, teaching or distance learning. Despite this, recurrent references were made to the transformation that the school underwent during the pandemic, without exception (even some UASC report their experiences in distance learning, or internships). As we have already mentioned in section 3.1, it seems evident across the sample that what remains of 'school' during the pandemic, whether that is distance learning or in-person classes, is formal education, while the relational aspect of learning has been reduced to a minimum. The children and young people interviewed talk of no longer having moments of exchange with their classmates or their teachers, beyond the hours of formal lessons. And this problem is discussed not only in relation to

distance learning, but also in terms of face-to-face teaching. Everyday school life has been completely transformed during the pandemic. In fact, young people can no longer use spaces at school, such as corridors, bathrooms, courtyards and gyms, which are also essential for encouraging their growth through learning informal social rules:

"In my opinion if she went back to school first of all she would be very happy, but then when she arrives she realizes that it is not the school as ... as it was before, that's because she is forced to be alone in the desk, far from the others, all the time with the mask, cannot turn around, must be careful not to touch, must always disinfect herself ... that is, even if she is happy to go back to school, then when she finally enters the classroom she realizes that it is no longer the same school, even if the class and classmates are the same" (G, 18 years old, focus group 4)

Furthermore, as V describes, being in school during this period is also scary, because there is the continuing threat of COVID-19, of becoming infected:

"In my opinion she prefers the distance learning for this reason, she goes to school happy and maybe she hopes that something is back to normal anyway, she goes back to class she has to wear the mask all the time, they can't take it off, breaks can't be taken anymore outside but in class, you can no longer hang out at the vending machines, not ... exchange a pen, a sheet of paper with your classmate or in any case talk to each other and in any case also for the situation he had, that they had COVID, er ... or maybe he is also afraid of going back to school and meeting someone positive and taking the disease home" (V, 16 years old, focus group 4)

For some, face-to-face schooling seems to be better than nothing, because it allows you to see your

“classmates live not on a screen” (A, 12 years old, focus group 2) even if you have to maintain physical distance and cannot always attend full time. It is important to see your classmates because, during distance learning *“the relationship with them went a bit ... it worsened, and ... that is, the first day we returned in presence no one spoke to anyone”* (A, 15 years old, trans, interview). Distance learning was particularly difficult for those who started a new school cycle and didn't know their teachers and classmates.

The relationship with teachers is rarely mentioned. In general, it seems that this relationship has suffered from the negative consequences of distance learning. There is a perception that teachers focused narrowly on academic learning, not paying much attention to other aspects of school interactions. Teachers have not always tried to recreate, within the distance learning environment, the lost social space.

“School is now seen more as a mechanism, no longer as a place to let off steam, socialize, so maybe as soon as you start the lesson or after maybe you can spend 10 or 15 minutes, I don't know, talking, as well as about current topics rather than always being on the books” (I, 14 years old, focus group 8)

Sociability therefore appears to be one of the main losses for children and young people who are aware of how it has been affected by the pandemic.

AX's words go further – they capture a much deeper sense of the role of the learning aspects of social relations as spontaneous practices of active citizenship and social transformation:

“Maybe we often think about the economy, academic performance, other things that maybe ... yes they

“Well I have got the Rubik's cube, that, since the beginning of the lockdown, I started to do sessions of like two, three hours a day, to solve the cube, mix it again, solve it again... and towards the summer my record was 8 seconds, and then, well, nothing. Simply I did it all the time, even when we could actually go out, for example, I always took it with me, at the station, whenever I wasn't walking I had it in my hands, I used it ...”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 18 years old, focus group 19, trans)



are important but if we then reflect on it, if we do not have good relations with those around us it is difficult to relate and have everything we then said, that is, what we listed before. And at the basis of these human relationships there is mainly respect, therefore a general education to respect the different, the other, different from us, because problems such as homophobia, transphobia, racism are still very present social problems, therefore further awareness on these issues which seems to be something taken for granted and said and repeated, however, it is a problem that still persists too much in Italy and that is added to the whole pandemic situation” (AX, 15 years old, focus group 11)

3.3 *"I was there, I made it."* Getting to know oneself, growing and improving during the pandemic

From the beginning of the first lockdown, everyday practices and social relations fundamentally changed for everyone. As described in sections 3.1 and 3.2 of this report, many activities stopped, familiar ways of relating to others disappeared, and people had to reorient themselves in a new map of relationships and social spaces. This section tells of another type of change – an inner change. In fact, our data analysis tells the story of research participants who are growing, thanks also to the particular difficulties faced during the pandemic. They are aware that they have got to know themselves better and, even if they have often felt fragile and *"small"*, they have discovered important inner resources. The pandemic has basically given them more time to think, to reflect about themselves and to understand what the things are that matter most to them. Diagram 3.3 summarizes the key concepts discussed in this section.

The pandemic is a period in which the *"normality"* that we were all accustomed to in the pre-pandemic time has been interrupted, placing people's lives in a new space, suspended in a distressing void with an elusive future. In particular, the lives of the research participants are caught between a 'before', which is constantly referred to as a yardstick for comparison in order to remember everything that is no longer there either concretely or existentially, and an 'after' that cannot simply be a return to the past and therefore becomes unknown and unimaginable.²⁶ The research participants live in this liminal space, between 'before' and 'after', which

"You were required – this was essential, a matter of survival – to know your limits, both physical and emotional. But how could you know your limits unless you tested them? And if you failed the test? You were also required to stay calm if things went wrong. Panic was the first step, everybody said, to drowning."

William Finnegan, *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*

leads them to immerse themselves in the present, to confront themselves, to rethink themselves, to question themselves.

The pandemic, which is not over yet, has created a global collective shock in which everyone has had to confront a new dimension of reality and a new way of thinking about human existence. Of course, this also applies to the research participants. Like any shocking experience, like any crisis situation, the pandemic has had the capacity to generate responses, including defence mechanisms which, in this case – although not necessarily for everyone – have been more about empowerment. Generally, these mechanisms seem to have led to positive and profound changes in individuals and, in particular, to an increase in self-confidence:

26 Section 3.4, 'What colour is the future? Between fear, great challenges and the hope of facing them together', discusses in detail the participants' relationship with 'after' (the pandemic).

"In my opinion we will carry with us the awareness and the words that will always be in our mind, that is, I was there, I was able to make it and for sure if I was able to make it with this COVID which is truly a very dangerous thing, I can make it all my life facing any obstacle. I think this is also a test of self-esteem for everyone, to believe in us, because if we have made it through this pandemic we can make it through everything." (C, 11 years old, focus group 1)

The pandemic was characterized as a sort of collective mourning, to which everyone, including children and young people, had to gradually become accustomed. From this point of view, almost all the participants in the research showed a process of maturation and growth linked to the process of

adaptation to the *"new normality"* experienced during this period. The following is an example from a focus group discussion in which the participants talk about the fictional character they have created:

"AX, 15 years old: He's used to it, he's got used to this new normal by now.

AC, 15 years old: But he continues to hope that he can improve and keeps being convinced of it ...

AD, 18 years old: Yes, I would also say used to it on the one hand, but also a little ... in short, in the sense that he would like this situation to end as soon as possible, I don't know if, I think this is a fairly shared thought.

AC, 15 years old: In my opinion, the fact that he realized things about himself that led him to really like himself also makes him have a more positive

Diagram 3.3: What are the key concepts of this section?



INSIGHT BOX 4

Adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans / transgender, queer / questioning, intersex (LGBTQI+)²⁷

"I know that whatever choice I make will be the right one, and I hope to meet many other people who will love me and appreciate me, I hope to maintain the relationships I have, and I hope that in any case it is ... I hope and feel that the relationship with my mom will go more and more positively, and that I will grow, that I will improve, because however it is I have a lot to improve, and I hope I can bring my experience as a trans guy, I hope I can bring this experience to the world let's say, because I don't like the ignorance and the misinformation that exist now and it doesn't have to be there, and so I hope to be able to help someone too, maybe."
(A, 17 years old, interview)

Who are the LGBTQI+ adolescents who participated in this research?

They are 11 young people: E, 15 years old; A, 16 years old; C, 16 years old; J, 16 years old; M, 16 years old; A, 17 years old; N, 18 years old; A, 18 years old; A, 18 years old; A, 18 years old; L, 19 years old. Six of them identify as lesbian, bisexual and/or non-binary, and five of them are trans adolescents (FtoM and MtoF). They participated in two focus groups and seven interviews.

How did COVID make them feel?²⁸

On pause, deprived of freedom, lost, uncertain about my future, alone, useless, trapped, not real, without memories, in (too) close contact with my family, not alone, unmotivated, limited, confused, helpless, aware, nostalgic, distant, restricted, tired, disheartened, worried, low, distracted, creative, grateful, motivated, captured.

What did the pandemic mean for this group?

Like the others, with the arrival of the pandemic, these adolescents spent a lot of time at home, alone with themselves, reflecting and looking inside themselves. For those who do not identify as cisgender or heterosexual, this was a period of even deeper reflection, and not always an easy one. The pandemic has made the relationship with oneself, and consequently with others, even more complex:

- N, 18 years old, had to announce the start of their²⁹ hormone therapy in distance learning because otherwise their classmates would have found them different when they came back to school.
- C, 16 years old, has realized that they sometimes feel much more comfortable as a male, but most people outside the relationship bubble constructed during the pandemic see them as a girl and would struggle to understand their identity needs.
- L, 19 years old, started hormone therapy exactly at the time of the first national lockdown, transforming the pandemic into a cathartic but also very impactful moment from a psychological point of view, and facing the sociability of summer 2020 with a new body that they find it difficult to adjust to.

27 A further publication is planned to report in more detail on the analysis of the data collected for this specific group of participants.

28 These adjectives were written by the research participants during a specific introductory activity to the focus group. By clicking on a link sent in chat by the researchers, each of the participants, anonymously, from their device, had to complete the sentence "COVID makes me feel ..." with three adjectives or phrases of up to 25 characters.

29 We use the gender pronouns 'they/them' when the participants cited identify as non-binary.

- A, 17 years old, suffered a lot from having to stay at home, constantly confronted with herself and with her body, feeling *“that you don’t want to look at yourself, you can’t look at yourself, you don’t want to talk to anyone, you feel disgusting.”*
- For some, it has been problematic to live constantly with their families who do not always fully understand or fully accept their gender identity.

However, these adolescents showed a determination and a desire for participation at both a political and social level generally higher than the average research participant. Almost all of them are active in associations that deal with the rights of LGBTQI+ people because, for them, the greatest hope for the future is *“being who you are”* (C, 16 years old, interview).

attitude towards what is happening around him.
 F, 17 years old: *On the other hand, there is also the hope that once everything is over we will return not to normal in the sense of how it was before but maybe a little better, that is to go towards a better situation, for example also in relation to relationships with others.*

AG, 17 years old: *And so he better understands who he is in terms of identity, what ... what he wants to carry on and what awaits him in the end.*
 AC, 15 years old: *What is really important that he carries on”* (focus group 11)

It seems that, in this process of becoming more self-aware and conscious of their inner resources, the research participants rediscover themselves as stronger and more grounded, despite the pain and difficulties experienced. In sections 3.1 and 3.2, we discuss in detail how the children and young people who participated in this research have discovered new possibilities in the interruption experienced in their daily lives and have changed the way they relate to others, getting closer to their families, attaching themselves in particular to their closest and most important friends, and establishing new relationships online. In this chapter, we want to shed light on the other elements of growth, as a result of the constant search for a sense of self and for meaning in their lives during the pandemic period.

Although many participants shared examples of pain experienced during the pandemic period or felt small and powerless in the face of the destructive force of the virus, which generated so much death and suffering and drastically changed the course of their lives, when talking about their experiences and perceptions they constantly refer to the opportunity the pandemic gave them to look within themselves, to know themselves better and to grow. A, in a conversation with other focus group participants, talks about loneliness and pain:

"In my opinion loneliness was the emotion that prevailed over all the feelings, because all social relations with other people were really cut off, I think we all felt a bit of loneliness in this period of COVID ... Even pain" (A, 15 years old, focus group 8)

A speaks of powerlessness in the face of the brutal force of the virus, a sentiment also shared by M and T:

"I wanted to say that for example, among the words I put, I wrote small, because in a certain way, respecting a person, and comparing myself with COVID in general, you feel small and as it is written well in large: powerless. I really agree with those who wrote powerless. Because a person, I mean, if many doctors do not make it to fight COVID, you alone feel small and, that is, huge. That's why I wrote small" (A, 15 years old, focus group 15)

"I also wrote powerless ... Seeing all these people who die anyway, you can't do anything, there's really no solution, you can't do anything. You can't solve ... I mean I had many loved ones who died from COVID but I have always been negative, I don't know how ... it could be luck, I don't know. And I couldn't do anything at that moment, but even my mother, even my father, couldn't do anything, so because of that we felt like we were worth nothing because at that moment neither we nor the doctors, nor anybody else who was around couldn't do anything, because in that case we were worth nothing. Eh, yeah, so it is, I wrote powerless" (M, 17 years old, focus group 15)

"Mmm ... I put small because COVID now is everywhere and it seems big, and so this thing makes me ... ehm it makes me feel, ehm ... small" (T, 11 years old, focus group 5)

The sense of inner growth is therefore not separated from a feeling of loss, of pain, of feeling powerless in a constant crisis. On the contrary, research participants recognize themselves as having changed in response to the pandemic and the government measures to reduce the spread of the virus. They perceive themselves as a "tree that is growing and then at a certain point finds an obstacle in front of him, which it then manages to overcome" (I, 14 years old, focus group 8). Faced with an obstacle in the path of their growth – which the pandemic represents – children and young people have to implement adaptation strategies to cope with difficult moments and come to the conclusion that "you should never give up and even if you have the most difficult and complicated things in front of you and everything, you should never give up and you should go on despite everything" (B, 11 years old, focus group 2).

