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GETTING OFF THE COVID SLIDE:

How to Keep Children on Track

What does a long stretch of isolation and stress do to developing minds? The question has come up as we confront the long-term impact of social distancing, preschool closings and COVID-19- induced trauma on our youngest learners. So far, children don't seem to be doing great, as 1,000 U.S. families said in response to a questionnaire from Philip Fisher, a University of Oregon professor of psychology. "Our 6-month-old cries the entire day. Every moment she's awake, she scream-cries," one Ohio mom moaned. "She cries so much her voice is hoarse. She gave herself a bloody nose yesterday. Our 4 1/2-year-old is reasonably distressed and just hangs out in the basement or hides out in our home office with his earphones on," the mother fretted about her son.¹

MY KID IS BROKEN!

And similar complaints came from many other parents who'd watched their children slip down the COVID slide over the past year or so. Moms and dads nationwide have been wringing their hands and releasing a wrenching cry: My kid is broken!² Some children were scared by everything in sight. Toilet-trained children were wetting their beds. Children with mature vocabularies reverted to baby talk.³ Some had forgotten how to eat with a knife and fork. Others had lost their early knowledge of numbers.⁴

And children who were already behind their peers or had special needs had begun to drive their parents to distraction.

The parents of a 4-year-old on the autism spectrum became frantic as their son lost the in-person therapy services he needs. Virtual school didn't work for Aidan, his parents realized while struggling to teach him at home. "It's a lot of going from room to room with him, trying to keep him engaged and his attention focused," said Aidan's dad, Troy. "I knew that if he had the consistency of a classroom, of being around a teacher and the same kids, that would be the best thing for him," said Rachel, Aidan's mom. "We've done the best we can, but it's been a roller coaster of emotions."⁵

Like Rachel and Troy, many parents have raised the alarm about pandemic learning loss. They've been joined by politicians and physicians. Still, the conversation tends to dwell on how the current turmoil will affect K-12 students. By contrast, there's not too much concern with how the COVID quarantine will stunt our youngest learners. "There aren't a lot of people out there screaming 'what about the infants?'" said Jack Shonkoff, a pediatrician who heads Harvard's Center on the Developing Child. But there should be since a young child's environment contributes to the development of their brain's basic structure.⁶

Children must be in a physical and emotional state that allows them to learn, Shonkoff explained. When infants and toddlers receive nurturing, responsive care in stable settings, "it literally shapes the architecture of the brain and builds strong brain circuits for learning, for emotional development, for self-regulation."⁷ When the opposite is true—when children don't get the

interaction they need—the consequences can last a lifetime. And the long quarantine has led to talk about a lost generation of students.⁸

THE LASTING IMPACT OF TRAUMA

The current crisis also evoked grim recollections of Romanian orphans in the time of Cold War dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. After his fall in 1989, a team of researchers spent 14 years tracking children who grew up in the orphanages and peers who were placed in foster care. The researchers found that the institutionalized children, who received little attention or affection from adults, had smaller brains and severe developmental delays. Those in foster care fared better, especially if they were removed from the orphanages by age two. Yet they showed the symptoms of ADHD more often than children who'd never been in an institution. "Children need to be in socially responsive situations," said lead researcher Nathan Fox, for their brains to develop normally. "There's a bit of plasticity in the system." But to reverse the effects of trauma, "the earlier, the better."⁹

It's too early to gauge the impact of COVID-related trauma on early learning. But another case from history suggests that the loss of teachers and friends simply rocks a young child's world. In a recent study,

researchers analyzed the impact of the 2005 Pakistan earthquake on children's learning by comparing households that were close to the fault line with similar households that were farther away and not affected by the quake. Schools in the affected area were closed for an average of 14 weeks, a little more than three months. Yet four years later, children in the affected area were not just three months behind; they were a disproportionate one and a half to two years of schooling behind.¹⁰

THE DATA OF DECLINE

Drawing on these lessons from the past, it could be years before our youngest children recover from the upheaval in their own lives. Due to preschool closings, U.S. children have lost important chances for

learning, according to a much-discussed study from the National Institute for Early Education Research. The NIEER survey found that pre-pandemic, 51 percent of 3-year-olds and 71 percent of 4-year-olds went to preschool.

