

## Editorial: Health & Well-Being in Uncertain Times: Centering Children & Youth

Thank you for opening the Fall 2020 issue (Volume 12, Issue 2) of *NEOS*. This issue aims to elicit, complexify, and center the health and well-being of children and youth in uncertain times. The theme for this issue is both timely and urgent. Articles curated speak deeply and critically to the ways in which the unparalleled times of COVID-19 disrupt sociocultural practices and compound underlying structural inequities to create intricate threats to the health and well-being of children and youth.

The Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) begins: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO 2020, 1). First adopted in 1946 at the International Health Conference, this statement persists—at once timeless and eerily contemporary. The need to view health as not just the absence of the bad, but the presence of the good, is vital to moving beyond sound bites of “success” to addressing root causes of ill-being and amplifying multi-faceted manifestations of well-being. Spanning experiences in seven different countries, scholarship herein powerfully exemplifies this imperative on global and cross-cultural levels, illuminating four core dimensions that shape, re-shape, and ultimately impact the health and well-being of children and youth in uncertain times. Through explorations of each dimension, featured authors collectively advocate for centering the perspectives of children/youth and offer an integrated understanding of well-being that accounts for mind-body connections. Research in this issue thus provides critical insights and provocative directions for biosocial approaches (McDade and Harris 2018) to child growth and development, where social, structural, psychological, and biological conditions intertwine to influence well-being across the life course.

### The “Every Day” Of Health & Well-Being: Disruptions and Fissures

Scholarship by Heath, Sanderson, & Feldman-Savelsberg examines how everyday practices and structures come to bear on personal and embodied notions of well-being among children, youth, and families. These authors highlight how COVID-19 has created disruptions in daily patterns and practices of care, from halted swim competitions to vanished commutes and disrupted kinship-based foster care networks. As Feldman-Savelsberg’s research demonstrates, such disruptions can heighten the potential for ill-being, particularly when compounded by structural forms of violence. We see this in traumatic family separations occurring in Cameroon due to a confluence of armed conflict, obstructive immigration policies, asylum-seeking dangers, travel restrictions, and harsh border control measures. Concurrently, this scholarship also looks at how the disruptions of COVID-19 have created fissures for re-imagining new ways of being that cultivate health in child- and youth-centric ways. For example, Sanderson considers new opportunities for “child-friendly [city] planning” in North America, through which the health of not only young people, but also families and communities, can be cultivated and playfulness (re)introduced in a post-pandemic world, while Heath demonstrates how a rebalancing of well-being can occur for competitive youth swimmers as they slowly re-envision a return to their sport.

## **Influencing Policy & Practice: Advancing Well-Being through Applied Research**

Deploying innovative methods to reach young people and families during the COVID-19 pandemic, authors Morrow, Gunderson and Shattuck, and Saldaña weave a compelling case for how anthropologists working in applied settings can influence policy and practice, lending the methods, frameworks, and techniques of anthropology to improve systems that impact the health and well-being of children and youth. For example, drawing on experiences as a practicing medical anthropologist in the pediatric wing of a managed care organization, Morrow's commentary illustrates how anthropologists can catalyze systems-level change by eliciting and applying caregiver narratives of personal well-being, decision-making, and navigation of child health. Saldaña's research within social service systems, alongside recent pandemic experiences, demonstrates the vital relations anthropologists cultivate in advocating for youth, both within and outside of bureaucratic systems. Gunderson and Shattuck urge expanded virtual advocacy and outreach techniques for marginalized youth—techniques that become even more pressing in light of the current pandemic. These authors demonstrate how anthropologists are uniquely positioned to advance well-being both within the traditional confines of research and in the undefined spaces that wraparound youth lives.

## **(Re)conceptualizing Risk and Harm: Beyond a Focus on Physical Disease**

Research in this issue also urges us to expand, nuance, and re-articulate understandings of risk and harm in conceptualizations of child/youth health and well-being. COVID-19 has created a near-exclusive focus on the physical health threats of the virus, resulting in regulations that emphasize physical (social) distancing for transmission prevention and physical (social) isolation for containment. This focus on bodily illness has come at the sacrifice of other aspects of well-being, while also silencing the complexity of risks that caregivers must navigate to achieve holistic health. Cho draws parallels between caretaking practices and child health in post-nuclear Fukushima and experiences during the current COVID-19 global pandemic. Through these parallels, their article invites us to consider how we can learn from past uncertainties to create well-being for children that is defined not just by safety, but by joy and freedom as well. Oliver's auto-ethnographic commentary on the biopsychosocial politics of maternal-child health demonstrates how birthing regulations focused solely on physical disease work to exacerbate ill-being in other areas, including infant mental health, caregiving practices, and parent-child bonding. Considering how the harms of COVID-19 are compounded by structural forms of violence, Collingwood-Whittick reveals how physical childhood illnesses, structural racism within the penal system, and rampant social inequalities collide to create overrepresentation of Indigenous Australian young people in the juvenile justice system and widespread trauma, cultural erasure, and ill-being.

## **Complexifying the Ill-Being/Well-Being Dichotomy: (Re)Centering Child Perspectives**

Much of the uncertainties of COVID-19 are entangled with a public discourse of resilience and an attempt to keep "normality" wherever possible—as ultimate markers of well-being, especially for children. As articles in this issue expose, such rhetoric can work to silence harmful impacts of forced resiliency, ignore more complex definitions of well-being for marginalized children and youth, and heighten broader systemic inequities. Drawing on their long-term ethnographic research in Delhi, India, Fernandes and Garg use the concept of "bodyminds" to unmask how dominant discourses of child well-being during COVID-19 place a heavy emphasis on adult-defined

markers, such as continued educational learning, while rendering other aspects of well-being invisible and contributing to growing marginalities for non-normate children and their families. Spray's research on self-harm among school-aged children in Auckland pointedly unpacks notions of resilience and calls instead for a focus on "accommodations for resilience," illustrating the urgent need to listen to children as we learn about how they cope with chronic uncertainty now and into the future.

## Concluding Thoughts

The dimensions of health highlighted in this issue are underscored by a clear call to re-distribute power back to young people in both perceptions of and responses to well-being. This call reflects Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirm young people's inalienable rights to freely give their opinions on issues that affect them, to express what they learn, think, and feel through any and all mediums available, and to have adults and governments listen, incorporate, and take seriously the insights, desires, and needs expressed by children and youth (UNICEF 1989). It is our sincerest hope the scholarship in this issue supports researchers, caregivers, practitioners, and policymakers in doing exactly that—(re)framing health and well-being in uncertain times from the perspective of young people themselves.

*In shared commitment to thriving children and youth,*

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