Aware of having faced a harsh and difficult period, full of individual and collective suffering, numerous participants realize that they have acquired courage, "because this quarantine has given me courage, it has helped me to face certain things, it has made me acquire courage" (E, 11 years old, focus group 2). However, the process of gaining strength and self-esteem has not been without difficulties, mood swings and emotional breakdowns:

"I agree with all of the statements, angry as well ... also angry for example because I too had many mood swings during the quarantine period because mentally I considered myself a strong person but in any case the quarantine challenged me. It made me, it left me very alone with myself and therefore I had the opportunity to reflect on aspects of myself, of my personality, on how I am, on who I am, and this whole rethinking has caused crazy mood swings all day in fact my parents couldn't stand me anymore, because 10 minutes earlier I was happy

and I was singing in my room, then they came in and I shouted at them ... so I had mood swings constantly and how they hurt them they hurt me, I was also angry with myself, I could not understand myself and understand why I reacted in that way" (A, 15 years old, focus group 11)

F acknowledges that his room, in which he spent most of his time during the first lockdown and which certainly represented the restrictions and limitations for many, in retrospect can be seen as *"a little world"* where he *"reflects, where he thinks, where he dreams, where he can really space out and go beyond what are four walls and maybe find an inner strength there that is more powerful than anything else, and that this would be the best. Obviously we are not all the same and it's not always like that, for me it was a bit like that"* (F, 18 years old, focus group 4).

A feels *"rediscovered ... because you have more time for yourself so you think more, you dedicate more time to yourself"* (A, 16 years old, focus group 8).

The participants' strength also stems from a sense of individual and collective fragility, from having had more time to devote to themselves, from having been able to talk to others about their difficulties:

"Yes, let's say that he doesn't see it too badly because maybe he has his parents, he also rediscovers the relationship with his parents, talking to his parents and understanding how much good that can do, how much it can help" (F, 17 years old, focus group 11)

Another thing that the young people we interacted with have in common is that they have *"understood the value of things that before seemed trivial"* (N, 18 years old, focus group 14), that they have acquired *"more awareness of things that ... maybe*

we have missed, let's say we should be more grateful for things ... actually, we should be more aware of the things we have, also of loved ones ... We should appreciate them more" (M, 17 years old, focus group 15).

Finally, several research participants also underline that they became more *"aware of the world for the simple fact that I used to give so much importance to stupid and fanciful things. With COVID I started to assess things more clearly, to understand which things count and which are ... futile"* (F, 16 years old, focus group 6).

Some hope that this is not just their individual awareness, but that, in the light of the pandemic, everyone will realize the importance of certain things:

"... that people should not take anything for granted ... not take friends for granted, the possibility of going out, having a relationship, having parents who love them, who are close to them, a series of things that people generally don't even realize they have, here. Maybe this" (M, 16 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17).

In addition, the research participants realize that the experience of the pandemic, despite its difficulties, will help them in their life journey, in the years to come, as P explains:

"Learn something constructive as well, because all these efforts we are making will be of some use, as often happens, and in any case it will be a memory that will help us grow if we find ourselves in other situations, as you said before. Therefore, addressing them will also be a constructive memory of COVID" (P, 11 years old, focus group 1)

An extract from a story created in one of the focus groups shows that the fictional character, despite

all their obligations and the interruptions in their daily life, despite all the inconveniences and the changes brought about by the pandemic, learned an important lesson:

"He learned anyway, having to stay at home with his family, he learned to share the space, and he also learned to be even tidier because the space he lived in was constantly shared by other family members and therefore he also learned to have more respect at home, more respect for the home since he stayed there 24 hours a day with his family, or even he basically learned to stay alone, he discovered more musical habits, he had time to rediscover himself in some way and be comfortable with his interior space, alone he has learned to have fun even on his own" (A, 15 years old, focus group 8)

There is also one research participant who even owes COVID-19 a lot, who considers the lockdown *"a turning point"* because *"if there hadn't been a thing like that, let's say a pandemic, something, I would be a man now ... in the sense of being led down a bad road"*, referring to his close experiences with bullying at school. In fact, M, thanks to the restrictions, was able to reflect, to change, to become a better person, to get away from his bully friends who encouraged him to embody attitudes that he considered to be wrong:

"Yes, because let's say that even at school they were leading me on the bullying path, they were making me become a bully by saying very bad words, very bad things, and instead when I discovered that they are fake friends, that there is my personality, I have to take my personality and not theirs, I decided not to say these things anymore, I mean swearing" (M, 11 years old, disadvantaged socio-economic background, interview)



"... It's the pack of cards of my grandparents that essentially, alright, is the pack of cards of burraco... my grandparents have always told me 'we will teach you' ... and, for various reasons, between studying, friends or my girlfriend, I have always avoided it, I said 'but no no no!'. But in this quite long period where I really had a lot of free time, I went to my grandparents and asked them 'will you teach me to play burraco?' And how did I learn? I never stopped! Every day, always after lunch, after dinner, we play always ... and so, in a sense, through these cards I got to know my grandparents even more and spent a lot of time ... I'm really lucky as many people could not, do not have their grandparents downstairs like I do as, and so really all that needs to happen is that I go down the stairs and I am with them, so these cards connected me even more with my family."

(©UNICEF Innocenti/F, 18 years old, focus group 4)

3.4 What colour is the future? Between fear, great challenges and the hope of facing them together

Up until now, in telling the story of the data we have gathered, we have focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed (and is still changing) the way in which the research participants experience their daily lives and environments, and how they relate to themselves and others. In this section, we turn to participants' perspectives of the future, seeking to understand how and what they imagine, fear and hope for the immediate future and the longer term. In these perspectives, there is a sense of uncertainty regarding the immediate future and often it seems that the only imaginable way forward is a return to "normality". The research participants are, however, also aware that the pandemic is far from over and they fear new variants of the COVID-19 virus. They have dreams for their longer-term future as adults, but they also have the sense that this future will be characterized by major challenges, particularly related to economic and environmental crises. Nevertheless, they have hope and belief in the potential to deal with these challenges, through setting aside individualism and remaining united in favour of the collective good. Diagram 3.4 summarizes the key concepts discussed in this section.

"So, I wanted to say something that, I don't know, seems nice: let's say the timeline is like a heartbeat, and when something happens it goes down but then after a while it goes up, but then when something nice happens it goes like a normal heartbeat. Let's say, this is what came up to my mind." (C, 11 years old, focus group 1)

Highs and lows, like those of a cardiograph, and unexpected events that can change one's days,

"Life is a lot like surfing ... When you get caught in the impact zone, you've got to just get back up. Because you never know what may be over the next wave."

Bethany Hamilton, Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board

moods or life to a greater or lesser extent – this is how our research participants perceive their present and their recent past, from the first lockdown onwards. The pandemic period has been characterized by constant fluctuations: attending school physically or virtually; yellow, orange or red zones; being able to travel outside one's local area or not. It has also been punctuated by unexpected events (and responses to those events) that would have been unthinkable a few months earlier – the positive COVID-19 test of a classmate forces you once again to quarantine at home; your living room table becomes a table tennis table; your grandmother falls ill with COVID-19 and you are not allowed to see her; you are not supposed to go to your aunt and uncle's house for lunch at Christmas, but you do anyway – dividing yourselves between three cars and risking a fine.

If the participants' perception of the present is characterized by uncertainty, or rather by the process of constructing new certainties, their vision of the future is even more uncertain. When asked "what is your greatest hope for the future?", many of the respondents answered "that we return to normality as soon as possible". "Normality", the

Diagram 3.4: What are the key concepts of this section?



pre-lockdown, the pre-pandemic, has for many respondents been “suspended” and the only way to imagine the future is to remember the past. The past, in turn, becomes a vision tinged with nostalgia, like an idyll, with good times that could have been enjoyed more fully – “one last dance, one last night out, one last life with friends” (N, 17 years old, focus group 13). So what is the main lesson of this pandemic for many children and young people participating in the research? “That we have to enjoy it better because we don’t know what can come later on” (A, 15 years old, focus group 7).

As Stenner and Kaposi (2020) explain, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the future that was envisaged before the arrival of COVID-19 to suddenly become the past (a ‘past future’). However, the new present (the ‘present present’) is characterized by the fact that there is no new future to replace it (no ‘present future’). In essence, the previous idea of the future is replaced with a new future that is difficult to imagine and therefore to anticipate. In fact, it is not surprising that the research participants – or

the characters they created in the focus group discussions – have difficulty in even thinking about their short-term future:

“So right now I think she feels insecure, but she knows that sooner or later this situation will have to end, and ... and so, she could make plans for the future but more ... more in the future, that is the future like in five years, not the future meant as tomorrow” (M, 15 years old, focus group 14)

However, the long-term future remains a great unknown and it is difficult to sketch out its characteristics. The only certainties seem to be defined by the fear, which some respondents feel, that the COVID-19 pandemic will become endemic, that there will be further pandemics, that “a new variant will come along that is very strong, very strong, and therefore causes ... that is, there are many deaths ... and we will not be able to cure it” (E, 11 years old, focus group 2). One respondent goes so far as to hope that younger people will study “more medicine so that in case

of emergencies there are more people who can help" (C, 11 years old, focus group 5), indicating that their perception of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it could be a very long-term phenomenon. The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic will *"still go on for a long time"* (F, 17 years old, focus group 8) is the future that participants have come to fear, and therefore to contemplate. While the present itself is difficult to understand, even the immediate future feels inaccessible. This is unsettling and disturbing, particularly for the older participants who are about to finish high school:

"I wanted to explain the words 'blocked' and 'astonished' that I wrote. 'Blocked' refers mainly to the fact that, not in the first quarantine but with this situation now, sometimes I feel like I'm doing things but they're all things that are unresolved and won't be resolved in the near present but all in the future. Maybe it's because I'm in my last year of school that I'm very focused on what will happen after, but I feel like right now I'm blocked and powerless about my present, about what's around me, and especially about my future. And then I wrote 'astonished' because I often think about how randomly this situation came about, in the sense that it's pretty absurd to think that we'd ever find ourselves in this situation, isn't it? Generally in my life I've always felt much safer than, for example, our grandparents during the war, I'd always thought about how the world had essentially moved forward, and I guess I thought a war or an event that could shake up the world this much were only very remote possibilities, so that's why I'm astonished at this situation which I'd absolutely never have imagined." (A, 18 years old, focus group 11)

Adolescence is a period of life characterized by change, and, both in popular imagination and in

reality, by the transition from childhood (the past) to adulthood (the future). The fact that the present is so uncertain and totally unpredictable makes the future, the planning of adulthood, difficult or even impossible – a tiring and frustrating exercise, especially for young people who have recently become adults:

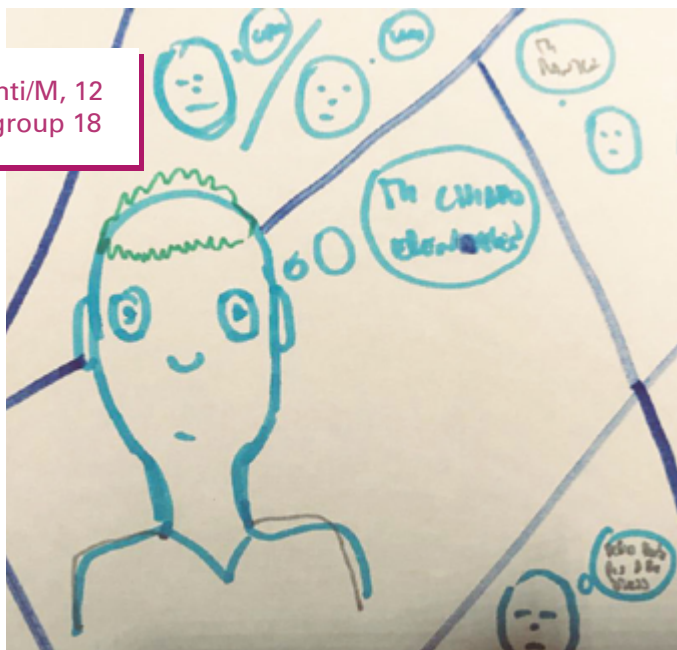
"Well I wrote tired and nervous but I mainly feel nervous because with the situation, all the decrees, all the stories they tell about the vaccination plan or what will happen with jobs and school ... I don't get ... I mean I don't know what will happen, I can't see a connection, I mean ... mainly I can't see the point of all the things that are happening." (B, 18 years old, focus group 4)

