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CHILDHOOD IN THE TIME OF CORONA

How will this pandemic shape the next generation?

The Second World War, nuclear stand-off, the three-day week – these historic events had long-lasting effects on the generations who grew up in their midst. Now that society is undergoing another seismic shift, how will it change our children, from the yet-to-be born ‘coronnials’ to the adolescent ‘quaranteens’?

BY HARRY DE QUETTEVILLE

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friend emailed this week. ‘I think,’ he wrote, ‘that this isolation will have a very different impact on families with and without children.’

AThe latter, he suspected, were filling endless leisure time with novels and box sets. The former were being tested as never before, not just stepping in as teachers, but also soothing and guiding offspring through a crisis in which there are few easy answers, no certainty and immense disruption.

Politics, society, the economy – all are sure to be different after Covid-19 has been quelled. But up and down the country another mass experiment is taking place. Every family is being forced into a chrysalis. No one knows how our children will emerge.

‘This will be the viral-shock generation,’ says futurologist Ian Pearson, already plotting trend lines of the pandemic’s impact. ‘The

changes in behaviour traceable to this point in time, taken together, will be profound.'

But what exactly will they be? Will a generation of children such as those born between December 2020 and March 2021, already dubbed 'coronnials', together with 'quaranteen' adolescents and those in between, emerge as radiant, resilient adults? Or will they be forever scarred: hygiene freaks who keep their distance, warily eyeing the old, and regarding friends, family, neighbours and classmates as vectors of fear and contagion?

All these thoughts bubbled through my brain as I drilled the new normal into my seven- and five-year-old before our first lockdown outing. My wife and I have spent hours telling them to be polite, approach people and look them in the eye. To shake hands.

Now we were preaching the reverse: that the park they have considered their playground since birth was a place to be on guard. No more impromptu kickabouts with friends. Certainly no more wandering up to elderly neighbours we once insisted they say hello to.

Diligently they nodded. And then, within 20 yards of the park gates, our five-year-old suddenly realised he risked piercing an oncomer's 6ft exclusion zone and, with nowhere else to go, pedalled heroically off the path into a bush. As we heaved him up, his expression was of confusion more than hurt. Learning to ride a bike is one of childhood's great triumphs. Now hurling himself off the saddle was the achievement, the right thing to do. How quickly the gravity of growing up has been reversed: up is now down, wrong is now right.

To read more about the viral shock generation...

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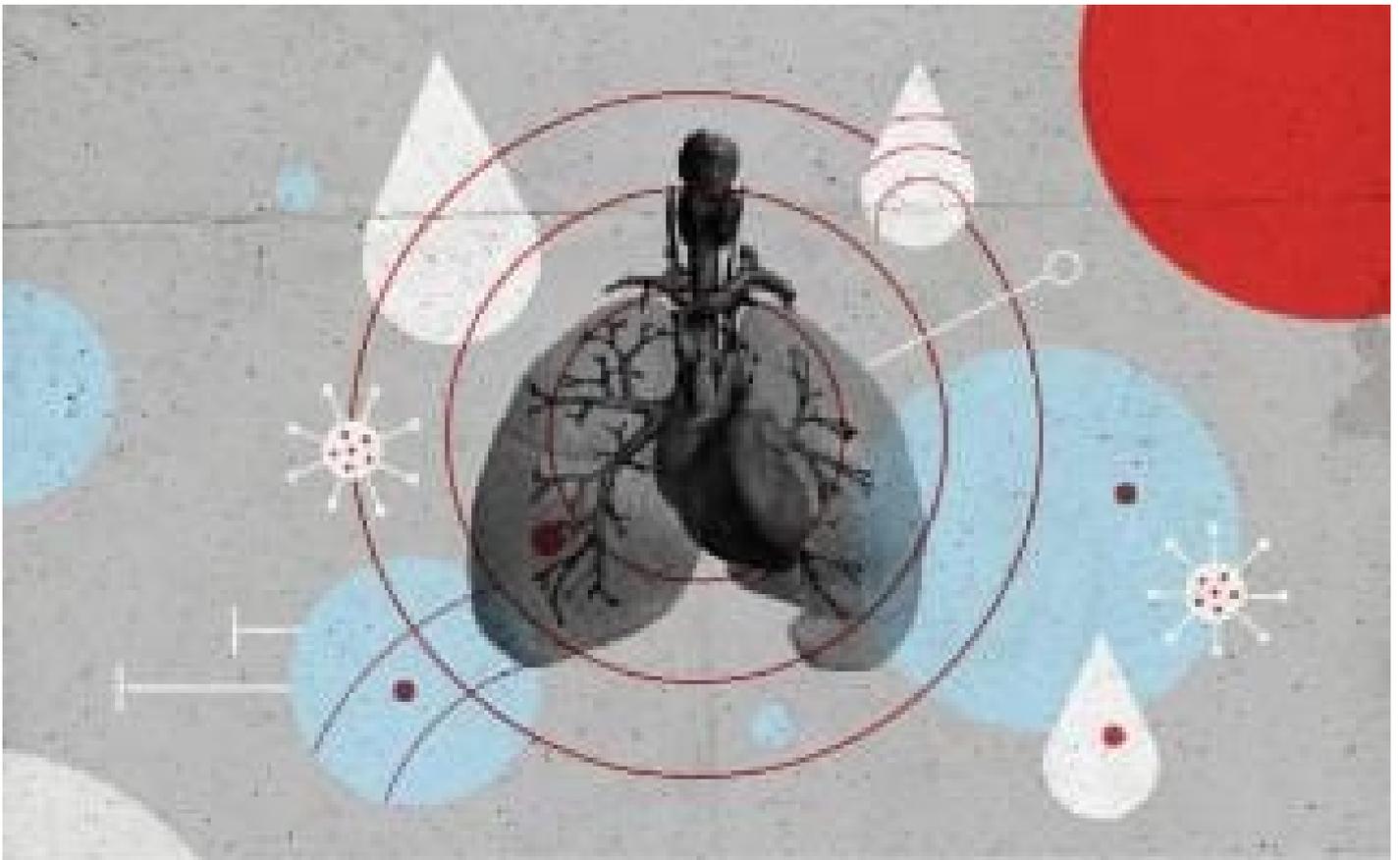
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