

The Impacts of COVID-19

On the Social Development of Young Children

Our nation's youngest children have lived most, if not all, of their lives during a global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic drastically upended the lives of parents and children in a multitude of ways; child care programs closed, stay-at-home orders were issued in many states, and parents struggled to take care of their children while balancing work and other responsibilities. As a result, many infants and toddlers spent most of their earliest few years at home, with limited opportunities to socialize or gain critical relationship skills. Since the onset of the pandemic, researchers have studied and documented its negative academic effects. Many students have experienced “learning losses,” leaving children behind and widening preexisting opportunity- and inequity-gaps. However, the impact on social development among young children may be more severe in the long-term than currently understood. While parents and caretakers have the ability to uniquely provide nurturing, stimulating environments to help children thrive, during the pandemic many have found themselves stressed, overburdened, and struggling to provide these supports during a crucial time in young children's lives.

The first three years of life are critical for brain development, learning, and growth, but also most vulnerable to being shaped by its surroundings. The greater challenges faced in early childhood, the greater risk of developmental delays and difficulty with cognitive impairment, substance abuse, and depression later in life. Pediatric physicians note that there are two crucial things that children need in order to build a healthy foundation of cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills that will serve them throughout life: nurturing interaction with caregivers and protection from toxic stress. For many young children, the COVID-19 crisis may have negatively impacted both of these pillars by upending nurturing interaction and increasing toxic stress as caregivers faced severe financial stress, anxiety about health and safety, and depression.

COVID-19 Increased Toxic Stress and Exacerbated Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are defined as traumatic or stressful events that occur in childhood, such as domestic violence, abuse, neglect, and parental mental illness or substance dependence. Studies show that ACEs may be exacerbated by the results of the pandemic—including job loss, social isolation, school closures, and other stressors. According to medical research, the high-level of stress created as a result of COVID-19 may generate tolerable or toxic stress for young children.¹ While both tolerable and toxic stress are the body's response to more lasting and serious stress, the key distinction is that when children experience tolerable stress they have a supportive caregiver to help turn down the stress response, while toxic stress occurs when there is not enough caregiver support.² The child's subsequent inability to turn off the stress response can cause bodily harm.

Under the appropriate care, children's brains are able to reorganize and return to normal functioning without damage. But for children who have minimal or no support there can be irreversible neurological losses due to toxic stress."^{3,4} This is especially true when healthy interaction with others is severely limited due to social isolation and extreme caregiver stress. Young children experiencing chronic stress and trauma without the buffer of a nurturing supportive relationship can be vulnerable to lifelong mental health problems. Now, more than ever, it is important to recognize and expand resources in the field of infant and early childhood mental health.⁵



Limited Social Interaction and Play-Based Learning

Due to fear of infection and mandated quarantines, parents had to keep their young children at home for significant periods of time. According to a report from the Department of Education, only 13% of children in families experiencing poverty and 38% of those above the poverty line were reported to receive in-person preschool.⁶ Because child care centers and even playgrounds shut down, many infants and toddlers missed out on opportunities to form important social interaction skills. Play-based learning is particularly relevant to young children, as it is where children are able to explore, interact with others, and learn to cooperate. According to a UNICEF report:

“Through play, children learn to forge connections with others and to share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts, as well as learn self-advocacy skills.

Play also teaches children leadership as well as group skills.”⁷ Many infants and toddlers born in the pandemic have not had access to these vital early childhood experiences.

Additionally, because infants and toddlers have spent so much time indoors, their lack of access to and engagement with outdoor spaces may also negatively affect their health and emotional wellbeing. There are a myriad of mental and physical benefits to outdoor play, and research demonstrates that children's exposure to the outdoors presents positive health and physical developments (such as development and refinement of locomotor skills), improved self-control, better communication, and social development.⁸

Impact on School Readiness and Future Success

90% of brain development occurs before kindergarten, and the early years are formative in laying the foundation for future behavior.⁹

Key core competencies for young children's development include self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

In the context of young children, this looks like managing emotions, taking turns, becoming independent in following routines, and interacting positively with peers. These are gained and strengthened in early learning settings because children learn about emotions and how they can be managed when interacting with others. They are also key predictors of school readiness, future academic achievement, and positive life outcomes.

While the full effects remain unclear, early research indicates many infants and toddlers raised during the pandemic experienced delays in cognitive and motor skills.¹⁰ Fewer interactions in quality early childhood settings also reduced language skills. One research study found that babies from low-income families experienced the largest drops, that boys were more affected than girls, and that gross motor skills were affected the most.¹¹ According to a research study conducted by Columbia University looking across groups of 6 month old babies, babies born in the pandemic produced lower scores in gross motor, fine motor, and social-emotional development, than babies born before the pandemic.¹² The study notes that, “[e]xamples of developmental tasks for infants this age are rolling from back to tummy, reaching for or grasping a toy with both hands, and acting differently to strangers than to parents or familiar people.”¹³

Studies demonstrate that children with poor or under-developed social and emotional skills display more challenging behavior, including anger, withdrawal, anxiety, and aggression.

Likely as a result of lack of exposure paired with pandemic-related stressors, programs and parents have reported an increase in behavioral issues. Many infants and toddlers have been traumatized by circumstances exacerbated by the pandemic in ways that may have stunted their social and emotional growth. These experiences give concern as to whether our nation's infants and toddlers have the developmental skills they need to enter Kindergarten prepared. Research findings have potentially profound long-term effects because overwhelming evidence demonstrates that children who enter kindergarten behind are more likely to stay behind throughout the course of their academic careers.



