

# *Adolescence*: Gripping realism explores social pressures behind young male violence

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*Adolescence*, a four-part mini series, was Netflix's most-watched English-language show in its first week, recording over 24 million views.

Written by Jack Thorne (*Skins*, *This is England* and *Toxic Town*) and actor Stephen Graham, and directed by Philip Barantini (*Boiling Point*), it has attracted such a large audience by addressing a morbid symptom of contemporary capitalist society in a way which neither moralises nor simplifies.

The series asks how 13-year-old Jamie came to be capable of stabbing to death his schoolmate Katie, addressing themes of social breakdown, parenting, social media, bullying and the many malign influences on young men and boys. Jamie's guilt is established at the end of the first episode: the tension is in finding out why.

Graham suggested to *Radio Times* the inspiration for the series were the killings of 12-year-old Ava White—stabbed by a 15-year-old boy during a row over a Snapchat video; 16-year-old transgender girl Brianna Ghey—killed by two 15-year-olds, a boy and a girl; and 15-year-old Elianne Andam, killed by a 17-year-old boy who said she teased him after he broke up with one of her friends.

Thorne wrote in the *Guardian* of Graham: "He wanted to talk about young male violence towards women and he had two stipulations: he wanted to do it in a series of single shots, and he didn't want to blame the parents."

Fifteen-year-old Owen Cooper, playing Jamie, gives an astonishing performance, capturing the early-teenage rollercoaster of emotions—from fear to sullen insolence, brash cockiness, embarrassment, defensive rudeness and flipped-switch rage—above all in the highlight third episode where he speaks with psychologist Briony. That role is played by Erin Doherty, whose occasionally rattled professional cool is very well done and complements the impact of Cooper's acting.

Graham, playing Jamie's dad Eddie, shows a man crumbling under the effort of keeping his life together in impossible circumstances. His chemistry with wife Manda (Christine Tremarco) creates a believable family around daughter Lisa (Amélie Pease), a quietly emotionally intelligent child who forms a foil to Jamie and sticks a spanner in the works of any "family background" explanation of his crime.

Ashley Walters as Detective Inspector Bascombe and Faye

Marsay as DS Frank are convincingly weary, almost jaded, investigators of social breakdown and its consequences.

Their achievements are made the more impressive by the filming style. As with Barantini's *Boiling Point* film, in which Graham also starred, each episode is done in a single shot, with the camera following characters, picking up on others as they cross paths. The result is a powerful realism, in which the emotional weight of each hour is really felt.

From the first minutes of Episode One—an armed police raid on a suburban house for a 13-year-old boy, who wets himself in fright—the viewing is unsettling, a feeling underscored by all the subsequent police procedures—strip searches and so on—as applied to a young child, and the discomfort of everyone involved. Something has gone deeply wrong in society for this to be taking place.

The final shot in which a stunned Eddie—who has just seen CCTV of Jamie stabbing Katie to death—flinches away from his son's touch, then sobs as he embraces him sets up what follows. Jamie has committed a heinous, inexcusable crime; but, like his family must, we will walk with him through the consequences.

Episodes Two and Three are twinned: dealing with the social context of Jamie's actions through a visit by Bascombe and Frank to his school, and with Jamie's psychology—his processing of these influences—through the assessment with Bryony.

The school is havoc, and not unusually so in a country where teaching is desperately understaffed and undervalued, and schools underfunded enough for education, even as they play a dual role as social care centres. "Does it look like anyone's learning anything?" Bascombe asks, "It just looks like a fucking holding pen." The phrase "phones away" is shouted repeatedly and ineffectually.

It's here Bascombe learns from his son Adam, a pupil at the school, that they have been misreading Jamie and Katie's social media interactions (largely in emojis) and that Katie had been bullying Jamie by implying he was an "incel", involuntarily celibate—"Who isn't celibate at thirteen?" Bascombe exclaims.

There is a horror-like quality to this scene: a sort of staring into the abyss on Bascombe's part. "I have been blundering,"

he admits to Adam. Andrew Tate is briefly mentioned later in a conversation with Frank and a teacher. Bascombe is evidently affected and worries about his own relationship with his son—distant, thanks to his long work hours, as Eddie later acknowledges of himself and Jamie.

