

# **HOW COVID 19 COULD AFFECT CHILDREN'S LONG-TERM SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: IDENTIFYING ISSUES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND PARENTS**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The consensus among experts is that if the social changes we are experiencing from the Covid-19 pandemic last for a relatively short period of time, most kids will be fine. Experts also agree that a prolonged period of social distancing and alternative ways of social interaction could produce negative effects on the mental health and social/emotional development of children.

The summer of 2020 is very different from our usual experience - vacations are cancelled, playdates are questionable, camps are not running. The beginning of the new school year is just a few months away and we are prepared for a variety of scenarios, which were outlined in the re-opening plan. Now is the time to identify the mental health and social/emotional issues associated with a prolonged period of uncertainty, outline the issues that could surface, and outline the support we will have in place.

## ***AGE CONSIDERATIONS***

How children respond to the COVID pandemic largely depends on their age. Although other factors such as exposure, family circumstances, and personality play a role, reactions are usually age related.

### **Pre-K**

In the early years, social development takes place mostly within the family. Young children are learning how to be social beings through interactions with parents and siblings. For children under the age of five the experience of being at home with family during the pandemic could have been developmentally healthy. Younger children are less affected by the pandemic.

### **K-Grade 3**

Social development evolves rapidly in these years. During lower school years children crave routine, structure, discipline, and clear rules. They become more social as they grow and friends play a bigger role in their lives. By second and third grade kids become decidedly more social and enjoy playing and working in groups. As a result, this older age group is experiencing the pandemic more actively. They wonder, "how can I have confidential conversations when my friends are sitting so far away and everyone will hear what I am saying? How can they play in groups during recess? If I

am physically at school, why are so many things different?” They might be unsure what a friend is thinking behind a mask because they can’t read social cues as they once did.

It is understandable that children in this age group could feel unmoored. They miss seeing their friends if they are at home and could be challenged by the new normal if they are physically present at school. Those at home will miss the structure and order that comes with the school day, while those in attendance will grapple with changed lunchtime, hallway procedures, and recess. Children at home will also miss another benefit of the school setting because teachers and counselors cannot cast a trained eye on their social and emotional development and mental health.

### Grade 4-8

Current opinion among experts is that the social and emotional development of children in late childhood and early adolescence could be significantly affected if they are deprived of experiences for social growth because of prolonged social isolation. This age group is moving away from the family as their most important source of social development, their peer group is becoming more front and center. They are learning to navigate more complex individual relationships and group dynamics. Children are figuring out who they are as a friend and what they want from a friendship. They are learning how to feel empathy and support their friends, they are investigating who they can trust. Friendships and peer group dynamics can be fraught and challenging in these years, but the lessons learned play a key role in teaching children how to have healthy and fulfilling relationships.

### *The New Normal Presents Special Challenges For This Age Group:*

1. Replicating friendships online or from a distance are more difficult.
2. Brain development. Humans brains experience the greatest growth spurts in infancy and adolescence. This is when our brains are best prepared to learn. How children perceive who they are and how they interact with others at this age plays a big part in how they develop socially.
3. Kids learn best from in-person interactions. They are learning how to resolve conflicts, develop empathy, share, and negotiate.
4. School, club and sports invite opportunities to make new friends, navigate new situations, expand community, and explore interests. Being isolated decreases these opportunities.
5. Social distancing and wearing face masks make social interactions more challenging.
- 6.

*But, there are silver linings:*

1. Kids this age have been virtually socializing with their friends all their lives and know how to communicate on line and through devices. Many have adapted easily to the new normal, hosting chats and playdates, having parties, watching movies, and having virtual sleepovers.
2. Provides opportunity for families to slow down, re-connect, and re-assess.
3. Social distancing and wearing face masks provide a unique opportunity for kids to learn about non-verbal communication.

## **UNDERSTANDING WHAT NORMAL BEHAVIOR FOR CHILDREN IS RIGHT NOW**

This is an unprecedented time and we don't have past experience to guide us in knowing what normal behavior is during a pandemic. The following reactions are common, but if they continue for two weeks or more or are significantly different from a child's normal behavior, it may indicate that the child needs help managing their feelings:

Grades Pre K - 2 Excessive energy / Hyperactivity/ Frequent crying / Tearfulness / Separation anxiety/ Increased whining/ Developmental regression (for example, toileting accidents)

Grades 3 - 6 Excessive energy / Hyperactivity /Excessive worry / Repeated questions/ Frequent crying / Tearfulness/ Separation anxiety/ Increased whining /Boredom

Grades 7 - 12 Excessive worry / Repeated questions/ Poor concentration/ Irritability / Anger/ Difficulty sleeping/ Fatigue/ Boredom/ Trouble coping

## **SEL AND THE NEW NORMAL - SOCIAL DISTANCING AND FACE MASKS**

Social distancing and wearing face masks can lower the quality of interactions students have with one another. They can make it more challenging to interact with people we know and more stressful to interact with people with whom we have no history. But, it also provides the opportunity to teach children the importance of non-verbal communication, how to manage stress and anxiety from external causes, and addressing conflicts that stem from misunderstandings.

