

Social Isolation Is Damaging an Entire Generation of Kids

I read an advice article at Slate recently where a mom of a nearly five-year-old daughter wrote in to express concern that her child hasn't seen any friends in five months, since COVID-19 lockdowns began. She said:

Because of COVID, my husband and I have decided to skip [pre-K] altogether and teach her everything she needs to know before kindergarten ourselves. This doesn't worry me academically, but I am concerned about her development and the loss of the social interaction she was going to experience.

The advice columnist responded that the mom shouldn't worry about her child's social isolation, saying:

She is part of a whole generation of quarantined 5-year-olds. It'll take her a while to catch up once she reenters society, sure—but it's going to take everyone a while.

This resignation to ongoing government lockdowns, endless social distancing, mandatory mask orders, and travel restrictions—even as the virus wanes in the US—is damaging to our social and economic health, and may be particularly problematic for children who are separated from their peers.

While some evidence suggests that young people are faring well outside of forced schooling, with less school-induced stress and anxiety, the same research indicates that children and teens are missing their friends dearly. Social isolation seems to be taking a toll. With most large, urban school districts planning remote-learning only this fall, the isolation is likely to continue for many children—unless parents step in to alleviate this loneliness.

An article in *The Wall Street Journal* exposed the impact of pandemic-related social isolation on children and adolescents: “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.”

Another recent *Journal* article reinforced these unintended consequences of the lockdowns and social distancing on adolescents, and particularly girls: “Adolescent girls already were experiencing record-high levels of loneliness, anxiety and depression before the pandemic, according to Mary Pipher, a clinical psychologist and author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*... ‘All of the things that a year ago were increasing girls’ depression have been exacerbated by the pandemic,’ [said] Dr. Pipher.”

Kids Need Other Kids

Regardless of whether or not you think schools should reopen for in-person learning this fall, the reality is that kids need to be around other kids to play, socialize, and learn.

They don’t need this play, socializing, and learning to happen in schools.

In fact, they may find much more authentic, satisfying social play and learning outside of a conventional classroom. Peter Gray, research professor of psychology at Boston College, has written extensively on the importance of unstructured childhood social play for children’s health and well-being. In a June interview with NPR, Gray said:

Play is crucial to children’s development. And much of my research shows that over the last few decades, our children have been very play deprived. They spend so much time in school, so much time that homework after school, so much time in adult-directed activities which are not fully play — play is activity that children develop themselves — that children take control of themselves and their children learn to be independent and solve their own problems.

(To learn more about this, see Gray’s book *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*.)

If they were play-deprived prior to the pandemic, then many children may be more play-deprived now, as they have been cut-off from peers for nearly six months. Gray has documented the correlation between the decline in play and the rise in childhood and adolescent mental health disorders. This is something that is deeply concerning now as children, and especially adolescents, are even more distanced from their peers.

While technology has been a lifesaver for all of us during the pandemic, it has also consumed a much larger portion of children’s lives. A new report released this month by the Children’s Hospital of Chicago found that 63 percent of teens are using social media more than they did pre-pandemic, and more than half of their parents indicate that social

media use is having a negative impact on their kids.

Perhaps more startling, the survey found that 68 percent of parents say that social media is interfering with their teen's ability to have normal social interactions. Concerns about social media use and its impact on teen mental and social health were widespread before the pandemic, but it could be particularly troubling now as social media use soars while many teens remain separated from their friends.

The continued quarantining of healthy children and adolescents is misguided and deprives them of the childhood play and in-person social interaction that are critical to their growth and development. FEE's Jon Miltimore wrote a great article recently saying this very thing, and providing international data on the low risks of COVID-19 on children. The health risks to children of the virus may be small, but the risks to children's mental and emotional health from forced separation from peers is not. Miltimore writes:

The best scientific evidence we have shows that children have the least to fear from COVID-19. As the CDC points out, the common flu is far more dangerous for children than the coronavirus. A society that deprives children of the basic freedom to gather to play, learn, explore, and socialize does them a grave injustice, one that will result in far more harm than good. Fortunately, we have ample evidence and real-life examples that show the costs of quarantining healthy children far outweigh the benefits.

The OECD recently issued a report detailing the global harm the pandemic response is inflicting on children's social and economic health and well-being, especially poor children. Its recommendation to combat these detrimental effects is to add more government interventions and mandates, particularly in social services, healthcare, and education.

But adding more layers of government involvement to fix the problems created by government lockdown policies puts expensive Band-Aids on injuries that could be alleviated by loosening the lockdowns.

What Can Parents Do?

So what can parents do? While they may not be able to lift government orders, parents can lift some of their self-imposed social distancing practices to help their children and teens avoid continued isolation and the damaging consequences that can arise from being disconnected from their peers.

Take the steps to connect your children with other children for play dates and social interactions, and encourage older children and teens to reach out to their friends to organize in-person get-togethers.

If schools aren't open for in-person learning, consider creating a "pandemic pod" this fall for consistent group play and learning, and encourage teens to gather for small, in-person study groups and co-learning. Push back against the creeping government control of family life, and question the politicians and pundits who keep telling you, and especially your kids, to stay home.