

## Olga's Speech

Hi. My name is Olga and I am 13 years old.

I love cycling with Orwell wheelers, Scouts with Dundrum 20<sup>th</sup>, The Ark Children's Cultural Centre and my family (not necessarily in that order). Those are the things that kept me going during the pandemic.

I am going to tell you about children's mental health, how we missed normality and structure, the simple things and how we see the future, post pandemic.

For some children, being at home so much their mental health went way down. Yet for others, it went way up. It depended. Some felt so alone at home that they had to rely on several hours face time with their friends just to keep themselves sane. Other children would have felt really lonely in school, even though surrounded by other kids.

For them, being able to stay at home, during the pandemic was freeing. Loneliness probably affected all children, but to varying degrees.

For those that find it hard to be with their families, or who hated being at home, they really needed to do anything to get out of their homes. Some were just stuck, imprisoned.

Lots of people said to children, "you shouldn't worry."

They tried to stop us worrying about getting the virus. Yet most of us were not worried about ourselves but about people who would get the virus or who would be affected by the virus.

We are not small minded, narcissistic individuals and it is OK for us to be worried, but you need to take care of us and help those people badly affected by the virus.

Every child missed out on something. In fact there are lists of things children missed out on. These are some examples from our public call out:

Going shopping

Going out without a mask

Confirmations

School tours

Seeing our friends

Being able to see faces

Sports days

Funerals of someone special

Weddings

Going on holidays

Walking down Grafton Street on Christmas Eve

Going to restaurants

And Hugs.

Some children lost progress in little things and other's lost progress in big things.

All of us lost progress in something.

For one it was music lessons, for another fractions, but for another child it was progress in learning to walk using a specialised mobility device.

For me, I missed Errigal, the one international cycling race we get to do every year (and I missed it twice!!)

Some children lost someone close or have a relative sick or otherwise harmed by pandemic and they will never get them back.

Lots of children missed sports, games, races and competitions. We missed out on the teamwork element, the adrenaline and the sheer fun. We certainly missed the chats, the taste of victory, or the smell of defeat or even just a friendly match on a Sunday morning. We missed comforting each other at the start line and finding out everyone was just as nervous as us. We missed going all out and doing our best, seeing the cheering spectators. Talking to your friends about strategies on how you might win or ranting about how you lost and how, "it wasn't actually my fault".

We missed normality and the structure of everyday life, something as simple as helping with the weekly shopping in Lidl, taking the LUAS, waking up at 7 am and getting dressed to go to choir practice before school.

We never really got dressed completely during the lockdowns.

Sometimes we went to bed too late and slept on in the morning. Days, weeks and months all blurred into one. Going to the Ark to meet with friends, stopping to sit inside for a quick Taco before getting the Luas home, that is a perfect day.

What is next? Can we simply pick up where we left off? With fractions its possible but things like hyper mobility lessons it is harder.

Children will have differing reactions.

Some will take all opportunities possible.

Some will do things they never thought of pre-pandemic.

Some will be inspired.

Others, will be permanently anxious and nervous.

Some have big holes left in their lives.

Some, will never recover.

I can't wait for the future. Can't wait for the day we can talk about the pandemic as an ancient story, a saga long passed, when we have put it behind us.

My hope, is that I will be one of the ones who learned to make the most of life. I want to tell my grandkids that I survived the pandemic and say, "that is why your 88 year old Grandma goes skydiving."

It will be interesting to see what the world does as a whole. Probably lots of new technologies will emerge. We will perhaps find lots of new solutions to possible diseases, and create new innovative, economic safety nets.

Maybe as a government you can ask us children about what we think before making decisions for and about us. Listen to us.

We have learned how fragile the world is. All of a sudden and with little warning the whole world was literally shut down.

Will we ever take the world for granted again – will we?  
We better not!!

Olga  
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