

Worried About Your Kids' Social Skills Post-Lockdown?

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Before the coronavirus pandemic began, Michael Munson's 3-year-old son saw a group of close friends at his preschool at least a few times a week. When he wasn't in school, he and his 1-year-old sister often played with other kids at the park.

But ever since much of the world shut down to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the kids have been home with Munson and his wife, both lawyers, who take turns watching them while the other works. They have tried to connect their preschooler to friends through video chats hosted by his teacher, but his response was usually to withdraw, throw tantrums or run away from the screen.

Like many other parents enduring months of stay-at-home orders and school closures, Munson has added a new worry to his list: social deprivation for his kids.

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Social interactions are an important part of development throughout childhood, and spending time with peers is typically part of that process. But try not to fret too much about what they're missing right now. Several pediatricians and psychologists offered reassurance about the isolation many children have experienced because of Covid-19.

Children tend to be resilient and adaptable, they said. There is much to be gained from interactions with parents, siblings and even pets. Time alone is valuable, too. And connection through technology, like hanging out or playing games through video chats, can fill in some of the blanks. Even without peer interaction for a while, kids can still develop socially and emotionally in ways that will prepare them to pursue real-world friendships when those can resume.

"Even though this is unusual, most kids will come out of this fine because we're biologically wired to adapt," said Dr. Jack Shonkoff, M.D., a pediatrician and early-childhood development expert at Harvard's [Center on the Developing Child](#). "If we weren't, we would have gone extinct like the dinosaurs. We wouldn't be able to survive because the environment is always changing."

Social and emotional learning begins in infancy, and social skills form the foundation for other types of learning, said Dr. Deborah Phillips, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist at Georgetown University. Among the skills that matter are the ability to understand your own emotions, empathize with others, make decisions, cope with challenges, develop relationships and take responsibility for mistakes. Spending time with peers is one way that kids can develop those skills, which affect physical and mental health throughout life, [research suggests](#).

While [plenty of studies](#) have documented the link between loneliness and long-term health problems, quarantine itself is not necessarily causing harm or depriving kids of what they need, experts said,

especially in cases where a child's needs are otherwise being met. In many cases, Dr. Phillips said, precedent suggests that kids can handle big changes, including spending long periods of time in the hospital, moving frequently or being separated from a parent for stretches of time.

From a cultural perspective, kids grow up in all kinds of situations, from nuclear families to communes, Dr. Shonkoff added. And historically, the level of technology-aided, always-accessible communication we are accustomed to with family and friends is relatively new.

In fact, having parents who worry excessively about what their kids are missing out on is likely more damaging than missing out on experiences, said Dr. Seth Pollak, Ph.D, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Stress is already widespread among parents who have been balancing work and distance learning, or who have been unemployed, for months. In a [May survey of more than 3,000 people](#), the American Psychological Association reported that 46 percent of parents rated their stress level at eight or higher on a 10-point scale, compared with 28 percent of adults without children. Neglect and abuse can have serious consequences, and [concerns about those risks](#) have escalated during the pandemic.

To reduce some of the strain, Dr. Pollak said, parents can help their children by trying to let go of their anxiety about temporary social deprivation. "I think it's really important for parents not to catastrophize and panic," he said. "There's no evidence that even a few months of social distancing is going to have a long-term effect on children's development."

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