## ***SOCIAL DISTANCING***

Social distancing is becoming part of our social lives and we do not know when that will change or if we will ever go back to socializing as we once did. With this new normal comes the feeling that we are not getting the emotional comfort and support we could count on before. A physical gap can feel like a relational gap.

We do not know how distancing will affect children in the long term but in the short term children will lose opportunities to practice and hone skills. For a period there could be no lunch tables, chance encounters in hallways, bonding through sports and extracurricular activities, teams at recess, morning meetings, assemblies, and field trips.

One of the major ways that children interact is by receiving and giving hugs. Now, these hugs are virtual. The congratulatory fist bump and high five are out. Sitting near friends at lunch, at sporting events and in the classroom won't happen. Humans crave physical contact and we don't know how the lack of that will affect children.

There is good news. Recent research suggests that even when people can't touch each other, our brains may adapt and respond.. As new ways of social interaction, like virtual hugs become normal, our brains may find ways to provide us with some consolation.

***Strategies:***

1. *Listen And Show Empathy*

Resist telling kids that they are lucky (they are but don't want to hear that). Don't minimize their feelings. Feelings aren't right or wrong. Acknowledge their experience and the sadness and grief that comes with what they have lost.

2. *Embrace The Challenge Of Needing to Work Harder At Relationships*

How can they safely gather, how can they safely play sports, how can they strengthen their important relationships?

3. *Embrace Technology*

It is OK to relax rules around the use of technology. It is also OK to spend more time on social media and phones.

4. *But Also Unplug*

5. Go outside, exercise, play family games, watch movies, have dinner together.

**FACE MASKS**

The new reality of covering our faces with masks makes it difficult for people of all ages to read facial expressions, to see smiles, frowns, and the many nuances that make up physical social cues. The face is one of the most expressive parts of the body and one of the best ways to read social cues. We are used to getting our information about people from their faces. There is also the issue of how masks affect our verbal communication, change our tone and volume, and produce muffled words. A child's ability to navigate this is particularly challenging, with younger children having the most difficulty.

### ***How Face Masks Can Impact Children's Communication:***

Except for younger children, humans tend to process faces as a whole, rather than focusing on individual features. Wearing a mask prevents the whole face from being visible, especially the mouth, which is expressive and gives us much of our information about other people. Studies show that over fifty percent of non-verbal communication is expressed in the face. Students on the autism spectrum, those with ADHD, and those with social anxiety, are particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding interactions.

The mouth, in particular, is associated with happiness, and a mask prevents us from showing our approachability and friendliness. A smile, however, is not always warm, and can convey other emotions such as embarrassment, sarcasm, fear, or scepticism. This is important because mirror neurons, the "smart cells" in our brain, allow us to understand other people's actions, feelings and intentions. When we see an expression such as friendliness or warmth or anger or fear on someone else's face, our brains fire the same neurons associated with that emotion.

#### ***Pre-K - Grade 1***

For very young children, who look to caregivers to help them formulate responses to new people and situations, it poses special challenges. For this group, seeing people in a mask can be frightening, disconcerting, and a source of sadness. One reason is that their ability to recognize faces is weaker than older children and adults. When we look at a face covered by a mask, we can still recognize others. Children younger than six see individual features rather than faces as a whole and can have trouble recognizing even familiar faces when they are partially covered. When kids can't see a whole face they can feel scared and might cry, cling, or hide. Some young children can be particularly troubled by masks, just as some are afraid of clowns and Halloween costumes. These children suffer from 'maskaphobia' and need special attention.

#### ***Strategies:***

1. *As Age Appropriate, Explain Why It Is Necessary To Wear Masks*  
Explain that people are wearing masks as a way to help other people. In the same way that we are washing our hands more often and for longer, and putting more space between ourselves and others, this is something we do to keep ourselves and others safe.
2. *Help Kids Learn To Wear A Mask*  
Practice having children put a mask on and take it off. Parents can practice putting on and taking off a mask so children can learn that a mask doesn't make them a different person.
3. *Begin Teaching Children How To Read Non-Verbal Cues*  
Help them to learn to pay attention to a person's eyes and eyebrows, tone of voice, and body posture by playing a game like, "Guess My Expression." Ask them to guess how others are feeling from their non-verbal body language.
4. *Practice Talking Through Your Mask*  
Help the child to learn that voices sound different from behind a mask. They may need to learn to regulate their tone and volume.
5. *Encourage Kids To Decorate Their Masks*  
This will help them to feel ownership of their mask and more control over the situation. If they have a hand in personalizing it, they are more likely to wear it.
6. *Make Masks At Home*  
This can be a fun way to engage with a child and talk about why it is necessary to wear masks now.
7. *Make It Fun*
  - Have kids pretend to be a healthcare provider and teach people about wearing masks.
  - Ask the child to put a mask on a stuffed animal and ask questions about why they must wear a mask.
  - Make a superhero connection. Explain that doctors and nurses are superheroes and they wear masks as part of their uniform to protect others from germs.

