

Have children lost an entire year of schooling and social development? It depends, experts say

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Children across the country have begun returning to school as new guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest classroom learning can be done safely.

It may be a welcome change for families that have had to juggle parenting, teaching and jobs for the last year. But a year of online learning and social distance has affected different students in different ways, according to experts from the University of Arizona College of Education.

Have America's [children](#) lost an entire year of education and [social development](#)? It depends, they said.

Pandemic Magnifies Socioeconomic Disparities

"You can imagine a scenario where some kids actually flourish under this situation," said Ronald Marx, dean emeritus of the college and a professor of educational psychology, pointing specifically to children with social anxiety or victims of bullying.

But socioeconomic conditions might make the biggest difference in how children have been affected by the pandemic, Marx said.

Negative impacts on a child's development typically stem from two areas putting a strain on their [family life](#), he said: stress and resources.

Stress often manifests in parents' behavior—they may fight more often, resort to more severe forms of discipline or be removed from the child's life. Resource-based challenges might include food insecurity, limited or no access to extracurricular activities that cost money, a lack of dedicated space in the home to study, and lack of necessities for today's learning environment, such as computers.

Researchers and educators have long known these problems exist and impact children disproportionately across the country, but the pandemic has magnified the issues, Marx said.

While it was easy for children from some families to transition to online learning, it was nearly impossible for others, Marx said. Many students who didn't have an internet connection at home moved to charter or [private schools](#) that remained open, Marx said. But some children from poorer families simply didn't attend classes at all.

"It's not as if poverty dooms you for life; it's that it increases the probability that you're going to have challenges," Marx said. "And that's what's happening now."

Social and Emotional Development Opportunities Lost

With learning taking place primarily at home, some of the youngest schoolchildren didn't just miss out on academic progress. Preschool, kindergarten and first-grade students also lost a year of typical social development by not being around other kids on a regular basis, said Iliana Reyes, the College of Education's associate dean of academic affairs and community and global partnerships.

Reyes is a developmental psychologist and professor in [early childhood education](#) whose research involves working with families—particularly immigrant families—and schools to learn how children adapt in the classroom.

"Children learn in terms of their own social attachments—how they interact with family and other people in their circle. They learn how to transfer that security to relate to others emotionally," Reyes said. "Many children have missed that transition."

Also largely lost when the pandemic began were classroom reading sessions, which are central to early childhood learning not only for

teaching basic literacy but also helping with emotional development. Many schools, Reyes said, invite parents and family members to stay for reading sessions in the mornings before heading off to work. This provides an opportunity for children and parents from different families to read together—another chance for children to learn how to socialize.

But opportunities like that were lost during the pandemic. While many schools tried to recreate them online, it's not the same, Reyes said.

"Even through touch, we learn so much about our senses and what we perceive," she added. "We feel different emotions when we are close to each other."

Socially and emotionally—just like academically—each child will be affected differently by the pandemic, Reyes said.

Many families have been able to bolster their children's emotional development by keeping in touch with a close "nest" of other families with young kids. Others have also been able to maintain connections virtually with video calling apps—something [immigrant families](#) were doing long before the pandemic to stay connected with loved ones in their home countries, Reyes said.

The return to the classroom won't immediately stem the effects of the pandemic on kids' social development, Reyes said. Children are drawn to routines and regularity, and when they return to school, new routines will be required to adhere to public health guidelines—meaning children will need to readapt.

Challenges for Children With Behavioral Disorders

The last year was particularly challenging for parents whose children have emotional or behavioral disorders, said Rebecca Hartzell, an

assistant professor of practice of disability and psychoeducational studies. Now, those children could be far worse off than they were a year ago.

Hartzell is the program director of the College of Education's graduate program in applied behavior analysis. Her research focuses on understanding children's behavior, and she often works with schools and clinics to help students with challenges like autism, depression, eating disorders, or behaviors that might cause self-harm or harm to others.

Parents of children with behavioral disorders typically rely heavily on schools and clinics, Hartzell said. Before the pandemic, specialists like Hartzell would spend significant time with children to observe their behavior and craft personalized plans to address those behaviors—a process that requires consistency in order to be effective.

When COVID-19 sent students home to learn online, "that consistency isn't necessarily there," Hartzell said.

"Mom and dad still have to work; they can't sit there and be this child's consistent interventionist that we need," she said, adding that telehealth isn't as effective as in-person professional support.

Making up for lost progress in children with behavioral disorders will require reevaluating every single plan they were using before, Hartzell said. She also expects many children will require a new plan that slowly ramps back up to the schedules they had before the pandemic, since picking up where they left off would be too difficult for many.

"The majority of these kids will have to start out this way: a tiny bit of work, and then this big chunk of preferred-activity time, and then you go back to this tiny bit of work," Hartzell said. "You have to have somebody that's right here managing this the entire time."

What Parents Can Do

The return to the classroom may lift a burden for some parents, but it won't be a silver bullet for the effects of the last year, experts said. Families and educators will both face struggles as they figure out how to make up the lost progress.

Parents should rely on resources in their extended [family](#) and community, Marx said, particularly organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs of America, YMCAs, and others specific to local areas.

"Don't try to make up whatever territory you think your child lost on your own," he said.

Working through this, Hartzell said, is going to require a common understanding.

"I know that teachers really, really need the parents' support and I know the parents really, really need the schools' support," she said. "We've had a rough year, but now let's say, 'OK, where's your child at right now? Let's make a plan, because the plan we had before might not be relevant now.'"

Many young children may have questions about the changes made in classrooms to make them safer, Reyes said. She said parents should welcome those questions and look at them as an opportunity to grow together in what will likely be a different learning environment for everyone.

As foreign as plexiglass dividers and masks might seem in a classroom, parents should embrace these measures as part of the environment, Reyes said. Doing things like decorating the plexiglass or letting children choose their own masks will help children adapt to what will likely be a

very different classroom.

"Make it fun within the given context," she said. "Even though they have to wear a mask and stay 3 or 6 feet apart, you can still feel close as long as you make the social connections."

Provided by University of Arizona

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