

# **Play, Not Pressure, Your Post-Pandemic Guide to Stronger, Healthier Kids**

A Research Backed Presentation by Mid-Atlantic Psychotherapy



# How COVID-19 Has Affected Children — What Parents Need to Know



The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted daily life for families in big and small ways. Parents worried—understandably—about how all of this might affect their children’s development.

- ✓ **The good news is that most children, including babies born during the pandemic, are doing well and developing normally.**

But some kids did face challenges, especially those in families under greater stress.

# How COVID-19 Has Affected Children — Most Babies Born During the Pandemic Are Doing Well



Large studies following thousands of families found:

- Most pandemic-born babies are meeting their milestones.
- A very small increase (1–2%) in developmental delays has been noted.
- A few more children—especially those born early in the pandemic—have had mild language delays around age two.
- COVID infection itself did **not** cause developmental problems.

**The biggest factor was stress, not the virus.**

When parents are stressed during pregnancy or early infancy, it can affect babies' developing brains. But even here, most babies have shown **remarkable resilience**.

# Family Stress Played a Big Role

Families who faced bigger challenges—job loss, financial strain, food or housing insecurity, health scares, or isolation—had children who were more likely to struggle.



## Stress can lead to:

- More emotional or behavioral difficulties
- Delays in social or language skills
- Less attention available for younger children
- Higher chances of “toxic stress” when family pressure is persistent and severe



## Support and stability helped enormously.

Parents with good social support, financial stability, or a helpful partner were able to buffer the stress—for themselves and their babies.



# Social & Emotional Skills Took a Hit for Some Kids

Many young children had less time with other kids during the pandemic.  
As a result, providers are noticing:



- ✦ Trouble with sharing
- ✦ Being overly cautious about touching things or getting too close to others
- ✦ Heightened worry about rules or germs
- ✦ Being unsure in group settings

**Some kids also show speech and language delays.**

often because they had fewer conversations and fewer opportunities to hear and play with peers.



These behaviors are signs of the unusual world they lived in, not signs of permanent problems.

# Elementary-Age Kids Faced Learning Disruptions

Online school was hardest on younger students. Common challenges included:



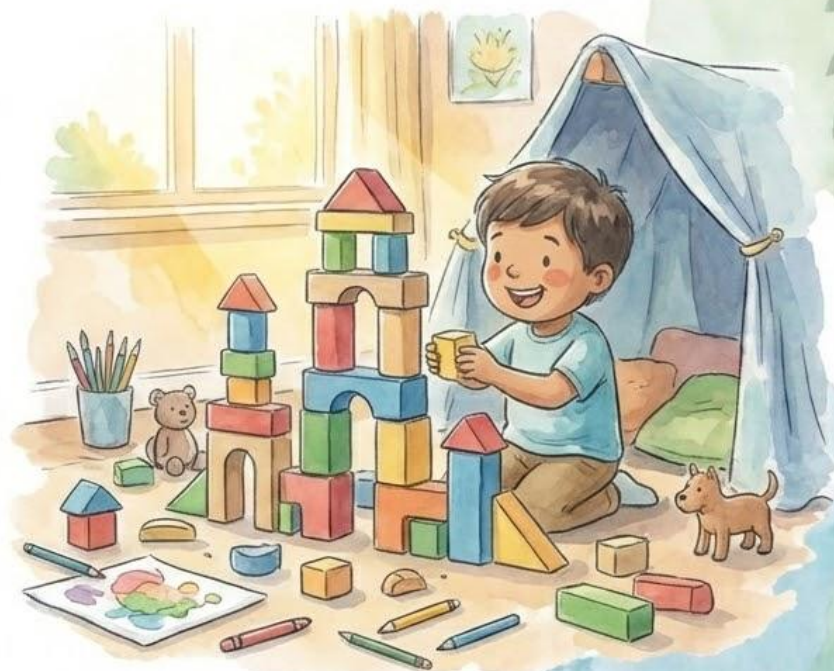
- ✓ Fewer chances to socialize
- ✓ More emotional ups and downs
- ✓ Gaps in academic foundations (especially reading and math)
- ✓ Uneven access to resources
- ✓ Kids from lower-income families being hit harder



These issues don't automatically create lifelong problems—but kids may need extra support to get fully back on track.

# Why Unstructured, Independent Play Is More Important Than Ever

One of the simplest and most powerful ways to help children grow emotionally, socially, and cognitively—especially after the pandemic—is **free play**.



# 1. Free Play Builds Mental Health



- They work out emotions
- Build confidence
- Learn how to cope with stress
- Become more resilient
- Practice problem-solving

Research links the decline of free play in society to increases in childhood **anxiety, depression, and emotional difficulties**. **Play is nature's way of building strong mental health.**

# 2. Free Play Teaches Social Skills



- Sharing
- Turn-taking
- Negotiating
- Working through conflicts
- Understanding others' feelings

These skills cannot be taught fully through adult direction—they must be **experienced**.

Because many children missed this during the pandemic, giving them plenty of time to play with other kids now is especially important.

### 3. Play Helps Speech, Language, and Thinking



During play, kids:

- 🍃 Talk to each other
- 🍃 Invent rules
- 🍃 Build stories
- 🍃 Use new words
- 🍃 Stretch their imaginations

This helps language, attention, creativity, and cognitive development.

### 4. Play Prepares Kids for Real-Life Challenges



Scientists believe animals (including humans) play because play is:

- 🍃 A safe place to practice tough skills
- 🍃 A way to learn flexibility and adaptability
- 🍃 An opportunity to experiment, explore, and even make mistakes without big consequences
- 🍃 Training for handling surprises in the real world.

Children who play more develop stronger problem-solving abilities and are better able to cope with frustration.

# What Parents Can Do Now

The goal isn't to “make up for lost time”—children are naturally resilient. Instead, focus on:

## Lots of unstructured free play

Time outside or time inside without an agenda. Let kids explore, create, and imagine freely.



## Time with other children

Playdates, playgrounds, family gatherings, community events—anything that helps children practice social interaction.



## Maintaining routines

Predictable routines help reduce anxiety and support emotional regulation.



## Talking and reading with your child

These simple interactions support language and connection.



## Asking for support early if you're concerned

Early help from speech therapists, pediatricians, or early childhood specialists can make a big difference.



# The Big Picture for Parents

Children lived through a historic and stressful moment—but most are doing well, and the ones who struggled can absolutely catch up. What helps them most now is not pressure or extra academics, but:



**Play.**



**Social time.**



**Stability.**



**Supportive adults.**

If parents, schools, and communities make room for these, children will continue to grow into healthy, confident, capable adults.