By fall, in-person attendance dropped to 32 percent and 40 percent respectively, while hybrid or remote participation for these groups declined to 39 and 54 percent.¹¹

The declines increased inequities in education since they had the most impact on children whose families had the fewest resources and least ability to give them rich opportunities to learn. Families with

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household incomes below \$25,000 were less likely to have children participating in preschool. And the “devastating loss of learning time,” the study pointed out, was greatest for children whose parents had less education. Pre-COVID, many low-income preschoolers already didn’t get quality education, and the pandemic only made their situation worse.¹²

To aggravate matters, parents’ support for home learning also dropped over the course of the pandemic. When COVID-19 struck in spring 2020, 85 percent of parents were reading to their children three or more times a week, but only 71 percent were doing so by December, according to the NIEER study.¹³ Though bedtime stories remained a ritual in many homes, parents didn’t do much to boost their children’s math skills, observed researchers from the University of Chicago. Math learning is typically not part of home routines since most parents aren’t comfortable with the subject. They tend to see math, much more so than reading, as the responsibility of teachers. So, children’s math skills have taken a particularly big hit during the pandemic.¹⁴

THE STRESSES OF HOME SCHOOLING

COVID-19 has also dealt a striking blow to qualities parents need now more than ever before: the energy and patience to help their children progress. Parents found themselves riding an emotional roller coaster as they lost the vital services that preschools had provided pre-COVID, according to the NIEER study. Nearly half said they felt “very overwhelmed by the responsibilities they faced in facilitating at-

home learning for their children,” and many working parents worried about being less productive on the job.¹⁵ Conflicts also arose for stay-at-home parents like Jennifer Carlin, a Utah mom whose 6-year-old daughter has ADHD. “She can’t read yet,” Carlin said, “so she can’t get through the computer work without remote instruction. But she zones out if I’m not sitting next to her and I can’t sit next to her all the time because I have three other children.”¹⁶

The stress that parents like her are feeling can also drive their children to fall behind, according to Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at U.C. Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education. When parents lose their cool or refuse to listen, children can withdraw, Fuller explained, and disengage from reading or rich conversation within the family. If they continually see their parents unhappy or anxious, it can stunt their own development. “And that’s worrying because this is a really stressful time for parents. It can be hard to maintain a calm and attentive climate for children when parents must take over schooling.”¹⁷

And that certainly rang true for Lindsay Williams, an interior decorator in Madison, Wisconsin, who dreaded the pressure that came with teaching her 6-year-old and 9-year-old herself. “I’m terrified that I’m going to screw my kids up because I get so easily flustered. There’s a deep-seated vulnerability that I’m just not cut out for this,” she said.¹⁸ And an Arizona mom expressed a similar sense that she was dealing with too much. “I’m exhausted,” she wailed. “I want to yell at my son all the time and it’s not his fault.”¹⁹

Neither parents nor schools were prepared for the abrupt transition brought on by the



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pandemic. Perhaps 10 percent of preschool children received a robust replacement for in-person school attendance, adding to the pressures their parents already feel. Many parents are struggling to work at home. Others have lost their jobs and are finding it hard to fill the household's basic needs. These pressures have decreased their normal capacity to support learning at home—much less ramp up their efforts to replace classroom activities.²⁰

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE PRESCHOOL

And there are things that parents can't provide, try as hard as they might. Science tells us that relationships with friends and teachers are essential for brain development during early childhood.

Children learn, love and thrive most when interacting with other adults and children. For example, children gain strong language skills by gabbing with other people. Real-life conversations literally mold parts of the brain that plant the seeds of literacy and later academic success. Put simply, there's no place like preschool for building the social bonds that play such a big role in learning.²¹

The current loss of chances for social connection will have the greatest impact on children who've never set foot in a preschool, according to Rebecca English, owner of an Iowa day care and president of the Cedar Rapid Family Child Care Association. She's one of the lucky child care providers whose business hasn't slowed down or changed much beyond taking some steps like requiring masks to stem the spread of COVID-19. "We are now

in phase one to get these kids school-ready,” English said, and she feels positive about their prospects.²²

She’s less hopeful about the 2- and 3-year-olds who will enter preschool in the fall.

“You’re losing the social skills of learning to get in line, waiting your turn, sitting in circle time to read books, learning to keep your hands to yourself, and basically conflict resolution,” she said. “Those skills are being lost when the child doesn’t have the interaction of a child care setting,” and “unfortunately, there are no substitutes for social interactions.” Children who are learning online won’t know how to get along with others or go in an orderly way from one activity to the next. And this could lead to antisocial behaviors like withdrawing or throwing tantrums, English explained. “These children are going to tell us what they need through their emotions.”²³

THE TROUBLE WITH TESTING

What they don’t need is a lot of tests to assess learning loss when schools do reopen. If there’s a pressing need for measurement, it’s to evaluate the emotional toll of the last year. Over half a million Americans have died, and some children have lost people they love. They’ve missed doing activities they enjoy and longed wistfully to see friends or favorite teachers. So, we should focus on helping our children

reconnect with the community. Bonds with other folks—not learning content—are the bedrock of early education.

Too much testing may actually lead to worse long-term outcomes for young children.

So, we should focus on helping our children reconnect with the community. Bonds with other folks—not learning content—are the bedrock of early education.

