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## Is the pandemic affecting children's development?

We are living in unprecedented times, and all of us are feeling the strain. In addition to their own worries and concerns, most parents are anxious for their children – how will lockdown affect them?

Will social distancing or being away from school harm child development or educational progress? With a recent study by the [Educational Policy Institute](#) (EPI) revealing that mental health problems in children are on the rise since the start of the pandemic (from 1 in 9 to 1 in 6 in children aged 5-16), how worried should we be about our children?

### How might lockdown affect development?

Many parents with babies and very young children are worried that their [normal social development](#) may be impaired due to lack of contact with others. "We know that many parents are worried that their baby won't know how to interact with people because they can't see their facial expressions, and they're not attending playdates," agrees Alison Morton, Acting Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting.

Slightly older children may also miss the learning that comes from interacting with a wider audience, as it is through this contact that they learn to make friends and share. "Interacting helps children to manage their 'big feelings'," explains Morton. "Getting angry or frustrated or showing kindness."

When it comes to language, too, children may find their experience during lockdown has an impact. "Language is the primary indicator of child well-being," says Morton. "It's so important. We know if a child has good language development they do better when they start school, and there are strong links with better mental health when they're older."

Finally, the fact that children have limited or no access to play centres and may not be participating in their usual sports is likely to mean a reduction in the amount of daily exercise children enjoy. "Guidelines say children aged 1-5 should have 180 minutes of physical activity every day. It's really important because it helps with their skills, movement and coordination," says Morton.

Lack of exercise can impact fitness levels and may cause [weight gain](#), as well as having a negative effect on mental health.

## What about children's well-being?

On top of this, children spending time in a home environment where adults are likely to be more [stressed](#) than usual can have an impact on a child's sense of well-being. According to one [study](#), "comparing the symptoms of [post-traumatic stress](#) in parents and children confined in pandemic situations with those of families in normal routines" indicated that "stress levels are four times higher for children who have been in quarantine."

Other factors that may be an issue for some children include [nutrition](#) - whether good nutrition is being provided at home and whether they have access to sufficient food.

Children living in an abusive home may also be less likely to be identified and supported by schools or social services, simply due to lack of contact with adults outside the home.

## Will children recover?

With many of us worried about our children's health and development, alongside a wealth of other issues, the most important thing to remember is that everybody is struggling. The cohort of children affected by the pandemic will all need support and assistance once life opens up again, and it is likely that schools and other support services will introduce programmes to rectify perceived educational or social problems once life returns to normal.

No matter how diligently parents work, it would be impossible to completely eliminate the impact of the pandemic on children's lives. The good news is that, while the current situation may be unprecedented, there are studies that demonstrate that most children bounce back incredibly well after a setback.

"We know from studies that children who have had really deprived early lives - way beyond anything that coronavirus has done - can catch up with their development," says [Dr Sharie Coombes](#), Child Psychologist.

"There's a lot we don't know about the long-term effects of this pandemic on children. But we do have a lot of learning from other children growing up in restricted environments - for example, refugee camps or children who are immune suppressed going through [chemotherapy](#) which limits their social interaction. The children in those environments miss opportunities for play and experience boredom or inactivity.

"They reported that they felt unhappy and [lonely](#) but actually making the best of it, finding opportunities to play as best as they can helped. Children are quite resilient and although we don't know everything, we're hopeful that the punchline is that basically with the right support, most children are going to come out of this OK," agrees Morton.

## How we can help

None of us is the perfect parent. But there are things we can do to minimise the effect of lockdown on our children. However, it's important to recognise that everybody's time and home situation will be different. Some parents may simply not be able to work with and help their children as much as they would like to. The key here is to do our best, without exacerbating stress levels.

### Tune into their needs

"For very young children, as long as they have a parent or carer tuned into their needs and can respond to them effectively, they have a very good chance of developing well," explains Morton. "Newborns can learn to communicate through parents sitting down with them and playing games, for example."

### Talk to children

In terms of language development and social skills, while children may miss out on interaction with a wide range of people, interaction and conversation in the home will continue to play an important role. "A child's relationship with their parent provides a solid foundation on which all other relationships are built. So much can be learned from interaction with parents and carers," agrees Morton.

### **Provide the opportunity to exercise**

While it may be difficult to provide the amount of exercise children need each day, taking advantage of a daily walk, using play equipment if available or even setting up activities within the home environment will all help. "Physical movement is really important as it helps young children to develop their movement and coordination," agrees Morton.

### **Stay in touch**

Many children are missing relatives and extended family – or, for younger children, perhaps not developing the close bond they ordinarily would with certain family members. However, the good news is that even young children do respond to interaction with a person on screen.

"Babies respond well to interaction on a screen provided it's in real time, and the person they are talking to responds to their actions and emotions," explains Morton.

### **Have confidence in catch-up**

Plus for those who are unable to speak to relatives in this way, any distancing of relationships is likely to be rectified once things return to normal. "Some parents are worried that their children might forget grandma, but children can learn very quickly when they're reintroduced to relatives that they're part of their circle. It's unlikely to affect their relationship in the long run."

### **Possible benefits**

Lockdown is something that has been introduced as a last resort – rather than a positive move. But while it may have made certain aspects of development more difficult, this enforced period of limited activity may result in some positive developmental changes too.

For example, according to Coombes, children may benefit from learning how to deal with boredom and some level of isolation. "We already know that the capacity to be alone and the capacity to tolerate **being bored** are good for our mental health," explains Coombes. "So it's possible that children who have experienced lockdown may become more resilient in the longer term."

Another additional benefit may be that with so many children likely to need additional support, more attention will be given to supporting young people in regaining their confidence going forward. "I feel there will be a national effort to address mental health through the curriculum," says Coombes. "And that can only be a good thing."

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