

First-rate drama, but ‘Adolescence’ is far from the whole truth



● Stephen Graham and Owen Cooper in Netflix’s four-part drama series *Adolescence*, which has become a global success. Picture courtesy of Netflix

Julia Molony



You have to hand it to Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham, creators of *Adolescence*, the Netflix show everyone is talking about — and not just for the technical and storytelling bravura.

Apart from being brilliant viewing, the show’s other great achievement is the way it has successfully distilled a mood of disquiet-rising-to-panic that has been building over the last decade among parents of Gen Z and Gen Alphas.

In their deft evocation of one of contemporary culture’s favourite bogeymen — the algorithm — Thorne and Graham have succeeded in creating a genuinely unifying water-cooler moment. It’s an uncommon feat in a time when our consumption of media is increasingly fragmented.

For years, the fretful conversation about children and social media has been part of the ambient noise of modern parenthood. Now, suddenly, it’s all everyone is talking about.

Even Keir Starmer has waded into the discussion, mentioning in the UK parliament that he had watched it with his own teenagers, and agreeing that there is an urgent need to tackle the “emerging and growing problem” the show addressed.

Sometimes it takes the alchemy of artistic interpretation to bring a

heretofore vague, inchoate or background fear into laser-sharp focus.

And the vision of the show’s protagonist Jamie — all freckled cheeks and mussed hair, his milk-fed features still bearing the vestiges of babyhood — facing two detectives after his dramatic arrest for the murder of one of his classmates, is, there’s no doubt about it, a dramatic way to hammer home the point.

This story about a child whose destructive impulse detonates outwards with devastating consequences, comes at a sensitive moment — especially in the UK, where a series of incomprehensible homicides committed by children have dominated headlines recently.

Just last week Luton 19-year-old Nicholas Prosper — whose cold-blooded murder of his mother, brother and sister, was preceded by watching videos of the misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate, and whose online history was a catalogue of “extreme violence” — was sentenced to life in prison.

Also in the headlines last week was the mother of transgender girl Brianna Ghey, murdered in 2023 at the age of 16 by two classmates in a “frenzied attack” after they gorged on ultraviolent content on the dark web.

These news stories seem to reinforce the central thesis of *Adolescence*, which focuses on the dangers of radicalism by algorithm. When the fictional Jamie’s bewildered parents

are confronted, far too late, with a new, barely comprehensible online world of “incels” and “red pills” that they had no idea their son was engaged with, they say, with heart-breaking naivety: “He was in his room. We thought he was safe.”

The choice to centre the action on a well-meaning, ordinary, loving family was very deliberate, say the writers of the show. They were keen to drive home the point that a calamity of this magnitude could strike any family.

Strictly speaking, that is true. But it’s also a narrative conceit — contrived for maximum attention because it activates universal parental anxiety about vague, unspecified threats that can’t be reliably managed or ruled out.

But the message of the show, and the high-profile, very extreme real-life cases which inspired it have to be viewed in context.

While there has been a modest increase in the number of children who are victims of knife crime in the UK over the past few years (with a peak during Covid), widen the lens and we see that the number of children cautioned or convicted for violent crime has almost halved over the last decade.

That’s not so compelling storytelling, though. And like many good psychological horror stories, *Adolescence* deftly manipulates a murky repository of parental nightmare — the limits on how well you can ever know your own children.

It is this, in no small part, that has sent its impact ricocheting around the world. So much about the show feels uncomfortably authentic — most especially the stony-faced scorn of the younger characters, in response to the adults around them and their clumsily concealed and

often coercive or wheedling bids for insight into the mystery of their lives and minds.

And yes, I think we can safely agree now that we need to put the brakes on the enormous social experiment we’ve engaged in by handing over the relational education of our young people to online influencers, the porn industry and predatory big tech.

Not because there is definitive, incontrovertible evidence, yet, that life online is definitely damaging them — there isn’t. But because it seems at the very least prudent to act on the common-sense assumption that it probably is, rather than waiting for the issue to be settled in the literature before we retroactively go about cleaning up the mess — after it’s too late.

Still, while it might feel good, even reassuring, to identify a single scapegoat — the internet — as the root of the problem, in doing so we risk overlooking the complexity of other societal and familial factors which we know with much more certainty will influence whether or not our children will thrive.

Crimes such as the one depicted in *Adolescence* don’t have a single, simple explanation, unfortunately. They are, says Kathleen Heide, who is one of the world’s foremost scholars on the subject of children who kill, “the result of a constellation of factors, including individual, family, peers and life circumstances”.

Most juvenile homicide offenders have had many adverse childhood events, she says, contrary to what we see in *Adolescence*. And it is this, much more than anything else, “that puts them at risk for behaving maladaptively”.

‘Adolescence’ is reviewed by Dónal Lynch in People & Culture, page 17