If it is difficult for participants on the brink of adulthood to imagine even their immediate future, younger participants still seem able to dream. The pandemic has not erased their long-term plans:

"I imagine, I hope, a life in which I can combine study, speaking of high school, and work. Because I would like to be able to work and study in these last two years of school that I have left before university and maybe make my dreams come true in order to have certain economic means and maybe take a trip in the summer, or the after-A levels trip, or have more money to buy books, musical instruments, or be able to pay me a month or two of a hypothetical apartment to take when I go to university, and then when I go to university I will have to go to the acting academy so England or New York I hope to enter and therefore I would like to go and live with my sister and my best friend, always the Fantastic Three,³⁰ and we have already made a plan of how we should organise it, the apartment, the university, work, we even divided the housework, the days

30 In Italian: *"Magico trio dell'Ave Maria"*.

©UNICEF Innocenti/M, 12 years old, focus group 18



of the week, we organized everything! And so I hope to succeed in this, I hope to succeed after university in having my job as a paid actor, very famous, Oscar, a pipe dream but maybe we will succeed. And I imagine it like this, then come what may” (J, 16 years old, trans, interview)

While generally, for all the participants, the act of planning for the future on a personal level is an interplay between old dreams and new uncertainties, many among them agreed that the future at a global level does not look bright. This view, and the recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic is damaging the economic situation in Italy, is a cause of anxiety:

“The economy has been completely screwed up with lockdown and the shops closing. My greatest fear is that our generation will suffer the consequences of this economy going ... it’s recoverable but it takes years to stabilize the economic situation.” (A, 14 years old, focus group 8)

Some participants feel poorly prepared to enter the labour market. Others fear that job opportunities will be drastically reduced. Some are already experiencing this reality because they are not able to find seasonal employment or because their parents or siblings are unemployed:

“I wouldn’t know, but for grown-ups, the fact that no one was working but they still got bills. How do you pay? It’s ridiculous. Kids obviously don’t worry about these things but parents do. I got it. How do you do the shopping? Something you have to do once you’ve paid the bills for the water, light and gas. You can’t do it if you’re not working.” (D, 14 years old, socio-economically disadvantaged background, interview)

Another important aspect identified through the analysis is the fear that some participants express about being automatically considered less well educated or able because they belong to the generation that finished compulsory schooling in 2021, the year of the pandemic:

“It’s harder to find jobs for people who graduate during this time, and I think there’s also fear ... that these people will be undervalued in terms of work, both with university and diplomas, for those who start working after their diploma. Like in the post-war years, I think there was ... the year of the ‘political 6’ [automatic pass for all students] and that was also ... they were valued less than others for work. I hope that doesn’t happen to us who are living through this now.” (L, 16 years old, focus group 6)

The awareness of facing a difficult future, not only as an individual but also as part of a generation, is evident not just in the discussions about jobs and public debt. Another strong recurring theme, in terms of fear and of future challenges, is that of climate change and the fight to protect the environment:

"I don't know, the world might realize that humans are not as invincible as we think and even a tiny microscopic being can bring the whole world to its knees, and people might understand that what we are doing to the planet has consequences because, maybe all the talk about climate change has been in the background, but one of the possible causes of COVID or the next pandemic is human exploitation of nature, so we should re-evaluate our presence, the world should try to change in that sense because otherwise there will be more and more pandemics and anyway we can't go on like this exploiting our planet, that's what I think." (G, 18 years old, focus group 4)

Therefore, if there is one word or concept that sums up the answer to the question *"how do research participants see their future?"*, it is, according to our analysis, *"awareness"*. Awareness that it is important to enjoy the present, that it is difficult to imagine even the short-term future, that the COVID-19 pandemic is certainly part of the immediate future, and that the future will be challenging because of difficulties in finding work and the realities of climate change. However, liminal experiences, as Stenner and Kaposi (2020) define the COVID-19 pandemic, are characterized by ambivalence. They can be frightening and disturbing as they disrupt today and, with it, tomorrow, but they can also expose people to unexpected possibilities, of *"humanity"*, of *"communitas"* beyond the usual hierarchical constraints of the social order, and of possibilities beyond their usual everyday horizons. It is precisely through this awareness of the need for a new collectively oriented way of living – the need to act altruistically, to learn to live together and be more empathetic – that the research participants see the key to the future. For them, the great lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic is that you have to respect the rules to protect others:

"The story we made has a moral, that we have to respect the rules not for ourselves but for our grandparents and parents who are a bit older and have lower immune defences, so this moral shows that if there's a rule it's because there's something wrong. They didn't make it like that." (B, 14 years old, focus group 12)

In this way, one positive aspect of the data we have gathered is the evidence of a group of participants who generally care about others, about their own community, and are aware of the need to balance their desire for freedom with a recognition of the importance of interdependence. For many of them, the hope for the future is therefore that *"all the unity we've seen, for example in quarantine, the flash mobs, all the things that have made Italy seem like a country, and maybe made it a united country, that we support each other as citizens; one of my greatest hopes is that this is not lost, that it wasn't just a moment of despair but something everyone believed in, and learned from it that it's useful every now and then to help each other and not to always be in competition"* (A, 15 years old, focus group 8).

For one participant, the need to build a future together also translates into political terms more specifically – international cooperation is viewed as a key solution to the economic problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic:

"We don't know what will happen with COVID, we can't know, but at the same time my greatest hope is that we can rise out of this really extreme situation, and it's a global phenomenon, so maybe cooperating with the EU and the other countries of the world, we can help each other and maybe rise together, because I think no country has been spared, no one has been spared, so we all know what we've been through, what we're going

through, we are living with this disease and so maybe my biggest hope is that all together we can help each other, those who are more affected and those less affected, so they can help us young people who are surely more affected than anyone else.” (F, 18 years old, focus group 4)

As extensively discussed in section 3.3, the awareness of the *“important things”* was a key turning point in the journeys of personal growth that each of our participants went through during the pandemic. The importance of the ‘other’ – of relationships, of family, of friends, of a support network, of a community that one can feel part of – is another important lesson that the children and young people interviewed feel they have learned so far. In imagining a new ‘present future’, they view the pathway in collective rather than individual terms, and the only possible future that can be envisioned as an alternative to the ‘past future’ (normality) and the ‘present present’ (the COVID-19 pandemic) is one based on a sense of community, where:

“It’s not every person for themselves, we are all in the same boat and so we all have to help each other to solve the big problems in our country, and if everyone thinks just about themselves we will not get anywhere. If we want big changes to happen we have to do big things, with lots of people and all together, because an individual might not be able to do anything, and this is how lots of us feel, we think we’re all alone, but if we can understand that we’re not alone we can do big things, all together. So understanding, as AC said before, that one person can’t solve this COVID situation but all together we can, and if we can defeat a virus together we can do great things.” (AX, 15 years old, focus group 11)

“So I have chosen the webcam, I don’t know if you can see it, because ... I searched for it on Amazon when I purchased it and it was the 15th of March 2020, before then I almost never used it besides the camera of my phone, maybe to have videocalls with friends but, since then, I would say that it is turned on six hours a day to do the class chats and... and so I don’t know, I see the webcam as that object through which ... maybe everything that you are, in the end, is filtered through the lens. People can’t see anything else apart from a piece of your room, that sort of limits and filters a little bit what you are, who you are, where you are ... it’s a bit like this that I see this object a bit like this but it is not only ... what I mean is I do not only see the webcam as something negative because I recognize that, without this object, I would not even have those few relationships that thanks to it I could experiment so ... it has a negative side because it limits on one hand, but ... from another point of view thanks to this object, well, we could ... what I mean I imagine we all could maintain a sort of contact with people, our friends, our family members so ... negative and positive.”

(@UNICEF Innocenti/G, 18 years old, focus group 4)



3.5 The pandemic generation: Defining oneself and being defined

The data collected represent the set of stories and experiences of all the participants in the research. Together, these data outline the participants' profiles as individuals, but they also tell us the characteristics of a generation of adolescents that defines itself as such during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section looks at the leitmotifs that bind the participants to each other and that give them a common identity, through which they recognize themselves, or are recognized by others. It is an identity made up of very strong common experiences related to the pandemic, which will probably remain with them and through which they will recognize themselves even as adults. The picture is of a group of young people who feel that they have sacrificed so much, that they are experiencing an anomalous adolescence, despite perceiving that their sacrifice is not fully recognized by adults. This is a group generally concerned about their mental health and relationship skills, especially in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, beyond the pandemic, we see in the young people interviewed a group that reflects itself in its diversity – of ethnicity and of gender – considering it an added value. Diagram 3.5 summarizes the key concepts discussed in this section.

The stories of our participants are stories of rituals lost – or renegotiated, modified, renewed – due to the pandemic. Christmas, the time of year that brings all relatives together, even the most distant ones, was spent with just the nuclear family, among “the closest”, becoming “a day like any other simply with a Christmas tree in the living room” (G, 18 years old, focus group 4). The same is true for

Easter, but especially for New Year's Eve and Easter Monday, two holidays seen as moments of great sociability beyond the immediate family, and which instead the research participants, their friends, and also the protagonists of their stories, spent for two years in a row almost alone or exclusively with their parents. Even local traditions such as the Palio or patron saint holidays, or recurring events such as scout gatherings, have been skipped or experienced in a different, and less enjoyable, version.

'There is this classic thing about surfers as they grow up', John McCarthy said one day. The adult surfer says, 'Oh yeah, I got the wave and rode it all the way to the beach!' But when you talk to a five year old who has just surfed, he or she will say, 'Oh, the wave picked me up and brought me the whole way to the beach.'

Keith Duggan, *Cliffs of Insanity*

Birthdays, even those marking the coming of age, were often spent at home, without any celebration, except with parents and siblings, or with a video call to grandparents or friends. Here is how Andrea's birthday, one of the characters created by the focus group participants, is described:

"We can also say that Andrea spent his birthday in quarantine and was unable to celebrate, but was on a video call with his friends while he was eating his mother's homemade birthday cake (A, 12 years old)

Diagram 3.5: What are the key themes of this section?



And how did Andrea feel? (Researcher)
 He felt sad because he didn't have fun with his friends with him, he didn't talk, he didn't joke, and this (A, 12 years old)
 In fact we can imagine that on his birthday Andrea after having blown out the candles does not feel that ... that is, he does not feel that it is his birthday because usually his birthday is celebrated with friends or his grandparents come to Italy and they visit him. But this year he doesn't really feel it and as soon as he blows out the candles he bursts into tears and runs to the other side of the house and stays there for a while. And ... in those days he is not so happy!" (L, 11 years old, focus group 2)

Many participants had to postpone enrolment in driving school and consequently obtaining a driving licence, while others were unable to organize the long-awaited post-high school exam trip. Many have had to switch to distance learning only a few weeks after starting a new school and have not had time to get to know their new teachers and classmates except through a screen. Many have finished the school year or even an entire school cycle in distance learning, leaving "the teachers,

the classmates without even greeting them face to face" (L, 11 years old, focus group 2).

"We were also very lucky because last week we would certainly have done it in distance learning because then if someone got infected, no one would have to do the quarantine. However, our teacher ... our teacher got infected on the Sunday before the last week in person learning, so we didn't do it, on the last day of school, we didn't say bye to the teachers, we didn't do anything. Basically to celebrate the last day of fifth [year] I always remember the other years as something ... that is, very big, that is, we are also a suburban school anyway so we also have technical institutes in our school, so there were smoke bombs, people that throw firecrackers, pews that fly from the windows, is something very emotional I don't know how to say. And precisely also seeing others, for example other schools that have decided to continue normally, and it was very disappointing as many of my classmates see everyone enjoying the last day of school when we never had it, and we didn't even know it was the last day of school" (L, 19 years old, trans, interview)

Having spent Christmas or other holidays differently from usual is one of those aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic experience common to many, irrespective of age. However, the other events the research participants talk about (birthdays, the end or the beginning of school, getting a driving licence, state exams, etc.) are real rites of passage that characterize being an adolescent in Italy, or in similar cultural contexts. The pandemic, by profoundly changing the way these rites of passage are carried out, has given a particular meaning to the adolescence of all our participants – one that is detached from the collective imagination and the practices of previous generations. Celebrating birthdays only at home, and starting or ending a

school year or cycle with distance learning, then become individual but common experiences, in which people recognize themselves as a group and as a generation.

Our participants feel and are aware that they are experiencing an adolescence different from the one they had expected. They perceive that they are living what F (18 years old, focus group 4) defines as *“the somewhat upset process of what is a bit of a paradoxical life.”* Very often we read in their words a certain sadness linked to the belief that they are losing or wasting what are stereotypically defined as *“the best years”* (B, 13 years old, focus group 2), the most important years – moments that will never return.

