

The Importance of Peer Interaction in the Development of Social Skills During Adolescence: Growth During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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AUTHOR BIO

Stella Wang is a student with a keen interest in science and art. Fascinated by the intersection of computer science and psychology, she continually seeks opportunities to deepen her understanding of mental health and its relationship with technology. Stella is dedicated to empowering young women in STEM by providing education in diverse technology sectors, artistic expression, and mental well-being. As a student, she is eager to learn and to share her insights and discoveries to promote a better understanding of mental health within the rapidly evolving landscape of technology and psychology. Stella is interested in pursuing a career that studies human-computer interaction.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on adolescents' social skills development. Adolescents are in a critical period of social skills development, and peer interactions are essential for fostering social competence. The pandemic limited traditional face-to-face interactions, which may potentially lead to long-term effects on adolescents' social development and increase susceptibility to peer rejection. Digital connections, such as social media, can serve as potential buffers against the effects of COVID-19. Parental support is important in promoting adolescents' social well-being and mental health.

Keywords: *Adolescents; social skills development; social competence; COVID-19; lockdown.*

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 virus spread across the world in 2019, public facilities were suddenly shut down and people were encouraged to socially isolate in order to stop the virus's spread (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). One group in particular, adolescents, was severely affected by the social isolation policies put in place during the pandemic. Adolescents are in a developmental period where they are starting to develop more complex social peer relations and behaviors in their transition to adulthood (Brown & Larson, 2009). As face-to-face interaction decreased during the pandemic, these important peer interactions also became extremely limited.

While examining the relations between peer interaction, the pandemic, and social well-being in adolescents, we must also consider how to maintain healthy growth and development during these irregular times. As studies have shown, peer interactions are essential to social development in adolescence (Blakemore, 2012). Social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to a regression in social skills (de Miranda et al., 2020). As a result, some adolescents could have difficulty readjusting to society. Some of these behaviors may also increase adolescents' susceptibility to peer rejection. With these effects in mind, parental figures, practitioners, and policymakers have a responsibility to uphold adolescent social well-being and promote healthy social skills development during the pandemic.

Social skills development during adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental period in which individuals are more sensitive to their social surroundings (Blakemore). During this time, teens are developing skills to help them navigate their social world. As people grow, they start to gain a better understanding of

how to interact with the people around them in a "socially acceptable" manner, notably, the process of mentalizing. Mentalizing is the ability to comprehend the intentions and mental states of others from visual or social cues, implicitly or explicitly (Frith & Frith, 2003). Adolescents usually have reasonable awareness of different mental states for each individual. Understanding others' mental states is important in helping people adjust their actions according to the other person's conditions, allowing them to act in more socially acceptable manners (Blakemore, 2012).

Adolescents' social skills grow during adolescence as they start to learn how to interpret others' actions and behaviors in a more complex and developed fashion (Blakemore, 2012). As an individual transitions from youth to adulthood, they are able to process interactions at a higher level that can further support their integration into their social world. In this manner, mentalizing is an essential attribute of social interaction skills in adolescence that continues into adulthood (Devine & Apperly, 2021). As an individual becomes more attuned to the behaviors of others, their ability to appeal to others grows as well. Adolescents use the social skills gained from this developmental period to help integrate into society.

The importance of peer interactions in enhancing social competence

Peer interactions are of utmost importance to the social development of adolescents. These interactions teach adolescents social competence, preparing them for adulthood. Adolescents are at a stage where they are exposed to many more diverse social situations as they are starting to join the workforce along with other transitions into adulthood. However, a great portion of the

interactions during this developmental period are still in the classroom and with friendships. As adolescents become more socially adept they also grow more susceptible to peer rejection and acceptance (Pfeifer & Blakemore, 2012). This means that as adolescents become more conscious of other people's mental states, they also grow more wary of how those people will react to their actions and behaviors. Different people would have different responses to this development and may have a harder time integrating themselves into society.

Past evidence has shown that those with good social skills have a better time adjusting while those with worse social skills find it harder to adjust (Brown & Larson, 2009). Healthy friendships can help an individual with these social adjustments as they have been shown to positively impact an individual's ability to adapt to various situations or environments (van Harmelen et al., 2017). Therefore, having positive peer reactions benefits the adolescent by improving their adaptability to a social situation both in the present and as a long-term effect. The results produced from peer interactions enhance adolescent social competence and are an integral part of preparing people for the greater social world.

The COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation

The COVID-19 pandemic called for physical isolation, which led to a decrease in social interactions. As the pandemic worsened, schools were shut down, most work, if not all, was conducted from home, and very rarely did people leave their residences. Even when meeting, everyone was advised to wear masks and socially distance. Given that schools are the main form of physical socializing teens have, school closures severely limited opportunities

for face-to-face interactions. Instead, physical interactions became limited to exclusively immediate family members.. Routines were abruptly changed, interrupting many facets of life for adolescents. . During the early stages of the pandemic, more than one-third of adolescents reported high levels of loneliness (Loades et al., 2020). This was especially the case for extroverted adolescents, who reported the highest levels of loneliness and depression (Branje & Morris, 2021). Considering that adolescence is a period where peer interactions are key for social skills development, social isolation is highly detrimental to the development of social skills during this time.

Social isolation could possibly leave long-term effects on social behavior, which may make it more difficult to readjust to society. Some of these behaviors may also increase adolescents' susceptibility to experiencing peer rejection. Consistent with this idea, many children and adolescents showed more clinginess, inattention, and irritability during the pandemic (de Miranda et al., 2020). These behaviors and circumstances may hinder the social development of adolescents and might negatively impact their social skills. Evidence has shown that behavioral problems and social competence are negatively correlated, and that increased behavioral problems, such as irritability and aggression, are associated with decreased social competence (Hukkelberg et al., 2019). With lower social competence and increased difficulty readjusting to society, adolescents may be even more susceptible to peer rejection.

Another notable matter is that mental health problems seemed to become much more severe, especially in the earlier stages of the pandemic. Depression, anxiety, and stress were highly prevalent in adolescents, with about one-third to one-half showing symptoms of

each (de Miranda et al., 2020). While social distancing is being encouraged and enforced as necessary, it is also worsening the mental health problems and social capabilities of teenagers, preventing them from receiving the social interaction needed for healthy development. This could be another manner in which the COVID-19 pandemic is stunting the development of adolescent social skills.

Maintaining social wellbeing during the pandemic

While the threat of social isolation is still present, digital connection could serve as a potential buffer against feelings of isolation among teenagers. It is clear that COVID-19 caused a severe decrease in face-to-face interaction and physical isolation. However, people were still able to interact digitally, which softened the impacts of physical isolation. As the pandemic persisted, schools found ways to transfer learning online using video calls; people also used social media, text messaging, and phone calls to stay connected. Social media, in particular, is instrumental to socializing while also distancing (Guessoum et al., 2020). Further, social media platforms are now commonly used to circulate up-to-date information on current events, which can be extremely beneficial to adolescents.

As the closest pillar of support during the pandemic, it is vital for parents to support their adolescent children in maintaining and improving social competence. One of the steps parents can take to promote social well-being is to support their child's mental health, as research indicates that poor mental health is linked to poor social functioning (Kupferberg et al., 2016). Actions like teaching the child how to cope with stress or helping regain a daily routine can make a significant difference (Singh et al., 2020). Additionally, parents and guardians can support adolescents by helping them get

professional treatment. Studies have shown that psychosocial interventions can help adolescents in handling the impacts of events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Guessoum et al., 2020). Over the course of the pandemic, teletherapy has also become more popular and is an option for professional help. There has been an increase in telehealth options such as phone therapy and therapy via video calls, which has shown to be effective and well-received by adolescents (Sweeney et al., 2019). It is important that adolescents receive adequate help in order to develop in a healthy manner.

Conclusion

Adolescents are in a highly important stage for social development that is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic. With limited social interaction with friends and peers, the development of social competence that usually takes place during adolescence can be stunted. Social skills, as a whole, can regress as well. However, with the possibilities of the digital world, the impacts of restrictions on physical interaction can be minimized through online communication and social media. The Internet contains many risks as well, though. More research on ways to ensure appropriate internet use for teens is needed to minimize the dangers of digital connection as a means of support for adolescent development. Moving forward, safe and accessible options for maintaining social well-being can be further explored to prepare for safe adolescent social development in isolated environments.

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