



<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/family/2021/02/how-the-pandemic-is-changing-childrens-friendships-coronavirus.html>

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FAMILY CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

# How the pandemic is changing children's friendships

BFFs look a little different right now. Here's what that might mean when the COVID-19 crisis is over.

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Just one year ago, kids could hold their friends' hands. They shared blankets at sleepovers. They clustered around birthday cakes to help blow out the candles.

And now they don't.

Many things in our pandemic-stricken world are very different. But perhaps the most striking change is how kids' interactions with each other have transformed. Learning to socialize in the era of social distancing can be tougher than any subject offered in virtual school, and experts like Wellesley College psychology professor Tracy Gleason believe that if children's friendships are altered, that could have an effect on them both now and in the future.

That's because, as she explains, that relationships beyond family are key to a child's development in a number of ways. Friendships help forge skills like negotiation, cooperation, and conflict resolution. They teach kids how to be supportive and show empathy. They also stimulate independent thinking and open kids up to new ideas.

So how are children maintaining these relationships now? Each child's social life depends on a variety of factors, including location and family structure, making it impossible to pinpoint one specific way that COVID-19 is—or could be—changing how friendships function.

"There are almost as many things happening to kid friendships as there are kids," Gleason says. But experts are keeping an eye out for patterns and pitfalls—and even potential windfalls—as kids chug along in their respective new normals.

## The new face of friendship

When clinical psychologist Julie Wargo Aikins couldn't leave her house last year without stepping on chalk drawings and spotting

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packs of kiddie cyclists, she realized something was changing when it came to kids and friendships. The associate professor at Wayne State University knew that prior to the pandemic, kids mostly formed friendships at school and through extracurricular activities. With the shift to remote learning and Zoom everything, the kids in her Michigan neighborhood had started getting noticeably closer to those who lived nearby.

“Children are seeking out socialization where they’re at and interacting with children they wouldn’t have before,” says Aikins, who notes that as long as they wear masks and play outside, this is a healthy and welcome development. For instance, knocking down age barriers in friendships gives older children a chance to take on mentoring roles and encourages younger children to challenge themselves.

Of course, not every family lives in a community where such mixing is possible, and outdoor playdates have dwindled as the weather gets colder. That leaves a lot of children looking for contact through a screen.

Video chat wasn’t a common way for kids to interact socially before, especially among the younger set, but many quickly acclimated to the new medium, says Aikins, who’s been impressed by how well kids in her research engage online. “They’re all used to being in virtual school at this point, and they’re pretty good at it,” she says. “Kids are adaptive and resilient.”

But the medium means these friendships can’t operate the way they used to, explains Emory University psychology professor Catherine Bagwell. “It has to be more intentional, not spontaneous,” she notes. And because of the additional planning required, she adds that it’s harder to maintain larger networks of friends this way.

Kids who’ve been attending in-person school have also seen their friendship experiences change, though perhaps in subtler ways. For instance, Maureen Morgan, faculty director of the Wellesley College Child Study Center, says kids at her laboratory preschool would normally be practicing how to play with blocks, crayons, and other toys together. “We’re used to talking about sharing things, but now they all have their own things,” she says.

## **What the new (friendship) normal means for kids**

Through her ongoing research, adolescent developmental psychologist Hannah Schacter has found one early nugget of promising news: In a survey of about 400 ninth graders entering high school in the fall of 2020, about 90 percent reported having close friends. Schacter, an assistant professor at Wayne State University, says that indicates that these young people are managing to keep up connections in a time when extra support is critical.

“In the face of stress—whether that’s being bullied or going through a global pandemic—no one wants to go through anything alone,” she says.

Schacter adds that with friendship, quality may matter more than quantity. When it comes to fending off feelings of loneliness, the key difference is “between one and not having anyone,” she adds.

But she is concerned by the fact that new friendship opportunities have been interrupted by COVID-19, forcing many kids into a funny game of “musical chairs” that has locked them into the relationships they had just before the pandemic.

“For kids not in the healthiest friendships, it’s harder to escape those,” Schacter says. “There aren’t as many opportunities for informal friend building anymore, like sitting next to each other in math class.”

And friendships, especially under these conditions, can backfire. In fact, a recently published study of Canadian adolescents during the early stages of the pandemic found that spending more time virtually connected with friends was linked to lower levels of loneliness—but higher rates of depression.

points out that adolescents who are more depressed may also be more likely to seek out support from friends.)

The more limited scope of friendships could have other ramifications, she adds. When your friends include a mix of soccer teammates, drama club buddies, and neighborhood kids, they're helping shape your identity in multiple ways. Fewer friends equal fewer influences.

Smaller social circles and less interaction with peripheral pals also means kids are losing the opportunity to practice negotiating relationships within larger peer groups, notes Bagwell. The upside, she adds, is that kids with social anxiety can exert more control over their interactions.

Another area of concern: Losing the physical aspects of friendship. "So much good stuff comes from hanging out in your friend's basement, smooshed together on the couch," says Bagwell, who's not sure how that will impact the way young people interact as they get older.

Morgan similarly wonders about how mask-wearing preschoolers will learn to navigate social situations, including future friendships. "Reading facial cues is a useful thing to do," she explains, and the kids simply aren't getting the same visual feedback they used to.

## Family to the rescue

As parents and children continue to work, go to school, eat, and play in each other's orbits, families are often there for kids when their friends can't be. Schacter says parental support provides a critical boost. (And in that same study of Canadian adolescents, more time engaging with family was linked to less reported depression.)

Although those interactions can't entirely replace what children need from friends, they provide important opportunities to observe how kids are coping.

"A parent can't jump in and take the place of a peer," Bagwell says. But moms and dads *can* encourage children to discuss their feelings about friendship—or lack thereof. "Give them an opportunity to talk about it. Are there things that are challenging? What are you surprised about?"

Those conversations can let parents know if they should be doing anything more pro-active, such as signing kids up for more online or socially distanced activities, or inviting neighbors to hang around the firepit.

Brothers and sisters can also help when kids are feeling isolated, Bagwell adds, "even if they seem to hate each other sometimes." Like in a parent-child relationship, you don't get to pick your siblings, so the dynamic is different from what develops between friends. But learning to get along at home will improve friendship skills, like compromise and teamwork.

Parents can encourage sibling unity by assigning two-person chores or just suggesting activities that require cooperation, like a complicated puzzle or LEGO project, Gleason says. When her family plays the online game "Among Us," her teens love to gang up—along with their cousins across the country—to beat all of the adults.

And don't forget imaginary friends. Gleason says with less kiddie social interaction available, parents may be hearing more about the exploits of friendly pink dinosaurs and chatty giant mice.

Those "friendships" might actually be your kid hinting that they want to talk to you more, Gleason says. Her recommendation: Ask lots of questions about their imaginary friends so kids can develop the fantasy.

At some point (hopefully) soon, more kids will be returning to your child's life. Gleason says parents should expect to play a role in that transition back to physical friendship, intervening to make sure kids can find their way back to something that was temporarily missing. But, she notes reassuringly, "Those skills are going to come, even if we've lost some ground."missing. But, she notes reassuringly, "Those skills are going to come, even if we've lost some ground."