“... I thought that, I don't know, I have been an adult for three weeks but I am understanding that I am not living it, in the sense ... and who knows for how long, I will not be able to do the classic things that an adult can do in the sense ... that maybe they are also stupid, this is the age that let's say however I am very lucky because there are those who have not even managed to meet their friends on their birthdays, but here it is, who knows for how long my adolescence will not be considered such because the classic things that a teenager does are indeed not feasible” (G, 18 years old, focus group 6)

Having lived key and symbolic moments of their growth in a different way from how they imagined makes the participants suffer but at the same time constitutes a significant generational collective experience. They are aware of this and identify a distinction between themselves and adults. The COVID-19 pandemic has therefore helped to strengthen the generational division, underlining the existence of a *we* (young people, adolescents) and a *they* (adults).



“So the object that I have close to me is a table tennis bat because in my house I have a garden where I play table tennis with my father, and because of the lockdown my father had to be home alone with me, we had a lot of time to play together, and this is the only bat that I have been able to beat him with at table tennis as he is very, very good.”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/V, 12 years old, focus group 1)

"For the future I hope that this COVID thing is completely over, because ... as we said before, the adults say that we are the ones who carry it but we are the victims in my opinion, because they, it is easy to judge something without knowing it. Adults had a normal childhood, we are not living a normal childhood. We are growing up, we need to socialize, to be outside, and ... in my opinion returning to normal is the best thing (M, 14 years old)

Precisely. Connected to her words, right? From the point of view that many many many adults work from home right? And being as you say we are the victims, this thing is true. It is we who go out to go to school, we go out to take public transport where there could be people, I hope not, who could carry

COVID and they don't know it. That is, we are the people who resist (L, 14 years old, focus group 16)

But not only that, you also go to school and catch COVID ... it's also a thing ... (M, 14 years old)

Yes, psychological as well" (L, 14 years old)

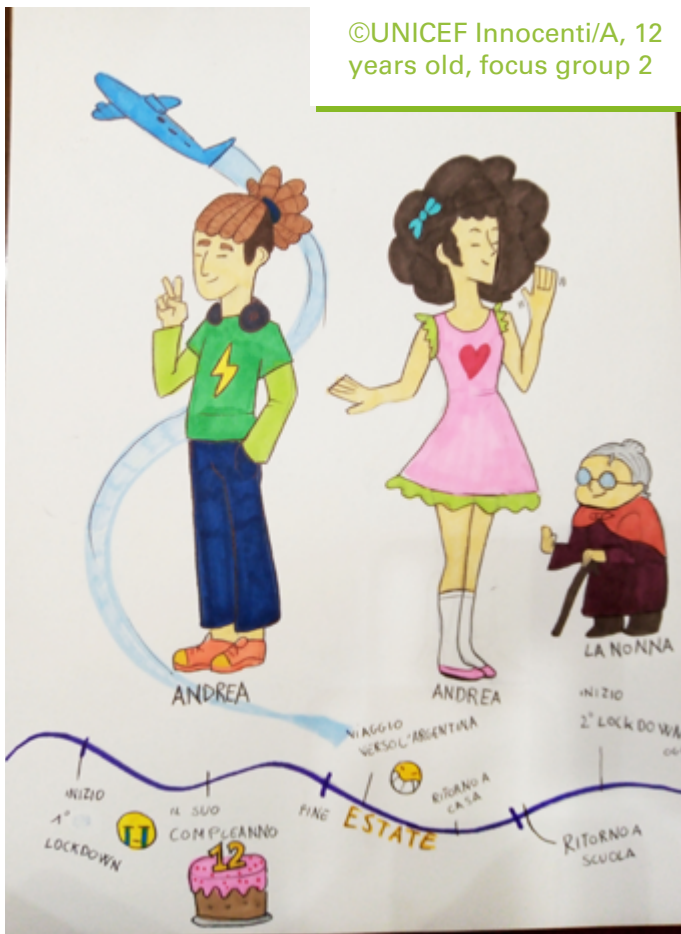
The research participants believe that they have sacrificed a great deal compared with older generations, precisely because they did not have the opportunity to experience the lighter and more social aspects of school, their first experiences independent from their family, training activities in preparation for their future, etc. As V explains, by constructing the life of their focus group character:

"So, Yashimabeth 12 years old, at least in my opinion at this age you start going out with friends more often and ... to ... and even if I'm not mistaken, I don't know if that's the case for dancing, but certainly for other sports that I practise or I practised, it also starts at a competitive level. You can start taking part in competitions, so I don't know maybe at a very high moment of her life... everything dropped dramatically" (V, 13 years old, focus group 1)

The words of many participants reveal the belief that all the places most important to their social life and development – school, sports centres, the streets, nightclubs and cafes – have been made inaccessible by the restrictions in place to limit infections, sacrificing the well-being and needs of adolescents more than anyone else.

"... it doesn't seem right to me because we are losing a lot of days we are now losing the true essence of school, I don't know ... we are there, or better saying I am, missing all the years of middle school, in fact last year I was in distance learning for

©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 12 years old, focus group 2



the whole first quarantine, for a lot of time for three months and again this year I'm missing the whole school I can't find the enthusiasm ... nothing"
(A, 12 years old, focus group 2)

In particular, the data indicate a widespread feeling of injustice suffered by the participants, not only towards their present, but also towards their future:

"... With the choices they are making, they continue to use beautiful words in the sense that we are the future we must go to school but when we go and afterwards they make us stay at home because the infections increase. It is as if, in my opinion, they were putting the country's future on standby, then obviously I, like those who are at the government, nobody has a magic wand so miracles and magic are not possible but I feel put on standby, I don't know" (F, 18 years old, focus group 4)

Young people cannot go out because *"you must have a valid reason to go out"* (A, 15 years old, focus group 15) and their motives appear less valid than those of adults. Despite everything, they do not perceive that their sacrifice is adequately recognized by the society they belong to. Many blatantly complain about a narrative built around young people in Italy as *"irresponsible"*, as *"COVID spreaders"* who go out *"painting the doors with COVID with a brush"* (G, 18 years old, focus group 4), or as not caring if they are asymptomatic:

"... this summer there were a lot of rumours that we carried COVID around by going to clubs and things like that. What I've been thinking for a long time is that if they give me a chance to do something, I don't waste it and I do it. That is, I had the opportunity to go clubbing and I did, no doubt about it. But here let's not sink into this

thing that we young people have been carrying around COVID for the whole summer"
(G, 18 years old)

It is everyone's responsibility, the entire population
(A, 16 years old)

Where I live this week they mass-screened the entire population, that is, those who wanted to, on a voluntary basis. People often said that all the young people had it, that they were all asymptomatic, and in the end it turned out that the young people and children tested negative and in the end those who had it were all adults and mainly working in shops, so ... we are not, it is not our fault, that is, it is not us" (V, 18 years old, focus group 6)

The sense of injustice that the young people interviewed feel, regarding adult attitudes towards them, is very strong, especially when referring to teachers. Many strongly draw attention to an adult narrative (teachers in this case) that they believe is incorrect: teachers thinking that students engage less in distance learning and have more time to study, precisely because they spend more time at home. The teachers therefore organize tests at impossible times or assign too many tasks, without appreciating the difficulties that young people may be facing. The following excerpt exemplifies this sense of injustice, and even anger, towards adults, understood as policymakers and teachers:

"Yes, in my opinion two things, but perhaps a little connected. In my opinion, trust in adults, because I had a great distrust of adults because the government, in any case, all these things here, at the beginning but also a little now, always blamed young people for the infections, that is, continuously the young people were seen with

let's say ... a bit like that, that's it. And then I went out with the dog and there were elderly people or adults who were the first who did not respect the provisions that were there. And ... this, first of all, the second thing about relationships, always with adults but in the school sector. Because I don't know your teachers, but most of mine don't have empathy just for ... that is, they don't know what we are experiencing, literally there were teachers who now that we are back are questioning us in an absurd way, that is, they do not even take a moment of, pause, or anyway, some people are really inhuman. That is, they thought that we, staying at home, did not experience the trauma because in any case the coronavirus, let's see it in a negative way, was a trauma, and some teachers just 'ah, you stay at home all the time, you don't study, get on the books!'. And according to them were we supposed to be on books from eight in the morning to eight in the evening? That is also this thing in my opinion, in fact, there are people who fell from my heart, teachers that I kept up here, from whom I heard 'but you are taking advantage of this pandemic', that is ... after there have been a lot of deaths, to be told you are taking advantage of not going back to school is very bad, really. It is okay that no one has had people, who have died or been hospitalized, but the very pillars of a young person's education who say these things or who in any case treat us like worms, because many people really 'ah, you have no future! Like this ...'. I also talked about it with my classmates and we were really upset, so this, also the relationship with the teachers because yes, there is a really good teacher who encourages you, 'maybe guys, let's go back to school!' or in any case he is human because he feels what the young people are going through instead there are those who really mistreat us, I don't know, for the fun of it, I have not found motivation, I have not found ... this" (A, 18 years old, LGBTQI+, focus group 17)

The COVID-19 pandemic is also seen by many of the research participants as a potential aggravating factor for some characteristics they themselves consider to be representative of their generation. Some participants are concerned that the pandemic may exacerbate the mental health conditions of adolescents like them. They consider themselves to be a particularly fragile generation from this point of view and demonstrate a marked sensitivity towards the need to cultivate their psychological well-being. Many mention the high number of suicides, others talk about the high levels of stress of Italian students compared with other countries in Europe, while one participant fears that the pandemic will contribute to lower self-esteem among young people. Two participants spoke first hand about self-harming practices and eating disorders:

"... Forced to stay indoors, I decided to study hard and I am very satisfied with what I have achieved. Unfortunately, however, I also unconsciously ran into a problem greater than me that is related to nutrition. To pass the time I looked at social media a lot and without realizing it, I let myself be influenced by models, influencers or other girls who respected and favoured the classic aesthetic standards that society imposes. I began to compare myself and to nurture a strong desire in wanting to become exactly like them at all costs, reaching the point of despising myself and also neglecting my physical but above all mental health. So I started dieting by myself, killing myself with sports and not listening to the advice of my parents at all. I thought I had everything under control and could manage myself, without asking anyone for help. I also thought I was happy but, in reality, I felt exhausted inside and the more weight I lost the more I wanted to lose and for this reason I was never satisfied ..." (S, 16 years old, asynchronous individual contribution)

INSIGHT BOX 5

Adolescents arrived in Italy as unaccompanied and separated children (UASC)

“Let’s hope well, let’s hope things will go well. We hope that we can make our dreams come true, what we need. What we have been looking for, for a long time, that we have ... that we have arrived here ... there was COVID and COVID has ruined everything so we hope to be able to achieve this. In short, we hope for the best in the future” (H, 18 years old, interview)

Who are the UASC who participated in this research?

They are seven young people: I, 17 years old; H, 18 years old; K, 18 years old; S, 19 years old; L, 19 years old; B, 19 years old; S, 19 years old. They come from: Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia and Pakistan. For all of them, special administrative provisions have been made so that in practice they will have the status of minors up to the age of 21. They participated in two focus groups and four interviews.

How did COVID make them feel?

Sad, nothing, very bad, aware, reflecting, isolated, thoughtful.

What did the pandemic mean for this group?

Like the others, with the arrival of the pandemic, these young people had to stop their activities, but in some cases, this had quite serious consequences for their future prospects. For example:

- H, 18 years old, lost his job.
- S, 19 years old, had to give up the competitive running that he was doing and had to interrupt his internship.
- K, 18 years old, missed face-to-face schooling.

The pandemic has had substantial impacts:

- It has limited young people’s movements, reducing the margins for socialization and forcing them to use the internet and social

media more than they did before. The loss of opportunities and physical social spaces has undermined vital opportunities for exchange, inclusion and integration.

- It has led to physical and mental health risks. Four UASC told us that they tested positive for COVID-19. Some have faced the virus in isolation in a room in a ‘Covid-Hotel’, with a poor internet connection, without being able to cook or go out. Some, like H, 18 years old, stayed there for a month.
- The process of obtaining residence documents has been delayed. Many of the interviewees say that they have missed appointments at offices that grant residence permits, because they were positive for COVID-19, while some speak of a general slowdown in bureaucratic procedures.
- The process of gaining autonomy, which is required of UASC, has slowed down, as a result of the reduction in school opportunities, internships, work, etc. Faced with these exceptional difficulties, respondents ask if they can be given more time, beyond 21 years of age, to become fully independent.
- It has accentuated the perception of their difference and created in the UASC interviewed the fear of being seen as “carriers of COVID” (K, 18 years old).

UASC are adolescents like all the others, but the pandemic has accentuated, for many, difficulties and sufferings already present. However, we have detected some glimmers of light within their rather complex life situations: (i) community life has led them to feel less alone; (ii) the inner resources, acquired during the migration path, have supported them on an emotional level in dealing with the experience of the pandemic.

INSIGHT BOX 6

Adolescents with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds

"... let's say that most of the kids do not have a house with a garden but have an apartment for rent, that is, I don't know how to say it. And yet in his craziest moments of crisis, let's say, the only thing he can take refuge in is: either take a hot or cold shower, to be able to feel the drops of water coming on him ..." (M, 15 years old, focus group 18)

Who are the adolescents with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who participated in this research?

