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Lessons from developmental science to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 restrictions on social development

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social restrictions, children's peer interactions have been altered. Peer interactions help children learn from each other to develop their understanding of conversation, emotion, and group norms. In addition, friendships can reduce intergroup bias and prejudice and increase independence. In this article, we review the ways that peers contribute to children's cognitive and social development in informal and formal settings. Although restrictions are necessary to control the spread of the virus, social restrictions do not have to be to the detriment of peer relations. Based on evidence in developmental psychology, we end with suggestions for parents, teachers, and schools for how to continue to enable children to engage in peer interactions safely throughout future restrictions.

Keywords

childhood, COVID-19, intergroup, peer interactions

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Children develop in everyday interaction with important others, such as peers (Rogoff et al., 2018). Children's active engagement with peers serves as a rich resource for their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has altered the ways that children interact with their peers to the detriment of children's learning. Local and national lockdowns and school closures, although necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19, have severely limited children's opportunities for face-to-face interactions, while the need to maintain social distance has reduced children's opportunities to interact independently, away from adult supervision and scrutiny. In this article, we outline how the reduction

of independent peer interaction, in schools and other settings, is likely to negatively impact on all children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, including understanding of group dynamics and the development of intergroup attitudes and relationships. We end with evidence-based recommendations that may serve to limit

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the impact of COVID-19 on these critical outcomes.

Our focus is on the possible impact of curtailed peer interactions because peers play a central role in children's socialisation. Peer interactions enable children to develop their own cultural communities and norms for interactions (Howes & Lee, 2006). Participation with peers tends to be less hierarchical than with parents, with interactional influence often shifting quickly between different children (Gerrits et al., 2005) enabling children to practise and learn new skills. Many of the developmental tasks and social skills children need to develop for future successful peer interactions are developed via social interaction and practice. For example, children appropriate how to regulate and express emotions in peer interactions (Denham et al., 2003). These interactions guide children to develop everyday skills.

Lessons From Research in Formal Settings

During the pandemic, children's peer interactions in schools were suspended, which could have an influence on their cognitive development in the short term. Indeed, an ample body of literature concludes that peer interactions facilitate cognitive development (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). When children discuss concepts from mathematics to moral dilemmas to scientific learning, they learn more through peer conversation than when they simply try to learn material on their own. Instructions that ask children to understand the perspective of another and come to consensus facilitate learning (Tenenbaum et al., 2020). One reason may be that there is a specific type of talk, exploratory talk, that is more likely to lead to gains in learning than other types of talk (Mercer, 2008). Exploratory talk involves co-constructing knowledge through the sharing of ideas whilst being able to challenge and evaluate ideas before coming to a consensus (Mercer, 2008). Such talk does not come naturally to children and, instead, needs to be taught (Mercer et al., 2004). These types of talk lead to gains in conceptual understanding (Mercer et al., 2004).

Peer interaction also provides children with opportunities to develop their social understanding of conversations, how to follow norms critical to smooth social functioning and understand how not to cause offense, preventing a faux pas. Faux pas situations are those in which one person inadvertently causes offence or behaves inappropriately, and understanding and avoiding these potentially awkward interactions is crucial for good peer relations (Banerjee et al., 2011). For children over six years of age, more advanced and naturalistic insights into others' mental states, such as how to detect faux pas, become increasingly important to smooth social functioning (Banerjee et al., 2011). In a longitudinal study, seven- and nine-year-old children who were rejected by peers were more likely than other children to have a poorer understanding of faux pas a year later than children who were not (Banerjee et al., 2011). Unfortunately, having poorer faux pas understanding predicted peer rejection in older age groups, suggesting that a lack of smooth social functioning may lead to peer rejection. Curtailed peer interactions could decrease children's opportunities to develop emotional understanding and social competence. Lack of emotional understanding could lead to decreases in wellbeing, social interactions, and self-esteem.

