

Will These Kids Catch Up?

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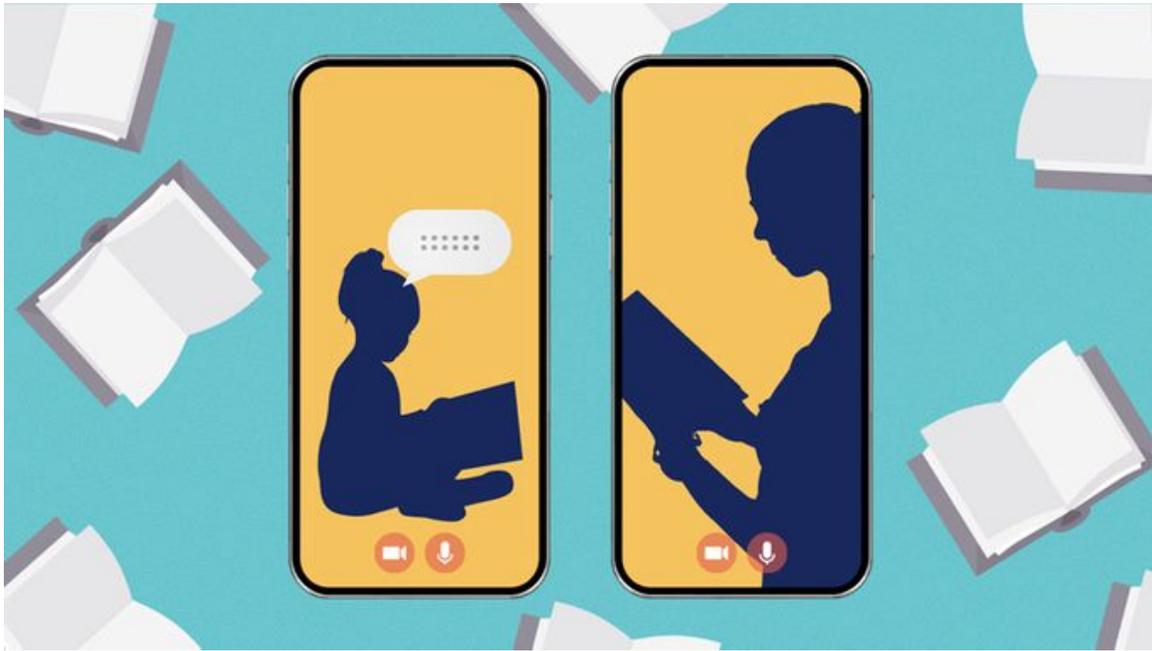
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Today

In elementary school, kids move from their cocoon at home or preschool into a world of stricter rules and more complex relationships, gaining skills that will last a lifetime. But pandemic lockdowns have limited kids' learning in these crucial years. Today we ask: What have kids of this age lost, and how can we help them rebound?

– with reporting by *Fiona Tapp* from *Ottawa, Canada* 

Two-plus years into a pandemic, where do we stand?



A reading emergency

Even before the pandemic started, scores showed that only about a third of nine-year-olds in the U.S. were reading at or above grade level, according to [The National Assessment of Educational Progress](#). Pandemic isolation has only exacerbated the situation, creating what reading specialist [Kathryn Starke](#) describes as a grim scenario.

The building blocks of reading, as defined by the [National Reading Panel](#), include fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, phonics, and phonemic awareness, or the ability to understand and manipulate the individual sounds that make words. Starke says that these skills were very difficult to teach virtually.

“The teachers tried. But it’s certainly not the same,” she said. Children didn’t have the experience of a teacher sitting beside them, helping them decode words and guiding them through common mistakes.

Starke says that children have lost between 2 and 14 months in their reading development. “As we head into a new school year, students will move up in a grade level, but may still be behind in literacy.” Such “unfinished learning,” as it’s called, can create problems for students who are then unable to keep up with the pace of a new grade level. Starke notes that teachers will need to differentiate by expectation, activity and outcome to help all children succeed — a tall order for already overburdened educators.