They are 11 young people: N, 11 years old; M, 11 years old; M, 12 years old; S, 12 years old; G, 12 years old; M, 12 years old; D, 14 years old; M, 15 years old; G, 15 years old; S, 15 years old; M, 19 years old. Five of them are second-generation migrants. They participated in two focus groups and five interviews.

How did COVID make them feel?

Bored, I miss my friends, anxious, agitated, lonely, scared, afraid, hurt, sad, not at ease, thinking (focus group, 11–13 years). *Lonely, not very creative, without freedom, like I have a weight on my shoulders, tired, scattered* (focus group, 14–19 years).

What did the pandemic mean for this group?

The pandemic has had a strong impact on the daily lives of these children and their families, as well as on their future. These focus groups and interviews are the only ones where we heard the participants talk about money and essential items. These are some of their stories:

- D, 14 years old, wonders why the government charges bills, considering the fact *"that in any case a person staying at home 24 hours a day is normal that he consumes more"*. Her mother interrupted her job during the various lockdowns, while her dad, who is unemployed, waits for

restaurant businesses to reopen to look for a new job after having taken a training course.

- Both the parents of M, 19 years old, have only occasionally worked in the last nine years. M's mother had just finished a cook assistant course, but the pandemic prevented her from doing a job placement. The family was able to celebrate Christmas 2020 thanks to food aid received from a local association.
- M, 15 years old, lives at home alone with her father and two brothers. During the lockdown, her elder brother, in a fit of anger, broke the only computer with which she could access distance learning.
- S, 12 years old, did the focus group with her younger brother, a baby, next to her, as no one else could take care of him.

All of these children and adolescents have interrupted the extracurricular activities they used to have access to through local organizations, thus interrupting, for intermittent periods, after-school and other support outside the family. Most of them conducted interviews and focus groups from the offices of the organizations that support them, as they did not have access to their own devices or Wi-Fi connection at home. It is also interesting to point out that the problem of accessing the internet only emerged from talking to this group of interviewees.

We would like to underline that, despite the numerous local partners contacted and their active commitment, it was particularly difficult to find adolescents who volunteered to participate in the research project in this specific group. This consideration is especially valid for the 14–19 age group. In fact, as also pointed out by the educators interviewed, these young people have *"gone off the radar"*, some have even dropped out of school and, after more than a year of the pandemic, it is very difficult to involve them again in networks that support their education.

Many participants are worried, for themselves and for their peers in general, because they fear that the limitations on movement and social spaces may aggravate the relational difficulties of a generation seen by themselves as already largely problematic, especially due to the use of social media. There is a fear that adolescents will isolate more and more, that they will learn too much to be alone:

“In my opinion, on the other hand, then I have no particular fear related to the pandemic, the only fear I have is that too many people, because especially in the period of the lockdown and in any case of the quarantines, that is, most of the people, especially young people, I think, that is they tend to isolate themselves, yes, maybe one becomes more social from the point of view of social media, but in any case I am afraid that a situation will arise where people prefer to be alone rather than socialize, let’s say I have this concern precisely because now we are forced, in some ways to be with ourselves, which is good we must know how to feel good by ourselves absolutely, but I would not want it to become a condition created, I don’t know, by our subconscious, in relation to what is happening to us now” (A, 15 years old, focus group 11)

The need to protect the mental health of adolescents, especially in light of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a clear point in the recommendations that the participants would like to make to the government, asking for high-quality professionals in schools and adequate emergency services.

However, on a more positive note, we also see in the data the picture of a generation that describes itself in its ethnic and gender variety. Of particular interest is the fact that almost all the fictional characters created by the adolescents in the focus groups are *“neither male nor female”* and that sex

is not a relevant characteristic, it is *“indifferent”* (A, 16 years old, focus group 16). At the same time, these characters are often born abroad, or have distant relatives, or are bilingual because one of their parents is not Italian. This exchange of words between some participants who decide which characteristics to give to the protagonist of the story they are about to create is explanatory:

“He has like a Japanese dad and mom ... (E, 11 years old)

And an African mother (C, 11 years old)

A mixture ... a mixture of origins (P, 11 years old)

Mmm so maybe a girl who was born in Italy, but who has a Japanese father and a father, a mother I don’t know ... (C, 11 years old)

African? (P, 11 years old)

Or she has two fathers, or two mothers doesn’t she?” (C, 11 years old, focus group 1)

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it has had on the research participants and their lives, the clear image we can paint of this group of adolescents is one of people who experience ethnic and gender diversity as a feature of their generation, and for whom racism and homophobia are problems of particular importance in the society in which they live, which must be addressed and discussed. The COVID-19 pandemic thus becomes for some a kind of lesson to mankind, a warning, an incitement to hate less:

“... because this virus at least in my opinion has made us understand that it takes everyone, whether you are rich, poor, famous, child or elderly person, it takes you the same, so a little less hate for those who are considered inferior and ... yes, here we understand that we are all the same and the same things can happen to anyone regardless of gender, sexual orientation and income” (G, 18 years old, focus group 6)

4. Conclusions

This qualitative research project involved 114 children and young people between the ages of 10 and 19 in 16 Italian regions, and was designed to answer the following research questions:

- What are children's and young people's experiences and perceptions of the pandemic? How is it affecting their lives?
- What are the key issues from their point of view when it comes to COVID-19?
- What are their ideas and proposals for responding to the current situation and for dealing with crises like this in the future?

Representing the voices of 114 young people in a report is not easy. By design, the sample was selected to be a heterogeneous group. While each participant has their own personal background, and has dealt with this period in a specific way that characterizes them, careful analysis of all the textual and visual material indicates common and recurrent patterns. These are linked to the impact that the pandemic had on the lives of the participants, as well as to their responses to it, and the negotiation and reorientation mechanisms they put into practice. The analysis includes LGBTQI+ adolescents, UASC and adolescents with a socio-economically disadvantaged background. In many ways, these specific groups do not differ from other young people interviewed, although each group presents some particular issues as discussed in the related Insight Boxes.

“You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn, scientist, writer and meditation teacher

The data analysis is presented through a metaphor, comparing the COVID-19 pandemic to a tidal wave, a tsunami that arrives unexpectedly. The research participants are represented as apprentice surfers. They are living their adolescence, experimenting with the art of riding the waves of life, and are faced with an unexpected traumatic event that, at first suddenly and then more slowly, invades and affects their daily lives.

The surfing metaphor, born from the data analysis, becomes the theoretical framework for this work:

1. The **tidal wave** represents the pandemic. In this interpretative framework, everyone's life is compared to the sea or the ocean – sometimes calm, sometimes agitated. Waves and currents represent the normal flow of human existence; no one goes through life without experiencing moments of difficulty or of change, and these are represented by stronger fluctuations in the waves. From this perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic is a tsunami, an unpredictable tidal wave that affects everyone at the same time.





“I wanted to connect with what G said exactly on the point about self-confidence, because in fact it is not an object but rather an environment – of the gym and fitness. Because during the lockdown I started to do sport because I did not accept my physical appearance and in any case I had many problems with it, and exactly because of this my lockdown period was on one side, well of course sad on one side but also beautiful because I could find a bit of self-confidence. Then I admit that I lost some kilos and now I am ok with my physical appearance and I feel good.”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/S, 16 years old, focus group 6)

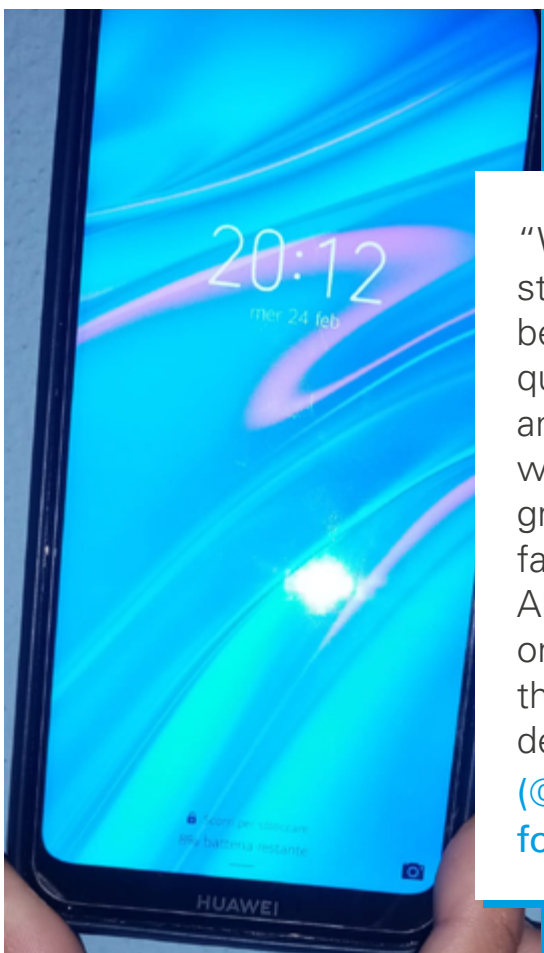
2. The **surfboard** represents the network of relationships and social spaces available to adolescents. Every adolescent needs support from people, such as family, friends, reference figures such as teachers, a community and a social network. As they develop, adolescents are like surfer apprentices. Beginners need bigger boards to help them stay balanced and to be able to slowly stand up to ride the waves; as they grow and gain experience they can gradually face the world (the ocean or the sea), with more autonomy, with a smaller surfboard that allows them to have more fun and explore life more easily. This transition from a larger surfboard to a smaller one does not happen in the same way or at the same speed for everyone: some surfers, even from their first steps, find themselves having to face the ocean of life with a smaller surfboard. Certainly the solidity of the surfboard is very important to be able to stay afloat when faced with the COVID-19 tsunami.

3. The **surfing technique** represents the skills and competencies of young people, in a broad sense, to face the challenges of life. This technique is refined through growth, reflection and practice. Under normal conditions, people learn to surf gradually, monitoring the weather, currents and, above all, the waves, in order to face a more ‘difficult’ sea or ocean when they are ready. However, the tidal wave of COVID-19 arrives unexpectedly and young people are forced to ride it, to bring out all their inner resources, in order not to drown. It is a difficult experience but at the same time it has given them a particular and unusual training and allowed them to experiment with their surfing technique.

4. The **surfing spot** represents the socio-economic, political and cultural context. For example, a first-generation migrant young person living in a residential setting is experiencing a different context from an adolescent born and raised in Italy living in a well-off family with two parents. On another note, being an LGBTQI+ adolescent can be difficult in a society with widespread homophobic and transphobic practices, or growing up in a family that does not accept one's sexual orientation or non-heteronormative gender identity. The surfing spot is thus the social, political, economic and cultural space in which a young person grows up. For some, the context is more accommodating (sandy), for

others it is more challenging (rocky). For obvious reasons, riding a large unexpected wave is riskier near a rocky coast than a sandy one.

With their different surfboards – larger or smaller, and of better or worse quality – and with the more or less refined surfing technique acquired up until that moment, the young people interviewed grow up during the pandemic. Using the data collected, in this report we attempt, at least in part, to recount the process of learning, awareness and self-definition, both individual and collective, that characterizes their 'lives in colour', during the time period from 12 to 15 months after the start of the pandemic. In short, how they learn to 'ride the wave'.



“Well, it probably seems a bit simple and stupid, but my object is my mobile phone, because it really helped the time to pass quickly, having video calls with my friends, and also for special days and celebrations when I was able to keep in touch with my grandparents and other people in the family. That made those days a lot easier. Also, I was able to use it to keep updated on information about the pandemic, about the situation in other countries. The phone definitely saved me during this period.”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 16 years old, focus group 13)

4.1 Discussion

The circumstances of the pandemic have forced the research participants to live through some difficult experiences, often involving disruption, frustration, stress and even pain and suffering; however, at the same time, it has provided them with positive experiences in terms of their relationships with others, having more time to think and reflect on themselves and their lives, as well as the consequent acquisition of awareness and the search for a better future. These results are in line with those of other research, such as two qualitative studies conducted in Italy (Ecorys, 2021a; Fioretti et al., 2020), a study in Canada with children aged 7 to 12 (Pelletier et al., 2021), and a qualitative analysis in Portugal with adolescents and young people between 16 and 24 years (Branquinho et al., 2020), which report the ambivalence of the experiences lived by children and young people, describing simultaneously positive and negative effects of the pandemic on their lives. Branquinho et al. (2020), in particular, report a wide range of experiences, ranging from having had more time to focus on their personal growth and being able to reflect on their friendships, to poorer psychological well-being and missing key moments of their own adolescence.

The impact of the wave

With the arrival of the pandemic, the research participants faced many limitations and sacrifices, initially accompanied by euphoria and adrenaline due to the extraordinary nature of the events. The tidal wave of COVID-19 literally changed the course of their lives: the pattern of daily life, and sometimes the predictability of the waves, has been disrupted. The participants were therefore forced to adapt to completely new routines. Many had to reinvent themselves, negotiating with

themselves, their habits and needs, to reorganize their reality. The wave of the pandemic has certainly not wiped out the whole of life that existed before, but it has definitely changed its nature and the way it is perceived. Young people have thus tried to fill the gaps brought about by the interruption in sports, hobbies and extracurricular activities, the impossibility of spending time in public spaces freely and peacefully, going out less often with friends, the limitations on going to school and the introduction of distance learning.

