

HEALTH & WELLNESS

The Toll That Isolation Takes on Kids During the Coronavirus Era

Playing with peers has important developmental benefits, and doctors worry that children are missing out on them now.



Pediatricians and psychologists are raising alarms about the potential impact of prolonged social isolation on children.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By [Andrea Petersen](#)

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After six weeks of lockdown due to Covid-19, Cari Marshall was getting concerned about her 11-year-old daughter Chloe. The child missed seeing her friends in person and was becoming frustrated communicating with them solely via FaceTime, TikTok and the gaming app Roblox.

“It laid bare how important her personal relationships are to her daily happiness,” says Ms. Marshall, a political volunteer organizer in Austin, Texas. “She is all about her friendships.”

With many summer camps canceled, many families continuing to practice social distancing and the upcoming school year a big question mark, pediatricians and

psychologists are raising alarms about the potential impact of prolonged social isolation on children. Some point to research that has found an array of benefits of positive peer relationships: Children who have them are more likely to later develop healthy romantic relationships and be more effective at work. Good relationships with peers during the teen years are linked to better health during adulthood.



Cari Marshall has started to arrange socially distanced playdates for her daughter Chloe, 11.

PHOTO: CARI MARSHALL

“There’s a key connection between having good peer interactions and social emotional well-being,” says Rebecca Rialon Berry, clinical associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU Langone Health in New York. “In certain populations, we’re seeing that our depression and anxiety are heightening with continued quarantining” and other aspects of the pandemic. “We have to start talking about the calculated risk and taking some more.”

There’s already evidence that social isolation may lead to mental health issues. About 23% of elementary school students in Hubei province in China had symptoms of depression and 19% had anxiety symptoms after two or more months of home confinement earlier this year during the region’s coronavirus outbreak, according to a survey of 1,784 children published in April in JAMA Pediatrics.

Psychologists are particularly concerned about how socially anxious children and others who already struggle making or keeping friends will fare. These youngsters might be relieved now to have a break from the social minefield of the lunchroom or playground, but “not having as many opportunities to practice, you might see a kind of withering of the social skills or a lack of development of the social skills,” says Eli R. Lebowitz, associate professor at the Child Study Center at Yale School of Medicine.

Children are less likely than adults to become seriously ill from Covid-19 and many show few symptoms. However, there have been rare cases of a dangerous complication called multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. And doctors are still trying to understand how easily infected children could spread the virus to more vulnerable people.

Friendships play different roles throughout children's development. For preschoolers, playing with other children and "learning to share, keeping your hands to yourself" helps develop our "core moral building blocks of empathy, perspective-taking, negotiation, collaboration and cooperation," says Dr. Rialon Berry. Playing with peers teaches children to regulate their emotions and behavior. "If we can do so, more people are going to want to hang with us and play with us," she says. These skills are critical to navigating all sorts of adult relationships.

Preschoolers need to interact with other children to learn these lessons, says Kenneth Rubin, professor of human development and quantitative methodology at the University of Maryland. "Parents just can't tell kids how they should act with other kids," he says. "Children learn to be kind based on their understanding of how others feel and that they are in need of a hug."

During the elementary school years, time with friends allows social skills to sharpen as children hone their "ability to take the perspective of others. There are opportunities to examine and discuss alternative and conflicting ideas and to compromise," Dr. Rialon Berry says. Competing with peers on sports teams and in academics helps kids learn about winning, losing and managing conflict, says Karen L. Bierman, director of the Child Study Center at Pennsylvania State University. And the growing complexity of children's relationships—the changing roster of best friends and peer groups—teaches children to manage challenging emotions like jealousy, Dr. Bierman says.

For teenagers, relationships with peers help them "develop a sense of identity and values," says Mary Alvord, a psychologist in Chevy Chase, Md. As teens separate from parents they rely on their friends for social support and help navigating the choppy waters of adolescence, notes Dr. Rialon Berry.

"Of all age groups, this virus is probably more socially devastating to teens than any other group. They are bored and they are lonely," says Joseph P. Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. The teen years are when children "learn to manage issues of intimacy and loyalty and boundaries that are crucial to adult functioning," he says. Dr. Allen points to the rising rates of anxiety and depression among teens in recent years.

Studies have also found that teens and young adults report more feelings of loneliness than any other age group. Social isolation may make these problems worse, Dr. Allen says.