“We fall into this trap of thinking if a child misses three months of math content that’s a crisis,” said Ed Berger, a former teacher of 25 years, as he reflects on the toll educational tracking often takes. “The truth is that if your kid were sick at home and missed three months of math content but got her confidence back, it

wouldn’t be a big issue in her life. But if her confidence as a mathematician is destroyed because of labels that were put on her, it’s a lifelong issue for her. She’ll never be confident in math again.”²⁴

So, Berger cautions against passing out diagnostic tests to quantify learning loss and then putting children into groups for remediation. “You know what’s going to happen to kids who couldn’t get online,” Berger asks, because they came from the least prosperous households or had parents with little education? “They’re going to be sorted in a way that will only exacerbate equity issues.”²⁵ This means we could assign children who have been through the most trauma to the lowest-level tracks. If we tell children that they are deficient, it will shake their confidence and shape their self-image, Berger warned. Testing that saddles students with deficit-based labels tends to doom children to the self-fulfilling prophecy of lower expectations.²⁶

Children are like sponges that absorb the energy around them, so we must stop thinking our children are broken. The collective angst among parents has reached a fever pitch, and a question is constantly coming up : When do we need to start panicking about our children falling behind? But it's not the right question to ask, cautions Deborah Stipek, a professor at Stanford's Graduate School of Education. "I think the more useful one is, 'How do we ensure that our children get the best possibilities to learn under these challenging circumstances?'"²⁷

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

Preschool teachers can provide answers by working with families to get kids ready for the return to school. "When true partnerships exist among early educators and parents, children feel safe and secure and are able to explore and learn in their early childhood setting," according to the Council for Professional Recognition. "These partnerships ease the transitions between home and school," but they should never take away from the importance of a parent's role. "Early childhood educators contribute to learning during an important stage of a young child's life. But families are forever. In most cases, they will care for, nurture and educate their child throughout childhood."²⁸

Now that parents are often their preschoolers' only teachers, they should focus on passing on the behaviors that form the building blocks of learning. When children go back to school, "they'll be expected to wait their turn and share materials," said Elizabeth Jones, a Texas

preschool teacher. "Many aren't getting the chance to practice that with their peers right now, but parents do have ways to get them prepared at home. "Board games are an easy way to reinforce turn-taking etiquette," Jones suggested. "And parents can also work on delaying gratification. If your child asks for a snack, for example, stretch out the time between them asking and the time you give it to them."²⁹

Parents can also guide their children through some laid-back learning. "See how many letters they recognize on a billboard" or "ask them what shapes are in a picture they drew," Britt Menzies, a Georgia preschool teacher, proposed.³⁰ "Try incorporating math into daily routines, such as setting the table, cleaning up and cooking," advised Susan Levine, a professor in the department of education and psychology at the University of Chicago. "There are math opportunities in card and board games, or in reading picture books with lots of things to count and patterns to talk about. Jigsaw puzzles and blocks can also bolster skills by building kids' spatial thinking and help children actively engage in math thinking."³¹

THE POWER OF THE THREE Ps

But parents shouldn't stress over teaching content to the pre-K set. Nor should teachers when children do get back to the classroom. At that point, the teachers should use a trauma-informed lens to address learning loss and bring children up to speed from an academic point of view. "Let's do some repair that's developmentally appropriate," urged Amanda LaLuna-Chorak, director of the child development

program at Olivet Nazarene University. “Then we’ll be able to see the brain repair itself, calm down from the trauma and meet those academic targets 10 times better.”³²

The best prescription for repair draws on “the three Ps of child development: play, predictability and pause,” as LaLuna-Chorak explained. Play calms down the high-cortisol stress area of the brain. Predictability gives children a needed sense of routine, and a pause in classroom activities allows children to express their feelings—which is crucial for the many youngsters who’ve suffered loss for the first time. “This is not just going to be something that is addressed right now and they move on,” LaLuna-Chorak predicted. “It will have ripple effects. There will be opportunities to revisit and give children support as they move ahead in development.”³³

OPTIMISM IS THE ONLY OPTION

Plans are now underway to help children recoup their losses after the crisis they’ve been through. School districts are already

arranging for a summer of joyful learning, including enrichment academies that can give our children a chance to heal and learn at the same time. They’re beginning to invest in high-dosage tutoring programs that can provide the personalized learning instruction that boosts student outcomes, especially for early readers. There’s solid proof that programs like these give results, so we shouldn’t label today’s young learners as a lost generation.³⁴

“Optimism is the only way to think about the early childhood period” as we move ahead, Jack Shonkoff urges us all. “We have so much untapped knowledge that could produce much better results if we used it.” And now is a critical time for early childhood programs to help parents make the home a place where children can learn. “Whatever we do,” Shonkoff says, “has to be done by empowering and enhancing the ability of the adults who care for children to provide that kind of environment.”³⁵ We must give parents the support they need to keep young learners on track. Our children can get off the COVID slide.

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