Much of the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of children and adolescents analyses the potential risks to their mental health and psychological well-being. For example, Magson et al. (2021) conducted quantitative longitudinal research on adolescent mental health in Australia, comparing data collected before the start of the pandemic with data collected two months after it began. The study states that the most distressing issue for adolescents during this period was not being able to see their friends, followed by the fear that a friend or family member would contract the virus, become seriously ill and/or die from COVID-19. Also high on the list of adolescents' concerns was the inability to participate in their normal extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, dance, music lessons, etc.) or to attend social events. These findings are in line with the results of our research. A qualitative study conducted in Ireland with children and parents reports social isolation of children, family stress from distance learning, behavioural changes, and increased anxiety and depression among young children as negative effects of the pandemic (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). The increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms also emerged from a quantitative study involving children and adolescents in China (Duan et al., 2020).

In the course of the 15 months since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been constant changes in Italy that have led the young people interviewed to often feel stressed and frustrated. They had to get used to a reality that changed their daily lives and they gradually tired of the situation. The research data show that the participants managed to carve out moments for themselves, which were previously taken up by the many activities of everyday life. They had more time for leisure activities, to pursue their passions, but also to think, reflect and look into themselves.

Familiarizing yourself with your surfboard during the pandemic

Our research shows that the participants have learned to navigate a new geography of spaces and social relations. COVID-19 has significantly modified these spaces and social relations, and consequently the experience of being with others. In times of pandemic, being together, in close physical contact, is risky and must be avoided for everyone's well-being. This leads to ways of living together that are different from before. The home becomes a space that is lived in much more, it becomes the place for parents' home working, school lessons via distance learning, and gymnastics; however, stress, anxieties and fears are also very much present, and it is impossible to pretend not to see them, living practically in symbiosis with family members or flatmates. Closed within four walls, in total or partial lockdown, people spend more time together, get to know each other better, often rediscover each other and become closer. Arguments also occur, especially if living in limited shared space or if there are other stressful situations to deal with, such as unemployment or COVID-19 infection.

Like the relationships with family members and partners, friendships also change. Contacts with

friends and schoolmates are maintained thanks to the online world, which helps people not to feel completely isolated. A year after its inception, the pandemic is perceived as an opportunity to take stock of one's relationships, to reflect on which are important and which are not, to realize that some friendships are not "*real*". Unexpectedly, the data tell us that relational skills often improve – even if there is the risk of isolation in a small group of peers, or the loss of important relationships – in addition to the suffering due to the deprivation of physical contact.

There are young people who feel protected by living in their own social bubble that allows them to be seen and show themselves in a way that they define as authentic, but who, at the same time, fear a return to a larger social space in which they will not be able to express themselves properly. There are also those who are afraid of contact with others, who are afraid of becoming infected, and who must reluctantly give up hugging their grandparents or friends.

A picture emerges in which the sense of responsibility towards others, the most fragile ones, such as parents and grandparents, but also partners, friends and classmates, becomes a central aspect of the research participants' lives. They have to change their daily habits, and this is difficult, tiring, limiting and often frustrating. However, while they feel imprisoned in this new reality, they also realize the importance of their sacrifices for the well-being of the community.

The network of key relationships (family, cohabitants, friends, teachers, etc.) that adolescents have, represented by the surfboard, assumes fundamental importance in the context of the tidal wave of COVID-19. There is a widespread awareness of how important the board is for staying afloat, irrespective

of one's surfing technique, or skills and abilities. The research participants understood the importance of social relations, just when they had to partially give them up; they understood that it is important to take care of the people around them, and they became aware of how dependent on and interdependent with others they were. With the experience of the pandemic, they therefore learn to take care of their surfboard and to make sure that it is firmly attached to their ankle. No matter how much a wave may risk taking it away suddenly, the board holds firm and makes its presence felt.

In our society, growth is generally considered synonymous with autonomy and independence. It could superficially be argued that our research participants, having 'lost' a few months of their lives and some crucial adolescent experiences, or having delayed them, did not grow up and did not become autonomous or independent as they otherwise would have. Devine et al. (2008), however, explain that a coherent concept of autonomy recognizes the interdependence of people within groups, and that autonomy can coexist with substantial relationships of dependency. Indeed, in our case, the growth we recognize in our research participants should be seen in the light of their interdependence with others (their parents, their friends, their network of relationships – in short, their surfboard). They seem to have grown precisely because they understood the unpredictability of life, their own fragility, that of others, and the importance of collaboration and mutual respect.

In their discussions, we found that, with a few exceptions, they agreed with government regulations, despite the fact that these restricted some individual freedoms. The research participants wear masks because they think this is important for their (and other people's) health; they do not go out because they are convinced that everyone should

do the right thing for the good of the community; and they positively value all those behaviours that they consider "*civilized*" (not going out after curfew, being careful not to see many people in indoor places, etc.). This naturally led us to wonder how much this type of approach might affect young people's sense of autonomy and emancipation, which is fundamental in adolescence, and how much they are able to self-determine in the context of the pandemic. From this perspective, their growth towards independence can be seen in the light of goals that are simultaneously individual and collective or social. For the research participants, being autonomous during the COVID-19 pandemic means recognizing their dependency on others.

These results are in line with those of a qualitative study conducted in Norway with 17 adolescents that explains how respondents have responsibly respected the regulations in force to limit COVID-19 infections and have accepted personal sacrifices for the collective good, despite this having reduced the quality of their lives (Riiser et al., 2021).

The concept of sociability is also particularly important with regard to school. While the young people interviewed seem to have different opinions on whether they prefer distance or in-person learning, they all believe that not enough effort has been made to maintain social relations between classmates and with teachers during distance learning. The picture is one of school relationships that seem to be depleted in this period, and not only because of distance learning. In fact, during the pandemic, the experience of physically attending school also changes completely: single desks, social distancing, going to the toilet one at a time, seated break times, and not being able to have a chat next to the vending machines. There is no touching or swapping football cards. Obviously, for some, this is better than nothing, "*at least you*

can see each other in person”; however, everyone misses the pre-pandemic school, understood as classrooms, corridors, bathrooms, gyms and adjacent spaces where you meet before entering and before leaving.

If we consider how important social relationships are during adolescence, since gaining acceptance within a peer group and establishing and maintaining friendships are pivotal developmental skills during this period of life (Buhrmester, 1990), we can imagine how much the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the research participants’ development.



“I also brought my object, it’s this one [laughs]. My hair clipper, and it reminds me of the first lockdown as everything was locked, the barber shops and it reminds me of, anyway, a beautiful moment, because I had fun, I became a hairdresser let’s say and I did it for my grandfather.”

(©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 15 years old, focus group 17)

The relational challenges are even greater for those who had to move from one school phase to another, since this transitional period, already difficult in itself, as it is often accompanied by a greater perception of loneliness by adolescents (Kingery et al., 2011; Van Roekel et al., 2010), was experienced without the possibility of being able to spend quality time with their new classmates and teachers.

It is important to consider what the long-term implications of the above-mentioned considerations might be for the research participants and their peers. Certainly their surfboards have undergone inevitable changes, which have forced them to rethink themselves and their relationships with others. For some, this may have created further isolation, anxiety about contact, and problems with socializing: some of the participants spoke of “*social anxiety*”. Many respondents felt lonely and sad. In general, there is also apprehension about living in difficult family contexts, where relationships are conflictual, or where there have been serious consequences due to COVID-19, from serious illness to the death of one or more family members. While it is known that a support network is crucial for the psychological and physical well-being of adolescents, COVID-19 may have reduced or exacerbated existing problems. Some young people’s surfboards, already very fragile and made of poor-quality materials, may have broken due to the tidal wave. Moreover, the pandemic seems to have, at least for some, increased anxiety and phobias, not allowing apprentice surfers to switch from a large to a smaller board with ease. These results are in line with those of other qualitative research with children and adolescents conducted in various countries (O’Sullivan et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2020; Pacey et al., 2021). It is therefore important to take into account these aspects and the long-term consequences that the pandemic may have on young people’s psychological well-being.

Pandemic as an opportunity to hone one's surfing technique

If, as we have described so far, the pandemic had an obvious impact on the lives of the research participants, our analysis also shows more subtle and hidden aspects and processes, which are common to the interviewees: inner growth and the development of self-awareness. It is as if, just as young people are beginning to experience the ups and downs ('waves') of life and are learning to surf, and are exploring, trying and finding their technique, the tidal wave of COVID-19 arrives, forcing them to bring out all their inner resources and abilities, even creative skills. They have to survive and in any case to continue to surf.

The young people who participated in this study often refer to the fact that they feel that they have changed, that they are strong and courageous, despite and because of the obvious difficulties of the period. Having ridden, or in any case having survived the tidal wave, gives them a sense of strength. They sometimes speak of the pandemic as a learning period for themselves and, potentially and hopefully, for the community. In the data available to us, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to represent a clear break between a 'before' and an 'after', in which the perception of the sense of existence and the meaning of life completely changes. In the lives of the young people interviewed, the pandemic represents a traumatic event, even though, unlike other traumatic events, it spreads over time and is not yet over.

The conceptual model of post-traumatic growth may be a useful interpretative tool here.

This is a model that has also been used to interpret the psychological consequences of people experiencing collective trauma due to environmental or other disasters – thus including

pandemics (Schulenberg, 2020; Bernstein and Pfefferbaum, 2018). Another study conducted in Italy about young people and the pandemic (Ellena et al., 2021) has also referred to the concept of post-traumatic growth.

The conceptual framework of post-traumatic growth incorporates five distinct dimensions (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004):

- recognition of new possibilities (new interests, new passions, new life paths);
- change in the way one relates to others;
- increased perception of one's own inner resources (increased self-esteem and strength of character);
- appreciation of the important things in life, the 'little things'; and
- spiritual change due to confrontation with existential doubts and new meanings of existence.

This growth process is not always triggered by the occurrence of a traumatic event, but only when the traumatic event upsets one's beliefs about the world and one's life (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). It is important to note that the children and young people who participated in this research project were interviewed one year after the first lockdown and the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). We believe that it is precisely for this reason that we can read in their words – and in a very significant way – stories of growth and inner change, precisely because for a year and more they had to deal with a reality that made their life a "*paradoxical life*" (F, 18 years old, focus group 4).

From this perspective, post-traumatic growth theory allows the experiences of children and young people to be framed as experiences of reaction and transformation. The pandemic as trauma, both

individual and collective, leads to the acquisition of new skills and competencies, such as the recognition of new possibilities, as well as to changes in relationships with others, a heightened perception of one's own inner resources and an appreciation of the "little things" in life. Obviously, this does not happen for everyone in the same way but it seems to be a recurring pattern in the data. The participants therefore do not seem to suffer the pandemic period and to be vulnerable victims. Instead they seem to react, 'renegotiate' and 'reorient themselves', finding out that they are strong and changed. We see very strongly in our data a vision of the pandemic as an opportunity for transformation and improvement. These results are in line with participatory and longitudinal action research conducted with various groups of adolescents in Italy, Lebanon, Singapore and the United Kingdom (Ecorys, 2021b).

Certainly the fact remains that, as with all traumas, there are not only opportunities but also risks. The balance of opportunities and risks depends on: the *surfboard* – the network of available relationships; the *surf technique* – the abilities and individual resources that can be drawn upon in response to a crisis; and the *surfing spot* – the difficulties and dangers of the specific context. The experience of the pandemic is not the same for all, and the responsibility cannot and should not fall only on the individual. The path of adolescent development is not without difficulties that, as we have discussed, may have a negative impact on young people's psychological well-being. It is therefore important that children and young people are supported in the years to come, and that the long-term effects of the pandemic on their psychological and physical well-being are monitored. To support this, we believe that it will be very important to conduct longitudinal studies that track young people who have grown up during the pandemic over a longer period.

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years old, focus group 15



Overall, this research project has shown us a group of young people who have refined their life skills and competencies, and who have developed an interesting spirit of self-analysis regarding the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. Media and public discourse often talks about distance learning as a failed experiment, or of the young people who studied during the pandemic as a group who are behind in their school learning. For example, the results of the 2021 INVALSI tests highlighted the poorer performance of secondary school students in mathematics and Italian than in 2019 (INVALSI, 2021). Through this research project, we were able to realize how much the pandemic has taught children about themselves and about being in the world. The young people participating in the research feel strong, changed, grown up, and they tell us so themselves. They feel better equipped to deal with the adverse circumstances of life.

The image that emerges from the data analysis is that of a group of young people who change, not only because of natural development, given their age, or because the pandemic changes their daily habits and practices, but above all because the pandemic brings profound lessons, beyond the skills acquired in the school context. Although it is never directly mentioned by the research participants, the pandemic seems to lead them on a spiritual journey, which simultaneously brings limits and sacrifices, but also growth and enrichment.

The participants in the research are also people who change as a group, as a generation, because they are united by life experiences that nobody had lived through before at such a young age. They are the first to play in lockdown, the first to learn online from home, they are the first in recent decades to have to give up things such as avoiding gathering in the squares. They are also the first to tell of lost, renegotiated, modified, renewed rites of passage because of the pandemic: birthdays, Christmas and other holidays, first and last days of school. For the older ones, important milestones, such as driving licences and post-graduation trips, or moving to other cities to start university, are postponed.

