

How the pandemic may damage children's social intelligence

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Children's brain development rely on interaction with other kids. Credit: [sutadimages/Shutterstock](#)

Do you remember the excitement and anticipation of your first day at school? Perhaps you were looking forward to making new friends. Or maybe you were shy and anxious. Research shows that such excitement and stress [are the two most common reactions](#) to starting school. It is telling that a large part of this emotional response is social.

Children are keen social learners, developing skills such as sharing, conflict solving and empathy at a rapid pace. These days, many children have already attended parent and toddler groups or nursery before they start school. So even if they have no siblings, their [emotional and social cognition](#) has already started developing.

But during the COVID-19 lockdowns, many opportunities for [social learning](#) have been lost. How will this affect children's [development](#)—and what can we do about it?

Brain development begins soon after conception and continues at least through young adulthood. It is shaped by [a complex interplay](#) between genes and the environment. There is [evidence](#) for critical periods in [brain development](#), such as

adolescence, when it comes to social cognition.

Social [cognitive](#) development, however, begins in the first year of life, when children begin to develop "theory of mind"—understanding what others are thinking—which continues [through age five](#). Play is an important part of this process, as it involves a lot of physical contact and development of friendships, helping children to cope with emotions and stay mentally strong.

Researchers are yet to fully understand the ways in which lockdowns will affect children due to reduced or delayed social interactions. But a recent study provides evidence that some adults' social cognition has indeed [been affected](#) by the COVID-19 lockdowns. The study showed that people experienced a reduction in positive feelings—making them biased to think negatively—which was significantly related to how socially connected they were. Those who were less socially connected were more affected.

It is likely that children are even more vulnerable when it comes to long term effects of a delay or absence in peer-to-peer interaction. We know that social [brain](#) development is a [two-way street](#) – the environment, in this case social interaction between peers, affects the brain and the brain affects the emotional and behavioral response to peers.

Social cognition is not only required for success in school and work environments and personal relationships, but also in "[hot cognition](#)" in general, which is essentially emotional reasoning taken as a whole. And we know that such cognition is a building block for "cold cognition," which involves skills such as attention, planning and problem solving.

For example, if children are not able to have creative play with other children, learning to empathize, compromise and manage their emotions, language development and [social](#)

[communication](#) is likely to be affected too. Indeed, it has been shown that children with higher [social cognition do better](#) in secondary school.

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Ways forward

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For young children in lockdown, Zooms and remote meetings just don't do it. One mother, having to cope with perpetual lockdowns, put the problem very clearly to us. "My six-year-old suddenly gets very shy when talking to his class mates on Zoom," she said, continuing: "And kids aren't just missing out on seeing their peers, grownup role models such as grandparents and teachers are suddenly gone too. Most young children I know don't really like video calls, so it's not a substitute for social interaction the way it can be for adults."

Some children, including those who are shy or anxious and those with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), may be especially affected. In regard to this latter group, it is important that psychological and pharmacological treatments begin at an early age, which involves social interaction. One recent study showed that it is possible [to improve ASD symptoms](#) in young children of three to six years of age with severe ASD.

Therefore, the best thing that you can do as a parent right now is to ensure your young child has opportunities for play and [social interaction](#) with other children as soon as the lockdown is over and it is safe to do so.

Governments should also develop special programs for toddlers and children to help gain back the critical period of social brain development that they have lost. There is some evidence that [children](#) can benefit from [social cognitive training](#), such as reading and talking about emotional stories.

Loneliness affects all ages and is detrimental to physical and mental health and wellbeing. Fortunately, we now know that our brains [are still in development](#) until early young adulthood and therefore, the possibility for relearning lost skills may still be possible.

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