Frank speaks less but what she says is pivotal. She is viscerally affected by the run-down school. At the same time, she remembers her own, similar, experience as a child and the fact that she “had a good teacher... All kids really need is one thing that makes them feel okay about themselves.”

She gives the necessary reminder that, although this is not the series’ chosen focus, behind the scenes is a dead girl and her devastated family—and the fears of other parents with young girls.

The viewer is helped to understand that, while antagonisms and anxieties are inevitable among teenagers, these have been supercharged by the fraying of the social fabric around them. The supportive struts and safety nets around the usual pitfalls of adolescence—adults who can spend the time to guide and encourage, settings in which children’s sense of self-worth can be cultivated—are gone. If the kids’ attention is always being snatched away by their phones, then it’s because there is little else to grip them.

Episode Three explores the feeling of worthlessness and loneliness this all sows in Jamie. He does not consider himself “good at anything”, he feels “ugly” and “bullied”. He nonetheless posts photos of himself to his Instagram account “Because you think someone might like one of your photos, because you might get into a conversation, make a new friend, meet a girl?” Briony observes. By the end of the episode he is literally screaming for her to “like me”.

Their conversation also examines how this sense of inadequacy ends up being framed in sexual terms. Jamie is, darkly ironically, pointed to misogynist “truth groups” by Katie and his other classmates’ taunts. He “didn’t like it”. But what he does agree with, effusively, is that “80 percent of women are attracted to 20 percent of men”.

The undigested sense at Jamie’s age of social inequality, that he is on the losing side, and that the way of the world is dog-eat-dog competition, is translated into the language of popularity—particularly with girls. The origin of the 80:20 ratio is the reactionary liberal economic “law” the Pareto Principle.

Again, that this takes the form of sexual frustration is not unusual among teenagers. But the extremity of it, and at such young ages, are the product of a market-driven exposure of young people to often violent pornography, “sex sells” advertising and beauty standards, and the subconscious standards they set. Women come to be seen as trophies of success. The likes of Andrew Tate give repulsive voice to the violence inherent in all of this and encourage it.

Jamie sees a topless picture of Katie circulated around his classmates by another boy. He uses the opportunity to ask her out, hoping “she might be weak because everyone was calling

her a slag or flat.” Her rejection of him even then—“I’m not that desperate”—and bullying afterwards prompts him to buy the knife to scare her. And the humiliation, as he has been led to see it, of being pushed to the ground by her pulls the trigger on this temper we see erupt twice with Briony.

Episode Four takes us back to the family dealing with Jamie’s absence and their lives under the shadow of his crime. The last minutes are brilliantly written. As Eddie and Manda accept that they “made” Jamie and “could have done more” to stop him treading his path, the viewer becomes more and more convinced that they are wrong, or at least only trivially right. People can always do more.

The reality, as we have been shown, is that the problems are well beyond an individual family’s ability to resolve. Perhaps the most common expression throughout the series is “I don’t know”, or some variant, from kids and adults alike; they are buffeted and bewildered by forces beyond their grasp.

The role of smartphones, the Internet, and social media in particular, are well contextualised in this broader social landscape. It would be foolish to deny the role they play in creating an unprecedented level of exposure to peer pressures and corporate advertising, declared and undeclared, and in streamlining the passage of individuals damaged by these influences into darker waters.

But the real problem is the poison spilling out of a rotting social system—from misogynist ideologies to the glorification of violence, wealth and selfishness—for which these technologies are a conduit, and the conditions of social neglect which make young people emotionally susceptible: the most vulnerable dangerously so. Conditions which also hinder the social dialogue necessary to help children learn how to interact healthily with new technologies and form genuine relationships.

With families and communities gutted and exhausted, where is the time and where are the personal connections and bonds of trust to allow this to take place? The five sessions Jamie has with Briony are the first opportunity—far too late—Jamie has to get anything close to this. He is tormented when they come to an end.

*Adolescence* shows Graham and Thorne continuing to deliver some of the most serious work in British television—both motivated by a concern to get across life as it actually is for the working and most harried sections of the middle class. They deserve the praise they have received for the series, and every encouragement to continue.



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