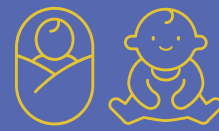
Steep Decreases in State Pre-K Enrollment and Early Intervention Services

Not only are children lacking important developmental skills, but national data shows that more parents opted to keep their children out of pre-k and kindergarten during the pandemic due to concerns about COVID-19, reluctance to participate in virtual programs, or lack of availability.

During the 2020-2021 school year, enrollment in state pre-k programs dropped for the first time in two decades and decreased in nearly every state, with a handful of states experiencing more than a 30% decline.

According to Steven Barnett, senior co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), “The pandemic erased an entire decade of progress in preschool enrollment” and added that it was “minority children and children from low-income backgrounds who lost out most.”¹⁴ This means more children than usual will be entering the classroom learning setting, and further behind, for the first time this year. Additionally since the start of the pandemic, fewer young children have been receiving early intervention services and there has been a decrease in referral rates.¹⁵ From 2019-2020, the number of children birth to age two served by IDEA Part C services declined by 63,847 or 15%.¹⁶ All but 3 states (DC, SC, WY) reported decreases in the percent of children served.¹⁷ Underidentification could create an uptick in referrals in elementary schools in the next few years and on top of that, children who were eligible but did not receive services due to the pandemic will likely need increased support.

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Necessity for Increased Research, Support, and Policies

Given we have not seen these babies and toddlers grow, there are many unknowns about what developmental, social, emotional, and mental health impacts the COVID-19 crisis has had on young children. These research findings emphasize the necessity to ensure COVID-induced harms are addressed and don't affect future development, learning, and success.

With existing federal dollars, states could consider implementing, strengthening and/or expanding certain policies to help, including:

- 1 Ensuring developmental screening for mental health and social-emotional needs are included as part of regular, universal developmental screening.**¹⁸ Screenings can be conducted and coordinated across early care and education, home visiting, school, primary care, or community-based settings in a way that meets whole-family needs.
- 2 Reducing suspensions and expulsions in early learning settings.** Exclusionary discipline policies can hinder development and may delay or interfere with the process of identifying students with disabilities or developmental delays. Given fostering the social, emotional, and behavioral development of young children requires a safe, nurturing space, states could consider limiting the use of exclusionary discipline practices and providing appropriate educator supports.
- 3 Increasing early educator compensation.** Healthy development is rooted in high-quality, responsive relationships and young children need qualified, properly compensated early educators to receive these supports. Currently, 11 states have a statewide stipend program, 6 of which fund wage supplements through the Child Care WAGE\$ Program, where early care and education professionals receive education-based salary supplements.¹⁹ 32 states offer statewide bonus programs and 2 states (Louisiana and Nebraska) offer teacher tax credits.²⁰
- 4 Expanding support for mental health consultation.** Given the development and emotional well-being of young children is directly tied to the functioning and health of caregivers, states could consider investing in Infant-Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC), as well as other targeted training, professional development, and evidence-based best practices for early educators. IECMHC is a preventative intervention that pairs a mental health professional with ECE providers and families to identify and use best practices to support children's social-emotional and behavioral development.
- 5 Strengthening IDEA Child Find efforts for infants and toddlers.** IDEA Part C, which authorizes federal funding for early intervention services to children ages birth to three with disabilities, requires states to implement Child Find activities to identify infants and toddlers who may be eligible for early intervention services. States could consider increasing their investments in Child Find activities in the coming year as many children who are eligible have likely not been identified.
- 6 Expanding eligibility for IDEA Part C Service to "at risk" children.** Currently, states may choose to make children at risk for disabilities eligible for IDEA Part C services, however, only 6 states do so. Increased federal funding for IDEA may encourage more states to expand eligibility, as many children would greatly benefit.

Resources on Social Development



Parent(s):

National Head Start Association (NHSA) [“Five Ways Parents Can Support Children’s Social and Emotional Development”](#)

Child Trends [“Resources for Supporting Children’s Emotional Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic”](#)



Child Care Providers/ Schools:

National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) [“Promoting Young Children’s Social and Emotional Health”](#)



States and Local Governments:

Administration for Children and Families (ACF) [“A Resource Guide for Developing Integrated Strategies to Support the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Children”](#)

References

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5. [Zero to Three: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health](#)
6. [Department of Education: Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs](#)
7. [UNICEF Report: Learning Through Play](#)
8. [COVID-19 pandemic impact on children and adolescents’ mental health: Biological, environmental, and social factors](#)
9. [First Things First](#)
10. [The COVID-19 generation: how is the pandemic affecting kids’ brains?](#)
11. Ibid.
12. [Pandemic challenges may affect babies- possibly in long-lasting ways](#)
13. Ibid.
14. [Report: Pandemic ‘Erased’ a Decade of Growth in Pre-K Enrollment](#)
15. [The Impact of COVID-19 on Early Intervention: How States Can Support Our Youngest Learners](#)
16. [New Data: Number of IDEA eligible Students Ages 3-21 Shows Little Change from 2019. Number of Infants and Toddlers Drop Significantly](#)
17. Ibid.
18. U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education (ED), [Dear Colleague Letter on Social-Emotional Development and Mental Health](#)
19. [State Policies to Improve Early Childhood Educator Jobs](#)
20. Ibid.