### Older Children

At around age six, children begin to develop the ability to look at faces as a whole, but it is not until approximately age fourteen that they reach the ability level of an adult. While they are still in the learning phase, wearing masks deprive them from seeing one of the face's most expressive areas, the mouth. If they are not in tune with how to read eye expressions and other body language, it is easy for them to misunderstand an interaction, resulting in hurt feelings, confusion, and even anger. The good news is that the new normal presents unique opportunities to coach children in the art of non-verbal communication.

Wearing clear **face shields** may alleviate some of the challenges brought on by masks. There is also a face mask that covers the area in the traditional way but has a clear plastic insert over the mouth, which allows for visual observation of that area.

### **Strategies:**

#### *1. Work With Children To Continue To Develop The All Important Skill of Reading Non-Verbal Cues*

- The key to correctly interpreting someone else's intention is to study the parts of the face that are exposed (eyes and eyebrows), tone of voice, body posture, and context.
- Play a game with cropped pictures. Find a picture of a face where the person is expressing an extreme emotion and ask students to guess what the emotion is. Reveal the bottom half and see if it matches.

#### *2. Help Students To Understand That It Is More Challenging To Project Empathy When We Can't See A Person's Whole Face*

One of the consistent research findings is that perceptions of empathy can be hidden by masks. This is especially true with people we don't know well, have little history, or are strangers. (Note: Studies also show that adolescents and teens are less empathetic as a result of texting). Empathizing with others is key to making and sustaining meaningful relationships.

#### *3. Teach Children To Communicate With Their Eyes and Eyebrows*

Raised eyebrows can indicate surprise, eyebrows in a "V" shape can signal anger, a "U" shape may mean happiness.

### **TIPS FOR TRANSITIONING BACK TO SCHOOL (AGE APPROPRIATE)**

#### **For Parents:**

1. *Parents should begin to prepare children for the upcoming transition several weeks before school begins (whether it is in the brick and mortar building or remote) by providing more structure than is common in the summer such as set bed, meal, and wake up times, and laying clothing out the night before.*
2. *Encourage conversation and communication with children around what the new school year will look like and how it will be different from, or the same as, previous experiences.*
3. *Reflect back on your child's experiences during remote learning (age appropriate):*
  - What did they learn about themselves as individuals and students?
  - Who are they as learners?
  - How was the remote learning experience like?  
(This can be done through conversation, writing prompts, pictures, music)
4. *Harness the self-isolation experiences to build confidence and resilience:*
  - What did you do well?
  - What made you proud?
  - What did you learn that you can take with you into future learning experiences?
5. *As appropriate, arrange playdates/gatherings with friends in person or remotely. Now more than ever kids need to connect.*
6. *If school resumes on campus, parents can practice drop off and re-introduce students to the campus.*  
(especially important for younger kids and those transitioning to 4th grade)
7. *Inform RA of any emotional/social/behavioral issues that are of concern.*  
(especially if it developed over the summer)
8. *Parent Reflections:*
  - Did remote learning facilitate a better understanding of curriculum and your child's learning style and ability?
  - Did you learn how to support your child's learning better?

## **GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH SOCIAL ANXIETY**



Children with pre-existing social anxiety may be having an especially difficult time. Other children may develop social anxiety as a result of circumstances. They may be having a difficult time connecting through a screen, reading social cues, socializing in a relaxed way, maintaining friendships, or making new friends. Perhaps, they are withdrawing and avoiding connections.

***Here are some tips:***

***1. Open the Conversation***

Ask the child why he is avoiding others. Is he uncomfortable? Has he had trouble relating to friends on-line? Has he had a bad experience interacting because of technology? Show empathy and ask her to talk about how her friendships are different now. If she resists sharing, talk about why social connections are important.

***2. Swap a Video Chat For a Phone Call or Email***

This is a good way to test the water and ease into communicating. Use the app, Marco Polo, which allows kids to make and send video messages back and forth. Children can add filters, texts, videos, and drawings.

***3. Suggest That The Child Meet A Friend To Play A Game Rather Than Talk***

This acts as a great ice-breaker. I often used games to promote interaction in my grade level recesses and group chats.