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How are you trying to balance the risks to children during the pandemic? Join the conversation below.

Connecting with peers digitally can help children maintain friendships. Teens and many tweens already had robust digital social lives before the pandemic, of course. Texting, meet-ups on Zoom and multiplayer videogames have filled some of children's need for social connection.

But digital playdates won't be sufficient for younger children, says Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrician and director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children's Research Institute. "It is immensely important to be physically present the younger you are," Dr. Christakis says. "Social emotional learning happens when they are physically present with peers learning to negotiate and share. You can't do that over Zoom." Dr. Rialon Berry says that while some of her tween and teen patients seem content with online socializing, others are craving physical closeness. "Some say, 'I just want a hug,'" from their friends, she says. "The neurochemical response that comes from human touch is real."

And even the most ardent online social butterflies can get tired of virtual get-togethers, especially since crucial cues like eye contact and body language can be missing. Dr. Alvord suggests that children keep online meetups interesting by playing old-school games like charades or Scattergories. Dr. Allen advises teens to prioritize interacting with friends one-one-one over making "curated" posts on Instagram and Snapchat.

Franklin Mendelsohn, an 18-year-old graduating high school senior in Silver Spring, Md., says the pandemic has caused him to re-evaluate some of his friendships. He's mostly been socializing with friends on Discord, a communication platform popular with videogamers. But one high school friend rebuffed his efforts to connect online. "Being socially distant from people makes it very clear who actually wants to talk to you," he says. "It's very easy to weed out people who are friends of convenience." But Mr. Mendelsohn has also reconnected with an elementary school friend and now plays

videogames and communicates on Discord with him every day. “We have so much time,” he says.

Some families are experimenting with socially distanced playdates outdoors where children stay at least 6 feet apart, sometimes wearing masks. Many pediatricians and psychologists recommend this approach for older elementary schoolers, tweens and teens. “Even though you’re 6 feet apart, the social cognitive neurochemistry is firing like crazy, hearing their stories and who likes who and who doesn’t like who,” says Arthur Lavin, a pediatrician in Beachwood, Ohio, and chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ committee on psychosocial aspects of child and family health. Dr. Alvord recommends activities like riding bikes, skateboarding and drawing with chalk on driveways, things that are relatively easy to do while staying physically apart. Younger children, however, aren’t likely to be able to keep their distance and their play generally requires close contact.



Sarah Morford drives daughter Marilyn, 5, to her friends’ houses so she can drop off homemade gifts in their mailboxes.

PHOTO: SARAH MORFORD

Sarah Morford of Williamsburg, Va., has come up with some creative ways to keep her daughter Marilyn, 5, and son George, 4, connected to their friends. Marilyn, in particular, loves drawing pictures, painting rocks and making bracelets. Most Fridays, Ms. Morford drives Marilyn to her friends' houses so she can drop off the homemade gifts in their mailboxes. "She has the recipient in mind as she's making the thing," says Ms. Morford, who owns a mobile spray-tanning business.

For families with multiple children, siblings do provide a built-in kid to play with—and fight with. But doctors and psychologists say that siblings can't fill the role peers do. "Almost invariably they're not the same age. Their skills are at different levels," says Yale's Dr. Lebowitz. Siblings often compete for parent's attention and may have dramatically different interests.

Dr. Christakis is a proponent of "pods," where two families that have been isolating team up and allow in-person gatherings without social distancing. Dr. Bierman says children will benefit from connecting closely even with just one friend. "Think of [children] as having a social emotional learning deficit. Try to make up for it with extra time with friends," Dr. Christakis says.

In late April, Ms. Marshall in Austin began arranging socially distant one-on-one outdoor playdates with one of her daughter Chloe's closest friends. In late May, she started them with a few more friends. The children swim at opposite ends of the pool, watch movies on a large screen Ms. Marshall put up in the family's yard and make TikTok videos. The rules are "no sharing food, keeping distance, no hugs or kisses," Ms. Marshall says.

Chloe is thrilled. "It's exciting and I feel really happy" to see friends, the soon-to-be sixth-grader says. "I missed them a lot."

The Power of Peers

Children gain critical life-skills from spending time with peers. Here's some of what they learn by age:

—Preschoolers

Regulating emotions and behavior, negotiation and cooperation

—Elementary school

Winning, losing, managing conflict, honing the ability to take the perspective of someone else

—Teen years

How to give and receive social support, intimacy, loyalty, boundary setting

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