

The pandemic limited children's ability to socialise: here's how to encourage your child's friendships

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The pandemic limited children's ability to socialise: here's how to encourage your child's friendships

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As many parents and teachers know, friendships can be the most important thing in the world to children and young people. And this is for good reason. Friendships are integral to children's healthy development and learning.

Friendships help children learn to negotiate social interactions and understand emotions. But many children had these important relationships severely curtailed during the pandemic.

Most children were not able to interact with their friends. Lockdowns and restrictions led to the closure of schools, parks and playgrounds. Children's social events, such as birthday parties, school leavers celebrations and play dates were cancelled. Even when schools gradually reopened, restrictions such as "bubble" systems limited children's ability to play with friends outside their bubble.

Effects of the pandemic

My research and that of others has shown that children missed their friends hugely during the pandemic.

An extended period of social isolation was an unprecedented situation for our children. We do know that for many children the effects of the pandemic will be long lasting, and we are still learning about the full extent of this impact, socially and emotionally as well as on children's wellbeing more generally.

I carried out a study with colleagues focusing on how children maintained their friendships during COVID-19. This work helped to build a picture of both the positive and negative impact on children's friendships during this period. While children were able to make and maintain some friendships online, the children we worked with talked about losing connections with friends they had before the pandemic, and how sad this made them.

Play dates give children more free time together than the limited opportunities they have for play at school. antoniodiaz/Shutterstock

Children's friendships can be overlooked in favour of academic progress. However, children's friendships should not be viewed as separate or additional, but a vital part of their learning and development.

Here are some ways that, if you are a parent or carer, you can prioritise your child's friendships.

Understand how important play is. Play is integral to children's friendships, and particularly after the isolation of the pandemic, it's important for children to reconnect and interact with their friends through play. Spending time with other children can be considered a valuable form of therapy for a child, and it's vital for their development and learning.

Set up play dates. If you can, orchestrate time for children to play and be with their friends out of school. Providing time for friends out of school as well as in school can nurture friendships and make them stronger, by giving children more time to play and form a bond than they get in a formal school context.

Give them plenty of time. Let your child and their friends get on with their games, by themselves. Early childhood expert Professor Alison Clark calls this uninterrupted or nonfragmented time, and it gives children space to explore, establish games, assign parts and have fun without interruption.

Focus on listening. Listen to children's stories about their interactions with friends and value them, as they mean so much to children. On the way home from school or when you have dinner together, ask: who did you play with today?

Pay attention to challenges. Fallings out with friends are part of childhood and provide opportunities to negotiate friendships and make sense of their social relationships. Recognise how important this may be to your child, and acknowledge that such scenarios are part of everyday life even for adults. Encourage optimism and resilience by asking questions that will prompt discussion and reflection: I wonder what you might do if this happens again?

Do not probe but be ready to listen when children are ready to share. This could be at bedtime or a few days later. Encourage independence but also be willing to step in and talk to a teacher if requested to do so.

Be realistic. It's unlikely that your child will be friends with everyone in their class, and you can acknowledge with your child that they don't have to be friends with everyone. You should help them understand, though, that they do need to be able to connect with others.

If your child seems to struggle with making friends, following the advice above will be helpful, as will staying positive and encouraging your child. Talk to your child's class teacher or school if you feel your child needs some support making friends. Teachers can be great at enabling and brokering friendships.