Lack of experience interacting with one's peer group could also negatively impact children's understanding of groups. Among children, play and peer socialisation are important for developing strong social bonds, discerning their role in the peer group, and understanding group dynamics. In their model of Developmental Subjective Group Dynamics, Abrams and Rutland (2008) argue that, with age, children develop a more sophisticated understanding of how groups work, including the ability to understand complex intra and intergroup dynamics and conventions, such as conformity to group norms, group loyalty, ingroup preference, and the consequences of deviating from normative expectations of the group. Abrams and colleagues argue that this more nuanced understanding of groups, termed "group nous", develops with age as children gain more and more varied experiences with their peer

group (Abrams & Rutland, 2008). To illustrate, in an experimental study, Abrams et al. (2007) found that older children, in a high accountability condition, were more likely to take into account group membership, and groups norms, and favour normative ingroup members. These findings show how with age and experience, children adapt their group behaviour to take into account contextual information such as group norms, and the presence of fellow group members. School closures and social distance requirements that limit opportunities for independent socialisation mean children no longer have a safe testing ground for developing their understanding of group dynamics, which may limit their developing “group nous”.

School closures and restrictions on socialisation with peers are also likely to impede the initiation and maintenance of cross-group friendships. Cross-group friendships are a vital tool in efforts to reduce prejudice and discrimination and promote good intergroup relations (Wölfer et al., 2016). Seventy years of research has shown that positive intergroup contact is one of the best means of reducing prejudice across the lifespan (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), and cross-group friendships have emerged as a particularly effective form of contact among young people (Wölfer et al., 2016). Children aged six years through to adolescence with outgroup friends tend to report more positive outgroup attitudes, reduced intergroup anxiety, and increased intergroup trust (e.g., Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). Among ethnic minority youth, cross-group friendships also appear to serve a protective function, by providing a buffer against the negative impact of prejudice and discrimination (Bagci et al., 2017; Benner & Wang, 2017).

The importance of cross-group friendships appears to be particularly acute in childhood and adolescence. At this young age, less entrenched attitudes are more malleable, and may be particularly affected by social context and contact experiences (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). The long-term effects of cross-group friendship are significant, and such relationships in childhood have been linked to more positive outgroup attitudes in adolescence (Wölfer et al., 2016) and a more diverse

social network in adulthood (Emerson et al., 2002).

Schools provide essential opportunities for the initiation and sustenance of cross-group friendship. This is particularly the case in areas where there is little integration between communities, meaning that for some children, schools provide the only opportunity young people have to mix with individuals from a different background to their own.

It is likely that school closures have had a disproportionate negative impact on young people’s cross-group friendships, compared with same-group friendships. This is because cross-group friendships in childhood are, in the first place, less common than same-group friendships (Aboud & Sankar, 2007; Hewstone et al., 2018), and they are also more difficult to initiate and sustain (Aboud & Sankar, 2007). Cross-group friendships also rely on having the opportunity to meet in multiple contexts in the wider community, outside of the school setting, and engaged in less-structured activities (Aboud & Sankar, 2007; Stringer et al., 2009). Local and national lockdowns and school closures severely limit children’s opportunities for such varied cross-group peer interactions, especially in more segregated communities. This restriction may be most powerfully experienced by younger children who will rely on parents’ friendship networks for arranged playdates. In divided communities, those friendship networks are likely to consist of families from the children’s and parents’ own community, for example their own religious or ethnic community. In these ways, children’s opportunities for interaction with cross-group peers, which is essential for maintaining these more fragile bonds, are likely to be severely restricted by limitations on peer socialisation in response to COVID-19 (see also Hales et al., 2021, for further discussion of the effects of physical distancing on adults’ perceptions of being ostracised).

Lessons from Informal Settings

Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for young people to socialise with their peers in informal gatherings, unmediated by

adults, have also been severely curtailed by restrictions imposed by governments around the world. Informal gatherings in safe contexts, away from the oversight of adults, give young people a chance to engage in sustained, independent interactions with each other on their own terms, to take part in activities and discuss issues of interest and value to them, and provide essential opportunities for the development of social skills and understandings that cannot be learned in adult-led settings (Baines & Blatchford, 2011, 2019; Blatchford, 1998). These gatherings also provide young people with a chance to develop social skills essential for managing friendships and interpersonal interactions, as they are required to manage friendship disputes, cooperation, rejection and communication independently, without an adult being available to “step in”.