From this point of view, they are the people who have sacrificed a lot, and feel they have sacrificed more than adults. They feel somewhat overwhelmed by events and are concerned about the mental health of their peers, demonstrating a marked sensitivity to the need to cultivate their own psychological well-being.

The surfing spot: the pandemic from an intersectional point of view

For those young people – for example, UASC, LGBTQI+ people and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds – who face other

obstacles on a daily basis, such as economic difficulties, the wait for documents, a troubled path of soul-searching, daily experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, etc., the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic can further burden their lives. Such difficulties can be represented by imagining that these young people are learning to surf in a hostile, rocky context, in the presence of sharks or a storm with rain and strong gusts of wind. And it is in this context that the tidal wave of the pandemic arrives to further complicate things and make it even more difficult for them to ride the waves.

Research participants tell us of many anxieties that have been exacerbated by the pandemic:

- anxiety about obtaining their documents, which for some, such as UASC, serve to make them feel safe in Italy, and for others to finally be legally recognized for who they are, as LGBTQI+ young people emphasize;
- anxiety about a possible lack of job opportunities, both in the present and in the future, for themselves or their families, as is the case for UASC and children with a disadvantaged socio-economic background;
- anxiety about not being able to pay bills, or not knowing how to help family members who have lost their jobs, as evident from the words of some young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds;
- anxiety about the disruptions to school and extracurricular activities, training and medical treatment – for example, we found that: many of the interviewed UASC had struggled with distance learning and consequently dropped out of school, at least temporarily; some of the trans adolescents had to interrupt or delay their hormone therapies, with consequent negative effects on their psychological well-being; and

- anxiety about a social context that continually focuses on ‘culprits’ who transmit the virus, increasing episodes of racism, homophobia, transphobia and also, banally, of adultism (and this applies to all the participants in the research: being young and being singled out as potential ‘COVID-19 spreaders’ caused many of them to suffer).

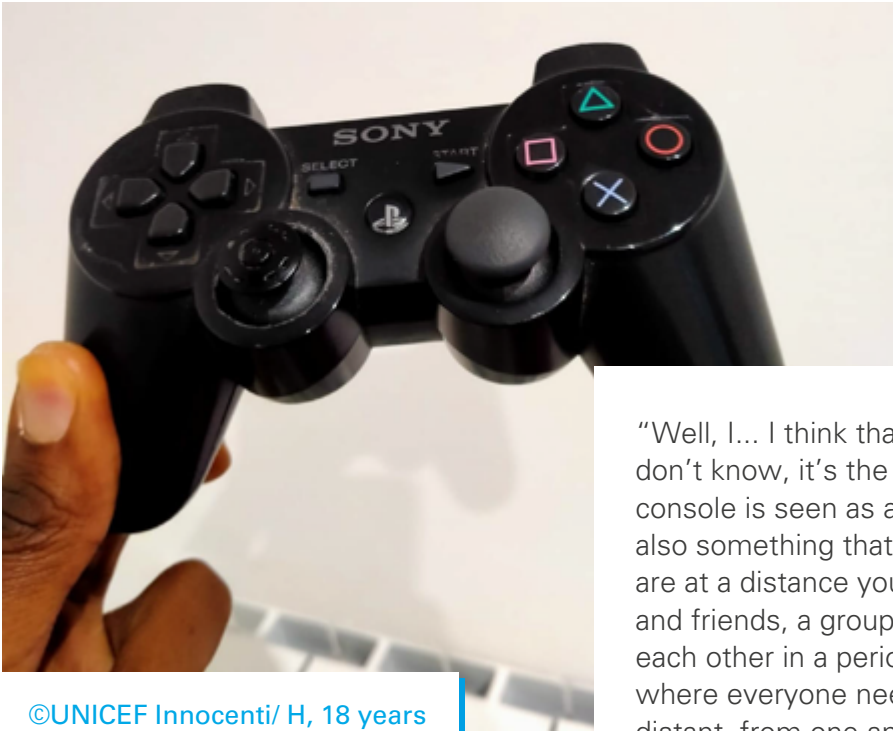
It is important to recognize that the pandemic is not something that affects everyone in the same way. There are forms of oppression, of disadvantage, that are structurally linked to a person’s socio-economic background, gender or sexual identity or ethnicity, or to specific socio-political, economic and cultural contexts – making the same surfing spot sandy for some, and rocky and full of sharks for others. In addition, the presence or absence of lifeguards, life jackets, buoys and coastguards – that is, a system of social protection and access to services – has a further influence on the level of danger on the coast.

The pandemic risks amplifying existing inequalities and creating new ones, as reported by some studies respectively on female adolescents in Bangladesh (Raha et al., 2021), on children with autism in Ireland (O’Sullivan et al., 2021), on children with cancer in Iran (Mirlashari et al., 2021) and adolescents with anorexia nervosa in Austria (Zeiler et al., 2021). These are studies that show that the effects of COVID-19 must also be analysed with reference to the specific contexts of each person’s life.

Inequalities also increase because the pandemic forces individuals to mix less with other individuals, and therefore tends to segregate. This report shows how the UASC have spent more time with each other, limiting contacts with the world outside the community; how children with disadvantaged

socio-economic backgrounds spent time in small houses, often crowded due to lack of parents’ work, and without receiving the usual support from the peers that they know at school, in public places or through organizations that they are connected with; and how adolescents who identify as LGBTQI+ have spent more time in their bubble of friends, those who understand and respect them. Regarding the LGBTQI+ group specifically, for example, another study of transgender and queer young people also shows that these young people were at risk of isolation during the pandemic and that this increased the incidence of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts (Paceley et al., 2021). However, the first thing we noticed when comparing the data of these groups of adolescents with those of all the other young people interviewed is that they did not seem to us to be more exhausted or negatively affected, at least emotionally. Initially, this surprised and partially confused us. However, we soon managed to interpret this phenomenon precisely in the light of the theoretical framework of post-traumatic growth.

These young people share the fact that they have already had to face great trials in life and had to learn to surf very early, often using a poor-quality surfboard, or at least a very thin surfboard for their young age. They surfed close to rather dangerous coasts, with the constant awareness that they could get hurt. Probably some of them have already been injured in the past. For example, there are those who have had to face a long and dangerous migratory journey, often in solitude; there are those who have faced a troubled inner journey searching for their sexual orientation and gender identity; there are those who have had to face family crises, have had to work from an early age to support the family, and have become accustomed to living with limited resources.



©UNICEF Innocenti/ H, 18 years old, focus group 3, UASC

“Well, I... I think that it is a bit basic, but I don't know, it's the console. Because the console is seen as a leisure thing, but it's also something that, let's say, even if you are at a distance you can have company, and friends, a group of friends can support each other in a period like the pandemic where everyone needs to be physically distant, from one another, and, sort of, that's a way to be attached, to be together, with friends that make you feel good, and you enjoy. To enjoy, I think that this is the object that is the symbol of my pandemic.”

(L, 14 years old, focus group 16)

Some have also developed a defined political consciousness, such as some UASC and transgender adolescents, who are aware of the importance of fighting to promote their political and civil rights. For them, the majority of their daily problems are not linked to the impact of the pandemic, but to problems that already existed in the bureaucratic and administrative systems that do not allow them to live free from anxieties, worries and fears. These fears are also linked to the (not remote) possibility of being victims of racism, homophobia or transphobia.

These research participants, although not without difficulties, also showed inner strength and a desire to respond to the situation and to improve their lives.

They must be helped and supported on this path because, in any case, like all the other young people interviewed, they will be the generation that will lead the path of reconstruction and social transformation that the country will face. Those who are thrown onto the rocks by a tidal wave will have very serious consequences compared with those who are thrown onto the sand; likewise, those who are rescued quickly by the coastguard can avoid drowning or being eaten by sharks. Precisely for this reason it is very important to have a protection system available to those young people who find themselves having to learn to surf in already unfavourable conditions.

4.2 Recommendations

All the young people interviewed have experienced the impact of the pandemic. They have learned to renegotiate their relationship with their daily lives, with the activities they carry out every day, with the people they see often, and even with themselves. The pandemic has also had significant consequences on the way in which young people view their short-term and longer-term futures, and on how they are defined and how they perceive themselves, not only as individuals but as a generation.

However, the participants in this study proved to be aware that things are not equally difficult for everyone, but that there are nuances and layers of difficulty. They are a group of adolescents who are extremely sensitive to ethnic and gender diversity, and for whom racism and homophobia are fundamental underlying problems of the society in which they live – ones that must be addressed and discussed.³¹ As individuals, and as a group, they believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity that should not be missed to work at a societal level on these issues, to address them, and improve the way we live together. They feel that it is they, as a generation, who are the key to facing the challenges of the future – those just mentioned, but also those related to the country's economic future, environmental degradation and climate change.

It is therefore essential that we realize the extraordinary resources that this group of young people have utilized so far to renegotiate their lives, to change and improve themselves, to understand how and what to do, what they are and what they

can be. In addition to recognizing these resources, skills and abilities, it is even more important to support and enhance these people through opportunities for young people's involvement and participation.

In light of the data analysed, it seems appropriate to emphasize the importance of speaking positively about young people, particularly because of the enormous wealth they have acquired by having to face an epochal event such as that of the pandemic. It appears necessary to support young people, such as those interviewed in this study, through interventions that target their psychosocial well-being and improve their school, family and community experiences. It is essential to make the most of their 'pandemic experience', making sure to involve them in the process of reconstructing the future and social transformation. They are going through a fundamental change process, as our data clearly show. Will the society in which they live – and we live – be able to seize the opportunity and change and evolve with them, thanks to them, in the direction the children interviewed wish? We hope so.

The report concludes with some recommendations on specific issues aimed at improving the well-being of young people in Italy. These points were drawn from the issues that we understood through the data analysis, enriched by direct suggestions made by the research participants when, during the focus groups, we asked them what key thematic areas the Italian Government should intervene on, to support young people's well-being in the present and future. The following points summarize what

31 These results are in line with the Demos surveys which show that young people under 30 are more sensitive to issues related to racism (<http://www.demos.it/a01745.php>) and homo/transphobia (<http://www.demos.it/a01874.php>) compared with other age groups in the Italian population.

the young people who participated in this research told us, explicitly and implicitly.³²

Specific recommendations

1. Supporting children's and young people's inner growth during the pandemic with interventions that promote psycho-physical well-being and mental health

"One thing that was made available to our school and that made me very happy, in fact I took advantage of it, is the psychological support, that is to say of psychologists inside the schools ... mmm that according to me and it is not something ... it is a very positive thing, that should be ... approved in all the schools of Italy" (V, 13 years old, focus group 1)

- Promote awareness of adolescent mental health issues, including eating disorders, self-harm and suicide.
- Promote awareness-raising activities, in person and via social media, that foster a positive body image among adolescents.
- Promote initiatives on mental health issues to support parents, guardians, professionals and volunteers who work with young people, and implement strategies to allow them to spend more quality time with children.
- Offer public services related to mental health and psychosocial support in all schools nationwide.

- Enhance play and workshop activities on the theme of affectivity, relationships and empathy.
- Enhance coaching and mentoring opportunities in schools, particularly peer to peer; for example, by promoting citizen's service (or similar) among young people graduating during the pandemic to support middle and high school students in coping with the adversity caused by it.
- Promote free and safe non-competitive sporting opportunities for children and young people – sport is seen as a coping mechanism by the research participants that helps them relieve stress and tension.
- Reflect on the need for young people to have time available to think, reflect, cultivate their passions and become curious about new things in a free way; activate strategies and projects not for a quick 'restart', but rather for a slow and reflective restart, which eases the stress of the months of the pandemic.

"For example, in our school, when attending in person, they put at disposal a psychologist, you can go and talk to vent ... and it is however optional, and most of the boys or girls are ashamed or shy, practically nobody goes to him, in my opinion it would be necessary to make an hour maybe even every now and then, but an hour of listening and only of dialogue to talk as we are talking now about this situation of the school, to improve anyway also to listen to students' impressions and to talk about the situation" (A, 15 years old, focus group 8)

³² These recommendations represent the collection and interpretation by the research team of the ideas proposed by the research participants and the needs identified by the data analysis. They do not necessarily represent the views of the research team, UNICEF Innocenti or any other UNICEF office involved in this study.

