

How to Help Kids Who Feel Isolated Right Now

Patrick Hayes

Illustration for article titled How to Help Kids Who Feel Isolated Right Now

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Over the summer, when it became clear that my 10-year-old son's school district was going to offer both face-to-face and virtual options for returning to school in the fall, his mom and I wanted him to feel like he had input into whatever decision was made.

My son is shy and introverted, but he has a small group of friends he's grown up with ever since kindergarten. He has missed them tremendously since March, and his only non-virtual access to those friendships would be him going to back to in-person classes. Still, he ultimately said he felt more comfortable staying home.

And for the most part, he's been resilient and adapted to such a dramatic change. He gets up early and starts on assignments at the same time every day. His grades are good, and he is self-motivated. He remembers when his Zoom meetings are, and has a good support system of adults. But sometimes, he just needs a friend who isn't his parent.

No matter how much I wish I still could, I can't play sports outside with the ridiculous amounts of energy he and his friends were always able to. I'm pathetically awkward at video games, and I can't troubleshoot all that effectively when he has issues connecting with his friends for online games.

Our primary concern with online school was how he would respond academically and adapt to having to be more self-driven than he would be in a traditional classroom. But that's been the easy part. Trying to navigate and supplement his emotional needs has proven more challenging.

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Start talking, and keep talking

For help, I reached out to Dr. Hannah Schacter, a developmental psychologist at [Wayne State University](#) in Detroit who studies how adolescents' social relationships affect their mental and physical health. She said what we're experiencing right now is not uncommon.

"One of children's and adolescents' favorite things about going to school is getting to interact with their peers—both in and outside of the classroom," Schacter said. "The shift to predominantly online learning has limited kids' abilities to engage in those informal school-based interactions that make them feel good—things like lunch with their friends in the cafeteria, sports games, after-school clubs, and sharing funny stories at their lockers during passing time."

She also notes that those emotional needs shouldn't be thought of as separate from learning, calling them "intricately intertwined, not separate priorities."

Dr. Hilary Marusak is a developmental neuroscientist at Wayne State who studies brain development in children and adolescents, and the effects of stress and trauma on the brain. She notes that most kids do have anxieties related to social distancing and life during the pandemic. She and Schacter both say that one simple way parents and caregivers can check in on kids' mental and emotional health is simply asking them questions.

"Some kids may be afraid of losing friends, of missing out on important celebrations like

birthdays, holidays, or graduations, and of doing poorly in school,” Marusak said. “You may never know if you don’t ask, and many parents might not know. Kids can experience anxiety differently than adults and are less able to verbalize what they are feeling.”

Anxiety and depression, she said, can manifest in kids in many different ways. For example, they may feel certain physical symptoms, such as stomach aches.

“Kids may also avoid talking about certain things or may no longer want to do things that they used to enjoy doing,” Marusak said. “This is particularly trying for more shy kids or older teens, who may keep things close the chest.”

Even if kids don’t want to talk, Schacter notes that routinely asking about their feelings at least keeps a door open so they know they can talk about things like feeling isolated or lonely with parents, school staff, or other trusted adults.

Being present is the key

The reality of life for everyone in quarantine is that new stressors are rampant. For parents who were already juggling full-time jobs and other responsibilities pre-pandemic, the added requirements to adequately support kids who are in virtual school academically and emotionally are immense new challenges that can feel overwhelming. But there’s a bit of good news: Simply being present is often the most reassuring thing parents can do.

“There is a lot of pressure on parents and caregivers to juggle all of these roles, while maintaining their own physical and mental health,” Marusak said. “This should be relieving for parents to know: Parents can actually do a lot to help buffer their kid’s fears and anxieties by just being there. We know from decades of research that the presence of a warm, comforting parent can buffer the negative impacts of stress on children.”

Simply assuring a child that they are safe may seem basic, but it can actually be pretty powerful.

“Parents should aim to be a stable source of support for your child, and a safe place where he or she can talk openly about what they are thinking or feeling at any time,” Marusak said. “Make time to listen to your child and don’t dismiss any of their emotion; acknowledge that this is a stressful time.”

Affirm their feelings and their need for autonomy

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers conversation starters](#) for talking with kids about the coronavirus. In those conversations, parents may not be able to play the exact role of a friend or peer, but they can provide some of the same functions. Schacter notes that listening, validating, and empathizing are keys.

“Rather than minimizing or trivializing kids’ stresses, it’s important that parents affirm their children’s feelings and take their perspective,” she said. “For adolescents in particular, it’s also important that parents allow their child to have some space. The adolescent years are typically a time of exploration and increasing independence from parents, and these developmental milestones are much more difficult to achieve when quarantined at home. Respecting teenagers’ space and desire for autonomy while signaling an openness to communication can also help build trust.”

Schacter notes that we’re only beginning to see early research on the social and developmental impact the pandemic has had on youth, and a clear understanding of the impact will take years and decades to see. But one thing that is known about children as a population is that they are incredibly adaptable.

“Youth with pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as mental health struggles or social difficulties before the pandemic, may be more likely to experience its long-term negative consequences,” Schacter said. “But children and adolescents also have a remarkable ability to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, particularly with the right supports, and I think we can also

expect to see much of this resilience following the pandemic.”

For now, there are some practical ways to make sure kids still have some connection to friends. Marusak notes that this is easier for older kids or teens who have their own cell phones or devices, but for kids with more limited access to technology, parents should continue to use Zoom or FaceTime for virtual play dates, or set up virtual games for kids to play together online. Weather permitting, there are also ways to socialize outdoors, with [physically distanced playdates](#) and games that can be played from a safe distance.

More resources:

- The [National Alliance for Mental Health](#) helpline is 800-950-NAMI; in a crisis, they can also be reached by texting “NAMI” to 741741
- [The American Psychological Association’s](#) COVID-19 information and resources
- The [Center for the Developing Adolescent’s](#) list of resources

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- Wayne State’s University’s [Healthier Urban Families program’s](#) guides for parenting through the pandemic