

How Kids Can Make Friends During A Pandemic—And Beyond



As the United States experiences its fourth surge in Covid-19 infections entering the fall of 2021, parents may be wondering how their children will interact with others. As the mom of three such kids, I can certainly say it is not easy to return to normalcy even though kids need to and parents want to.

Children, whether they interact on screen, by phone, or in person, still have to navigate the challenges to building friendships and making connections. A lot of how kids interact this school year will depend on what a school permits, including whether schools are attended in person or virtually, if masks and social distancing will be mandated, if there will be after-school activities, and if parents and guardians are comfortable with playdates, travel, and other activities that up until 2020, were considered normal, safe, and welcoming.

Even in the best of times, with no pandemic to worry about, issues of bullying, acceptance, and diversity are challenging, regardless of the limitation COVID-19 may impose, we need to continue to encourage our children to believe in themselves and to treat others fairly, whether their interaction is on Zoom, in person, by text, social media, or other channels.

Seek out new places to take your children and to interact with people who are not the same as them. Visit other places of worship, not necessarily to switch religions, but to expose your children to seeing how others do similar things in just a different manner. If your child likes soccer, great, but he can also try ice skating. If she loves to swim, awesome. But don't rule out guitar lessons.

Mix things up. Expand a child's mind to see other cultures – try new foods, visit a museum for something you never thought to visit, or watch a movie on a subject you know little about. By exploring new tastes and ideas, children may expand their passions, hobbies, and circle of friends. Experiment and try new things.

One way for kids to make connections is if parents make more connections. It is only logical that the children of parents getting together will also find a way to interact with one another. As adults go back to befriending and interacting with others, children will benefit.

Encourage children to develop pen pals. Check out www.epals.com and www.penpalschools.com.

Where parents can find places for their children to interact, they can pursue them with hope and confidence. Even if a school still doesn't open its after-school activities and clubs, there are private companies that still hold dance classes, sports activities, etc.

Parents can form their own playgroups for kids. www.Meetup.com or www.Nextdoor.com may make local gatherings possible for those with similar interests, from dog walking to hobbies to other passions.

Many towns have newcomer groups. Even if you are not new to the town, you can still join and help children new to the area to adapt by playing with your kids.

You can also ask a tutor, coach, or someone who teaches a skill – piano lessons, singing, speech, ESL, or sign language -- to introduce their clients to one another and help to arrange for kids with a similar age or background to meet.

Children can always meet other children when families volunteer together. Pick out a few worthy causes and seek out local charities that support activities for families. Will you build a home for Habitat for Humanity? Make sandwiches for a homeless food drive? Help out at a local animal shelter? You can help your kids interact while helping others. It's a win-win situation.

Perhaps the key to managing your children through the pandemic and navigating socialization is to remember that kids are resilient. We need to afford them as many opportunities to connect with each other and to know that one day the pandemic will not be the factor it is today, that life will eventually flow back to what it was. For now, we just have to persevere to help our children thrive under the new normal.

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