

The Impact of Isolation and Social Distancing on Babies and Children

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What impact will social isolation have on babies and children?

Isolation and social distancing measures may cause concerns for parents about how they can help their baby learn, develop, and achieve important milestones.

Equally parents with toddlers at home, who are used to attending nursery, pre-school or other group settings, may have concerns about how isolation from other children will impact on their child's emotional wellbeing, social skills, and overall development.

For all parents or main caregivers, it is worth noting that one of the most immediate and important things they can do for their baby or child, is to provide close physical contact or loving cuddles.

What can you do to help your baby and/or child develop at home?

Despite social distancing, there are plenty of opportunities to enhance your baby's or toddler's development. In addition to close physical contact, a regular, predictable routine, which consists of fun activities, games, songs, and interactions with others on social media platforms can enhance wellbeing, offer reassurance, and provide a sense of security. Your baby or child will also thrive on quality (not quantity) interactions such as snuggling up and sharing a book with you before a nap or bedtime.

Routine

A regular, predictable routine is vital. It makes your child feel secure because they know what to expect, and it gives them a sense of control. The routine can consist of:

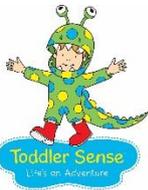
- Getting dressed - this can have a big effect on your child's mindset for the rest of the day, so avoid keeping them in their pyjamas
- Sitting down for breakfast together
- Including your child in the planning and organisation of activities so they feel involved and motivated to join in
- Opportunities to exercise and let off steam
- Getting some fresh air and sunshine (following social distancing rules)
- Quiet time (reading, drawing, cuddling, etc.)
- Shared mealtimes with the family
- Bedtime (bath, cuddle, story, massage, etc.)

Although every household will differ, putting a routine in place provides emotional security, and builds esteem and confidence because your child can predict what is going to happen next. A variety of activities that will keep your baby or child busy throughout the day will also help underpin emotional development and social skills.

Social Skills

We know that playing with other children is important for the development of social skills. However, there are still plenty of ways in which socialisation can be achieved during lockdown. Any one of the following activities with an adult or family member will facilitate turn-taking, negotiation, organisation, imitation, and cooperation skills:

- Dolls and tea sets
- Puppet shows
- Dancing



- Peek-a-boo games
- Hide-and-seek
- Talking to and playing with soft toys
- Sharing a book together
- Role-play or dressing up
- Songs and action rhymes
- Building dens
- Construction with bricks or boxes
- Helping Mum or Dad with household chores
- Catching up with family and friends on social media platforms

A fun game of peek-a-boo or hide-and-seek encourages turn-taking; helping with chores such as dusting, cleaning, baking, and sweeping enable your child to make sense of the world; a tea party with teddy or soft toys provides a range of benefits from social interaction to turn-taking, communication, movement, problem-solving, and imaginative thinking. Your baby or child can also interact with others on visual platforms, and with family and friends on Zoom or Skype.

Online Interaction

Online communication tools are currently the 'new normal' worldwide, and although they cannot replace physical interactions with others, they can offer multiple benefits:

- *Online baby/toddler classes*

Baby Sensory, Hello Baby, and Toddler Sense programmes facilitate learning and development at home, provide useful information for adults, one-to-one interactive activities, creative ideas, top tips, and exclusive Facebook groups where parents can share ideas and experiences, and ask questions if they have concerns. Online baby/toddler classes also provide a wealth of activities which can be introduced at home to keep your baby or child busy and happy.

- *Online catch up*

An online catch up with family and friends is a wonderful way to help your baby or child stay in touch with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends. Simply seeing Grandma's familiar face online and hearing her voice will strengthen bonds, and provide a sense of security. A cube (tissue box) with photos glued on each face or looking through the family photograph album together will also provide reassurance that loved ones still exist in your baby's or child's life.

An online catch up with friends from your child's childcare setting can help strengthen friendships. There are plenty of activities that can be enjoyed together, which might include:

- Scavenger hunts
- Show and tells
- Children's quizzes
- A disco
- Games and songs ('Simon Says', 'Head, Shoulder's Knees and Toes', 'Musical Bumps', 'Musical Statues')

A reassuring online two-way chat with your child's keyworker or childminder can also foster bonds and provide emotional security, even if it is at a distance.

Cuddle time

Most important of all is close physical contact with you. A loving cuddle releases oxytocin, the 'love' or 'cuddle' hormone, which helps your baby or child feel warm, safe, secure, and loved.



The effect of touch is extremely powerful. Numerous studies have found that babies who are given plenty of close, physical contact gain weight faster, have stronger immune systems, sleep more soundly, and cry less.

Cuddles and physical touch also positively influence growth, learning, and development. Children who are given plenty of physical affection show less solitary play, more task-oriented play, and less aggressive behaviour when they go to school.

Close physical contact positively develops the brain, enhances bonding and relationships, reduces stress, and provides the love and security that all babies and children need for healthy growth and development.

Summary

Parents need to look after their own mental health and avoid putting too much pressure on themselves during these unprecedented times. Instead, focus on the positives that lockdown can provide for themselves and their family.

Due to the lack of case studies, it is impossible to know what effect (if any), social isolation might have on your baby's or child's development. But what we do know is that a nurturing, caring home provides the emotional security that all babies and children need to thrive and grow. A regular routine that includes opportunities for exercise, activities, and communication with family and friends via technology, can make all the difference to their social and emotional wellbeing.

What babies and children thrive on more than anything, is warm, loving, physical contact with the parent or their main care-giver.

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