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, academics had noted a worrying decline in opportunities for young people to socialise informally outside school. In their study of secondary school pupils’ opportunities for informal socialising, Baines and Blatchford (2019) noted a significant decline in the proportion of pupils who regularly meet (offline) with peers outside of school, and a significant increase in the proportion of students who rarely meet with peers outside of school (less than once a week). They argue that schools have an essential role to play in children’s social development, perhaps providing the only opportunity for young people to socialise directly (and in unmediated ways) with peers their own age, in lunch and breaktimes for instance (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). COVID-19 has necessarily severely restricted young people’s ability to socialise independently (unmediated by adults) in school or outside of school, precluding them from the unique developmental outcomes of these important interactions.

Suggestions for the Future

What we see across formal and informal settings is that peer interactions enable children to gain cognitive, emotional, and social skills. Through these everyday interactions with their peers, children learn about how different social groups

work and how to interact with their peers and contemporaries in the future. In addition, peer interaction can help children learn to interact with peers from other backgrounds and break down barriers to inclusion. As a result, these interactions support children in accepting a diverse group of peers and decrease prejudice. Although lockdowns and restrictions limit peer interactions, we believe that social restrictions are necessary. Our role as psychologists is to mitigate some of the unintended, negative consequences of these restrictions. What becomes clear is that, going forward, we need to find ways of harnessing the benefits of peers in the future. For this reason, we offer recommendations based on developmental science.

One suggestion is to use electronic communication. Indeed, when young people were prevented from meeting in person, many turned to electronic communication platforms. Although parents and teachers may be nervous about increasing children’s online media use, there are benefits to online media. For example, electronic platforms have the positive effect of supporting young people in forming and maintaining friendships. Koutamanis et al. (2013) proposed the internet-induced social skills hypothesis in which online communication skills support children in developing in-person social skills. In support of their hypothesis, the use of Instant Messaging in Dutch young people aged 10 to 17 years predicted facility in starting offline friendships six months later in a longitudinal study. The effect seems to be a result of communicating with different people, which allows young people to learn different ways of communication. It may also be that online self-disclosure supports young people in knowing how to disclose offline (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Similarly, 12- to 20-year-old Italian young people reported that the internet helps them maintain and make new friends (Borca et al., 2015). Thus, young people may have been able to increase the number of friendships they have during the lockdown through the increased use of technology.

This technology could also be used by teachers to increase cognitive development. For example, we recommend that teachers assign

children in groups to work together on assignments. Children could use technology provided by schools to develop joint projects or even discuss simple maths problems. Importantly, however, teachers should teach children how to work together as groups and learn to listen to each other. Second, parents should encourage the use of messaging services between peers to allow self-disclosure between young people as practice for in-person communication. Parents should, of course, have conversations with young people about how and what is appropriate to disclose. At the same time, parents need to be aware that in peer groups, children develop their own norms.

Schools also need to consider how they can optimise cross-group interaction in the school day, and when learning online. This can include formal learning time, but also informal interaction opportunities such as in lunch and break. Online learning should be mindful of facilitating cross-group interactions where possible, in order to make the most of the limited contact available. E-contact is a growing area of research, and early results point to the potential impact of carefully executed cross-group interactions online, on intergroup attitudes (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012). See also Blanchard (2021) for further discussion of virtual working and virtual group entitativity in an adult context.


Conclusion

In sum, we see that peers serve as an important resource for children's development and support children's cognitive, emotional, and social skills across different types of gatherings. Peers and friends can also reduce prejudice and help children understand diversity. The lockdowns and school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed many peer interactions. Going forward, we believe that we can learn to support children to develop some of these same skills through careful online-mediated communication. Although these interactions are not a substitute for in-person peer interaction, they can support children to appropriate many of the same skills needed for successful development.

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