- For older kids try: Three Truths and a Lies, Words with Friends, Charades.
- For younger children try shorter games like: Scavenger Hunt, I Spy, Would You Rather Be? (... a teacher or a baseball player, ski or go swimming),
- Silly faces (use your facial expressions to show how you are feeling).

***4. Once your child becomes comfortable in this setting, you can expand to playing shared board games.*** Try: Boggle, UNO, Monopoly, dice games, card games

***5. Practice Connecting with Family before Friends***

Schedule a remote visit with relatives or other people a child knows well and trusts.

***6. Build Up to Virtual/Real-Time Playdates/Gatherings or Group Chats***

Ask the child who he misses, or who he likes to play games with. Reach out to parents to set a child up for success.

7. *Create a Schedule*

For children who are especially withdrawn or rigid, keep things structured by creating a schedule and suggesting a time frame. For younger kids: a relative on Friday, a soccer friend on Monday. For older kids try: Chats, Meets, Zoom, Houseparty.

8. *Make Time for Mindfulness*

Help the child learn to take mental breaks by practicing a few minutes of relaxation. Practicing mindfulness even for five minutes a day helps reduce stress, decrease bad decisions, improve behavior, increase focus and concentration and, improve sleep.

Grades Pre K - 2 Animal yoga: Pretend to be different animals, and shape your body into curled up and stretched out positions. Imagine being that animal feeling cozy in places of safety, or relaxing in nature. Slow breath: Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 2, breathe out for 4 seconds. Repeat 3-5 times while lying down or sitting comfortably. Tighten & Relax: Move through each major body part, slowly tightening (10 seconds) and relaxing (10 seconds) the muscles in each one.

Grades 3 - 6 5 Senses: Spend 30 seconds focusing on each sense (sight, smell, sound, etc.) and observe what you notice. Imaginary vacation: Close your eyes and pretend you are in a favorite place – a beach, your room, a hot air balloon – and imagine, tell, or write about what it is like there. Mindful eating: Hold a piece of food in your hand (raisin, M&M, etc.) and look at, feel, and smell, it. Then put it on your tongue and notice its smell, taste, and texture before chewing and swallowing.

Grades 7 - 8 Body Scan: Mentally observe your whole body, one part at a time. Note where you feel tension, pressure, pain, or calm. Try to spread the calm throughout your body. Loving Kindness: Create a statement of forgiveness, kindness, wellness, or love and send it to yourself. Then in your mind send that message to loved ones, friends, family, neighbors, your community, and finally, the whole world. Tolerating Emotional Waves: Focus on the image of difficult emotions being like waves that come and go. You can ride the wave of each emotion, just tolerating it when it's present, and trusting it will eventually roll on and give way to a moment of calm afterwards.

## **THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR**

Centering on the basics is the place to begin. Children and families will continue to need to feel connected to one another and the community and to build and strengthen relationships, but this is now more challenging. to facilitate. Venues to listen and help students find the awareness and vocabulary to articulate their needs will be available.

In addition to the support put into place to support all community members, RA is committed to locating vulnerable children and adults. We are asking the important questions:

- ❖ How do we locate them?
- ❖ What criteria do we use to assess vulnerability?
- ❖ How are students of color or those with different socio-economic backgrounds experiencing things?
- ❖ Are there gender differences?
- ❖ What role does personality play in the ability to adapt to changes?
- ❖ Are personality types like being an introvert or an extrovert engaging in different ways?
- ❖ What about kids with learning challenges? How are they experiencing things differently? What are their unique challenges?
- ❖ How can we help children already grappling with social anxiety and/or other social/emotional challenges?
- ❖ What about the children and adults who are suffering in silence? How can we identify and support them?
- ❖ Are any students falling through the cracks?
- ❖ How are family dynamics and experiences affecting the student?
- ❖ Why is social distancing and wearing masks going to be harder for some than others?
- ❖

## **STRATEGIES**

### **1. LISTEN AND LEARN**

How can we find out what students need to stay healthy mentally, emotionally, and socially so that they can continue to access learning? We LISTEN.

Teachers, advisors, and counselors are all in the position to ask questions and sit back and listen to the student's words and observe body language.

*Design A Survey (age appropriate) To See How Children Are Doing*

This will help us to understand what our students are experiencing. It will need to be tailored to the developmental age of the student and that will require some creativity. There could also be a daily or weekly check in where students can rate their feelings on a scale (or through pictures for the youngest). This is a good way to reach out because those students who are feeling down are most likely to respond.

**2. PIGGYBACK ON THE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Design age appropriate programs centered on non-verbal communication skills. There has never been a better time to take advantage of this unique opportunity to help kids understand the importance of non-verbal language. Generally, this education doesn't start until children are a bit older but social distancing and wearing face masks make it important to begin the dialogue sooner. Use picture books, role plays, games, discussions.

**3. COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS PRIOR TO THE RETURN TO SCHOOL**