It's not all academic



Lost cues

When in-person learning resumed, teachers and parents observed that many kids had fallen behind in ways other than academic. Helen Shwe Hadani, co-author of [“The Emotionally Intelligent Child: Effective Strategies for Parenting Self-Aware, Cooperative and Well-Balanced Kids,”](#) says that virtual learning and masking in class denied children a vital stage of development called “social referencing,” where kids observe and mimic the reactions of others in social situations.

“Emotional intelligence sets the foundation for how children interact with other people,” Hadani told OZY. “I think parents realized during the pandemic that yes, it was important for their kids to keep up with academic content like math and literacy, but they also realized that their kids need to be able to interact with other people successfully. To be able to share and to communicate with others. For young children to be able to take turns, and to control their impulses.” So what can we do about it now?



How parents and caregivers can help



Listen, and model conflict resolution

Hadani and co-author Rachael Katz both emphasize that it's essential to ask children lots of questions to develop their vocabulary around feelings and social interactions. Katz says that role-play opportunities in particular are an ideal venue for modeling conflict resolution strategies.

“Ask your child for their opinions, and start to listen to how they might problem-solve social situations,” Katz says. “Just by creating that dialogue, you’re giving children the language skills to use when they have social and emotional conflicts. To communicate how they’re feeling, what their desires are, how they might need to collaborate with someone else and share their ideas — this is really crucial.”

Parents should try not to assume that they know how their children are feeling, but rather encourage open, frank dialogue. Says Hadani, “Make space for kids to ask questions about how they're feeling about a situation or reflect on a particular experience to build that vocabulary, so that when they are frustrated or angry or sad about something, they can express how they're feeling.”

Big rewards from reading together

Starke says that books have the power not only to help children succeed academically but can also help them work through some of these social and emotional challenges.

“Children at all grade levels would benefit from books that touch on feelings and emotions and how to overcome obstacles,” Starke advised. In particular, she and OZY recommend the following books to help elementary school-aged kids work through some of these complicated feelings and redevelop their social skills.

“Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon” by Patty Lovell

“Charlotte and the Quiet Place” by Deborah Sosin

“The Recess Queen” by Alexis O’Neill

“Jamaica’s Find” by Juanita Havill

Starke also says that parents should aim to improve their kids’ literacy skills by modeling a love of reading, going to the library, getting involved with literacy activities and events at school, joining a book club and talking to their kids about their favorite books, characters and stories.

Take it slow

Psychologist Dr. Sharon Witkin is the Chief Clinical Officer at [Polygon](#), which offers support for those with learning differences. She suggests that parents reintegrate their kids into social activities gradually. “Try not to go from zero to 100. Sometimes people feel that they have to make up for the lost time; I would encourage people to take it easy and ease the transition.”

She says that parents who are concerned about their child's emotional and mental well-being should watch for biological factors like changes in sleep or eating patterns. For example, a loss of appetite in an otherwise typical eater could be a sign to seek guidance from a mental health professional. But if your child has always found it hard to go to sleep, then restlessness might not be a cause for concern.

If your child seems to have a change in mood or temperament, if they're particularly worried about themselves or if you're especially worried about them, it's probably worth seeking a professional opinion. And because there are sometimes lengthy waitlists for mental health referrals, consider taking these actions in the meantime:

- Ask to be put on a cancellation list, if your provider has one, so that you can get in to see them as soon as possible.
- Continue encouraging your child to share their feelings and thoughts.
- Speak to your doctor about resources like support groups or helplines.
- Ask about school resources such as guidance counsellors and psychologists.
- Visit the library to continue deepening your own understanding.

Community Corner



What are your concerns as a parent of a school-age child after the pandemic?

Share your thoughts with us at OzyCommunity@Ozy.com.

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