©UNICEF Innocenti/M, 17 years old, focus group 15

2. Rethinking education and teaching with a student-centred perspective

“In my opinion, it is not necessary to do lessons only on the books because they are always on the books and then you can’t follow after a certain period of time, it is necessary to do lessons in sync, not even in team ..., to do also manual things as much as possible” (A, 16 years old, focus group 8)

- Implement policies to promote competence-oriented teaching that involves building an effective relational context, including through workshop activities; further encourage experimentation with flipped classrooms (anticipating lessons with videos to be engaged with individually and using classroom time with teachers to do homework and apply the knowledge learned).
- Ensure resources and investment for teacher training on participatory methodology and skills in listening to children and young people.
- Enhance the creation of local networks and create the conditions for children and young people to learn active citizenship rights.
- Enhance the digital skills of teachers and school staff.
- Apply distance learning teaching methods oriented to the construction of rich and engaging learning contexts, applying paradigms developed in the tradition of child pedagogy, such as that of the ‘integrating background’, to secondary education, in order to encourage group work and social interaction at a distance (Zanelli, 1990).
- Create spaces for safe social interactions, both in distance learning and in face-to-face teaching, including extracurricular ones – for example, promoting theatre, art, music and other types of workshops – in safety to ensure that the social aspect of school that has been lost over



the years of the pandemic is promoted through initiatives of various kinds.

- Rethink the possibility of introducing into the school professional figures who can support the creation of a plan of teaching oriented to the construction and enrichment of learning environments in a technological-educational perspective, paying attention to the interconnectedness of the planning and organization of the physical place of teaching; the tools available for learning; and the relational context; also including the use of artificial digital environments.
- Promote the implementation of effective personalized teaching that is particularly geared towards bringing out individual aptitudes and

talents. This also implies greater participation of all secondary students in school choices – in both lower and upper secondary schools.

- Ensure that young people can regain the practical workshops they lost during the pandemic years, and also encourage former students to return to school.
- Improve the use of school spaces in order to increase the potential for effective social distancing in case of risk of infection.
- Improve school infrastructure to ensure that teenagers feel safe at school.
- Strengthen the transport network for the journey between home and school.

“Practical example: I now take notes on the laptop. Taking notes with the pen at school will be a bit bad in September, so I would like to try to propose to my teachers the use of the laptop in class even if I know that they won’t let me do it because they can’t all be there with notebooks and myself with the laptop or the tablet. But it was, and it is an opportunity, which I hope they will take advantage of also because for example, especially during the first quarantine, this thing of using Classroom made us produce more creative work, and this thing of the long-term homework should remain because it allows me to learn but not that I have to repeat the lesson by heart, I can link it to other things, I can apply it to other things.” (E, 15 years old, focus group 17)

3. Involving adolescents in policies for the economic and social development of the country

“There are a lot of workers who have lost their jobs, the mothers of many of my friends have lost their jobs, so ... it has left a lot of people at home anyway and the help that the state can give is only up to a certain point” (A, 15 years old, focus group 11)

- Promote interventions to support families in poverty or at risk of poverty, in particular to ensure access to digital devices and broadband for all young people, to ensure that all children can be guaranteed privacy and space at home, and to allow, in compliance with the law, young people to work and earn what they need without compromising their education.
- Ensure that all groups of young people at risk of marginalization and poverty are included in initiatives to combat poverty by supporting families and communities.
- Inform adolescents in appropriate child-friendly ways about national economic development plans.
- Involve children and young people in decision-making on issues that directly affect them, including the economic future of the country.
- Promote national and European community service scheme for young people who became adults (reached 18 years old) during the pandemic, to have more educational and training opportunities and put into practice the skills they gained during the pandemic.
- Promote media transparency and combat fake news. The research data we gathered sometimes reveal misinformation, confusion, frustration with the media, and risks linked to the spread of fake news.
- Support the creation of a more positive discourse in the media about young people, recognizing their commitment to trying to improve the society in which they live, and acknowledging the particular process of maturation they experienced due to the nature of life during the pandemic – for example, through the launch of a communication campaign involving the Ministry of Youth Policies and other interested institutions.

"I'm more worried about my future because with this pandemic we're running up so many debts we're shelling out money without earning because our economy has been put on hold, and ... tomorrow it will be us young people who somehow (...) will have to pay all the debts that the country is doing now." (G, 18 years old, focus group 4)

4. Combating discrimination, racism, homophobia and transphobia

"As I am there, as an African, so I am afraid!" (K, 18 years old, UASC, focus group 3)

"Problems such as homophobia, transphobia, racism are still very common, so raising further awareness on social issues seems something obvious and to be said over and over again, but it is a problem that still persists too much in Italy and that adds to the whole pandemic situation." (A, 15 years old, focus group 11)

- Raise awareness of gender issues, racism and diversity in general.
- Introduce sexuality education in schools following the "comprehensive sexuality education" model, which includes discussion on gender diversity and sexual orientation (UNESCO, 2018).
- Promote the rights of LGBTQI+ adolescents in national plans and strategies for children and young people.
- Simplify the process of obtaining identity documents for transgender adolescents indicating their new name and gender.
- Introduce the *Alias Career* in all schools to enable students in gender transition to live in a supportive and suitable learning environment, paying attention to the protection of privacy and the dignity of the individual.

"I don't know, during the pandemic, I had, I mean ... the absurdity of Italy for trans people like me, is that to change the documents you have to wait for a year of therapy and then go to a judge, and during the whole time of the pandemic it was not possible and so I found myself when we opened everything to be told: 'no you can't do it and I don't trust you to do a legal path of this kind, because it is too complex, it takes too much thinking and so you risk to lose sight of what is your goal'. So I don't know, I mean ... make our life a bit easier, if you know what I mean, in the sense ..." (L, 19 years old, focus group 19)

"They should really take the hearing away. Directly. Because it doesn't make sense that after a professional psychological report certifying that one has gender dysphoria one has to go to a judge" (N, 18 years old, focus group 19)

"A judge who doesn't know anything about it, who looks at you and decides if you're worthy to change documents or not ... it seems to me ..." (A, 17 years old, focus group 19)

"And to undergo surgical treatment, for other things ... the right to self-determination is really non-existent" (N, 18 years old, focus group 19)

5. Supporting UASC and ex-UASC on the path to inclusion and integration

"They must change the law that Salvini left, yes because we cannot be here almost four years without documents. This ... this is not good, it's not good because even the dogs here have documents we can't stay here, then we walk like this without documents then when the police stop you it becomes a problem ... also without documents we can't work we only do illegal work and that's not good, it's not good for us so if the government can

change this law let's go and make the commission [the hearing] then ... with the arguments that the guys have we'll see if we can have ... at least two years, it's fine! Those who are five years old are fine too! But they have to have the documents, that's what I want, the documents, then the work comes later, Inshallah!" (S, 19 years old, UASC, focus group 3)

- Speed up the process of obtaining residence documents (in times of crisis such as the pandemic, not having documents can exacerbate marginalization and exclusion).
- Promote family foster care to avoid the risks of COVID-19 infection in community settings.
- Ensure that every UASC has a voluntary guardian as stated by the law; extending the voluntary guardian (or similar) figure also to young adults until they become autonomous – especially during the pandemic when it is necessary for young migrants to have reference figures who serve as an entry point to the local social context.
- Support Italian-language studies and enrolment in secondary schools.
- Avoid, as far as possible, in future, the practice of isolating young people in 'Covid-Hotels' for prolonged periods of time.
- Extend the continued additional support that UASC receive (extension of the same rights as minors) from the age of 21 to 22 years at least, to take into account the negative impact the pandemic has had on their path to independence.
- Promote the integration of young ex-UASC into national and European community service schemes.

"Permanent contract and citizenship. For foreigners it's the best." (B, 18 years old, UASC, focus group 9)



"I have it here, it is a little casserole. I already had the casserole, or in any case a larger pan, but it is basically the same thing, because during the quarantine, the whole lockdown that has happened, I got interested in cooking, as before I was really bad at it, the only thing I could make was toasted sandwiches, but now I have expanded the recipes I can make and I am getting better at cooking, experimenting of course, but in any case asking my family to taste the food I make, things like this, and this is one of the many objects that have been important to me during the lockdown, only a casserole, but this small casserole – thinking that also the most famous chefs can cook with a small casserole, a bit, I like it, that's it."

(©UNICEF Innocenti/A, 18 years old, focus group 17, LGB)

6. Protecting the future of teenagers on planet Earth

“I don’t know the world might realize that in the end man is not as invincible as he thinks, and even a tiny microscopic being can bring the whole world to its knees, and it could understand that what it’s doing to the planet has consequences, because now maybe all the talks about climate change have taken a back seat, but one of the possible causes of COVID, or one of the possible causes of the next pandemic, is the exploitation we humans make of nature, so he should re-evaluate its presence a little, that is, the world should try to change from that point of view, because otherwise pandemics will be more and more frequent, or we can’t go on like this, exploiting our planet to the fullest” (G, 18 years old, focus group 4)

- Invest in a sustainable transport network and bicycle lanes, first and foremost for journeys to and from school.
- Organize consultations with youth activist groups to cocreate sustainable solutions for the future.
- Give a radical signal to combat pollution, promoting initiatives in which children can, from a young age, be better informed and contribute to solving the problems of environmental degradation and climate change.
- Provide information in a child-friendly manner about strategic plans at national and EU level that are proposed or being drafted to address other potentially serious epidemics or pandemics in the future.

“If I can add one very last thing that F made me think of, it’s that one of my greatest expectations for the future is that we finally learn to really love our planet and stop this impending catastrophe, that’s it.” (AC, 15 years old, focus group 11)

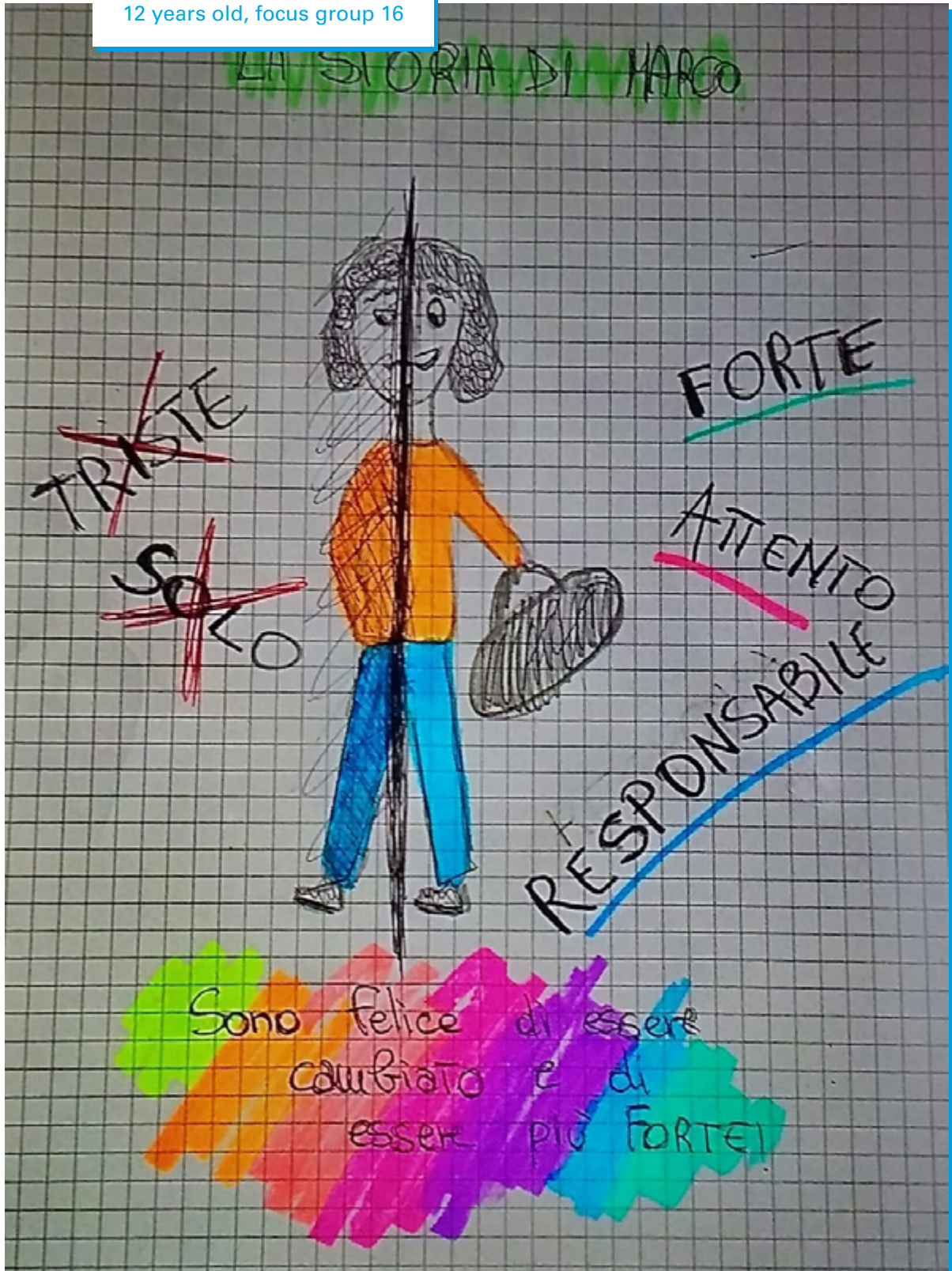
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years old, focus group 17,
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A stylized illustration of a young person with short, wavy blue hair and bangs. They are wearing pink-rimmed glasses and a grey t-shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient of purple, blue, and yellow. The person has a neutral expression and is looking directly at the viewer.

for every child, answers

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