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Your kids might now be socially awkward—and they're not alone

Experts think pandemic isolation has impacted children's social skills. Here's how parents can help as their students head back to school.

BY RACHEL NG

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Third-grade teacher Samantha Thompson was on recess duty when she heard screams. Alarmed, she scanned the playground for the source of the distress till she found the boy.

When she asked why he was screaming, the kid shrugged and replied, "I don't know."

In her first weeks back to school in San Diego, Thompson found this to be a common scene. "When I first came back, there was a lot of screaming for no reason," she says. "The kids will be outside playing, and they'll just start screaming really loud to get people's attention or to get them to do what they want."

After more than a year of lockdown, experts agree that pandemic isolation has impacted some kids' social skills, especially their ability to regulate frustration, cooperate, and focus. "The past school year has been super challenging because kids had lost some social skills or emotional self-regulation skills," says [Robyn Koslowitz](#), a clinical psychologist and director of the Targeted Parenting Institute. "That's understandable because they went through something major and life-changing."

Socialization is at the core of how children develop cognitive skills and other tasks that they'll eventually need in adulthood, and they develop vital social skills when they're around



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their peers: They learn to communicate, share toys, wait for their turns, and nurture new friendships. But more than a year of *not* being around peers is likely going to impact those social skills.

In fact, [according to a survey](#) by education-tech company Osmo, 72 percent of parents are worried about their kids' social skills development as they return to in-person school. That includes everything from remembering basic manners and managing everyday interactions like making conversations, meeting new people, sharing, staying quiet for long periods, waiting for their turn, and saying "please" and "thank you." Another survey by Harvard's [Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative's Early Learning Study](#) found that 61 percent of parents reported that their child's social-emotional development had been negatively impacted by the pandemic.

But even though research shows that kids have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, experts also agree that children have an extraordinary ability to catch up on lost progress.

"Kids are resilient, and they're ready to learn and socialize," Reyes says. Here's how to ease them back into in-person schools and activities.

Social skills and the brain

Picture a child's developing brain as an empty field. When your child learns a new skill, they're "rolling" a bowling ball repeatedly to make a groove. Then, when they roll a tennis ball or a golf ball through the field, that ball might find the deep groove left by the bowling ball and follow that path.

"Anything that a child learns or experiences builds neural pathways," says child neurologist [Jane Tavyev Asher](#), director of the Division of Child Neurology and Neurodevelopmental Disabilities at Cedars-Sinai Medical Group. These connections between neurons (or brain cells) makes subsequent attempts at the same task easier.

How well a brain develops depends on many factors, including the child's experiences with other people and the world, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). So when the pandemic cancelled, well, everything, children lost out on the experiences that were supposed to be creating social learnings in the brain. In other words, because that bowling ball wasn't making deep grooves in their brains, the tennis ball won't always know what path to take.

The good news is that kids' brains, especially in early development, are malleable and can change with repetition and practice.

"Their brains still demonstrate remarkable ability for recovery and growth known as neuroplasticity," Asher says. "If we can push to make up for lost time, they can certainly still gain those skills."

Figuring out how socially awkward your child is feeling

You'll likely notice (or be told by a teacher) if your child is suddenly cutting in line or not raising her hand. But other signs that your child is struggling might be more subtle, such as more frequent tantrums.



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“A telltale sign is if a kid is much more reactive and gets angry or anxious easily,” Koslowitz says. “Their emotional reactions are a sign that other stuff is not going well.” Older kids might turn to self-isolation. Some children may verbalize their worries and questions, while others may be more quiet.

Children displaying difficulty adjusting to the routines, structure, and responsibilities of school after a year at home might also be struggling socially. “These children may have more difficulty following instructions and sharing,” says pediatrician Pamela Phillips, chair of the Department of Pediatrics, Cedars-Sinai Medical Group. “Others may feel more hesitant about participating in the classroom and may initially seem withdrawn.”

Or they might be concerned that they won’t have friends to play with.

“I have eight-year-olds who haven’t seen their friends since they were in first grade, and now they’re in third grade,” Thompson says. “Maybe they don’t have anything in common with their friends from first grade anymore, or their friends may have moved on. The hardest part for the kids is to figure out who is their friend.”

How parents can improve those social skills

By interacting virtually rather than at playgrounds or school, kids have missed opportunities for building skills for self-regulation, problem-solving, and cooperation in their classrooms. That’s why practice and preparation is likely going to help kids the most for dealing with new perspectives and experiences.

To get children accustomed to a new environment with potentially different rules and expectations, K-6 school counselor [Keri Powers](#) suggests changing the rules of a familiar game. For instance, if you’re playing Candy Land and draw a purple card, compliment the person to your left before moving to that space; for a green card, do five jumping jacks before advancing.

“Going back to in-person school, children will have to adapt to changing rules or expectations,” says Powers, author of *Social Skills for Kids*. “Playing games differently than they’re used to encourages children to actively think about rules and expectations in the moment.”

For younger children who are new to in-person schools, Powers suggests setting up a pretend school area: “Review school rules, and practice skills like following directions, raising a hand to speak, and waiting to be called on.”

For children who are having a hard time with their frustrations, parents can help them practice independent self-regulation strategies. “They can practice controlled breathing, positive self talk, or journaling together so the children are confident that they can use these strategies independently when they’re at school,” Powers says.

And if your child is having a bigger reaction than normal, Koslowitz suggests having a conversation with them. For example, you can say, *Hey buddy, it seems like you don’t always cry so hard when something happened. Now you’re crying really hard because your tablet screen cracked. Let’s talk about that.*





“If they’re having a huge problem reaction to what’s a small problem, they’re probably upset about something else,” she says. “So, what’s going on?”

Parents can also role-play conflict resolution and empathy strategies to help kids get along better with peers. “Whether it’s on the playground, in a group project, or just in friendship, opportunities for conflict resolution will certainly come up,” Powers says.

For instance, when you’re reading a book together or watching a favorite show, take the opportunity to discuss a conflict that arises in the story. “Then, role-play positive ways to work things out with peers by expressing feelings calmly, stating needs, and brainstorming positive solutions,” she adds.

Parents can also discuss what it might feel like to be one of the characters. “When they head back to school, they can transfer this skill to peer interactions,” Powers says, citing an example of asking a lonely kid to join in a game of kickball.

Then, try things out in real life—but slowly and in manageable doses. “If they’re going back to in-person school, it’s a good idea to start having playdates with kids who are in the class,” Koslowitz says. Pediatrician Phillips agrees: “Outdoor play is relatively safe, so plan a trip or two to a local playground so your child can practice interacting with other kids.”

Just make sure that kids don’t think they’re going on playdates because you’re worried about their behavior. As with most things, a parent’s attitude will directly affect the child’s. So if Dad vocalizes his worry about a kid’s social skills, the kid will worry as well.

“The most important role that a parent can play is modeling a positive attitude,” Phillips says. “Children look to the adults in their lives to decide how to react to situations, and we need to set the right tone.”

Regardless of how socially awkward your child has become, Reyes assures parents that kids are quick learners and will adapt to new processes with time and consistency. Teacher Thompson would agree: Four weeks into the school year, she noticed significant improvements in her class.

“They definitely struggled in the first couple weeks,” she says. “It took them awhile to get their footing, but now they’re right back into the swing of things.”

Educators are also quick to point out that though children might need to work on rebuilding those social skills, the skills they’ve gained during lockdowns are just as important.

“What about some experiences that have added to their knowledge? What have they learned after a year at home with their older siblings or grandparents?” Reyes says. “There is knowledge learned at home that will benefit kids socially and academically.”



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