Children’s social distancing from peers predicts more social-emotional problems: The case for fostering social understanding as a protective factor
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INTRODUCTION
By early 2020 governments around the world had instituted social distancing measures to stop the spread of Covid-19.
What impact did social distancing measures have on children's social-emotional well-being?
Social interactions are especially important for fostering social understanding and social-emotional well-being.
Children's social understanding (sometimes called ‘theory of mind’ or ToM) is a significant predictor of children’s social-emotional functioning and well-being (e.g. 1-2), and can serve as a protective factor against stress (3-4).

METHOD & RESULTS
110 parents of 3-12 year olds (M = 7.1 years, SD = 2.6 years, 46% male) completed an online survey on:
• their child’s social-emotional difficulties via the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (5).
• their child's social skills using the Social Skills Improvement System (6).
• their child’s social understanding (ToM) using the Children's Social Understanding Scale (7).
• their own social-emotional health using the Perceived Stress (8) & UCLA Loneliness Scales (9).
• their child’s social interactions by estimating the # of hours in in-person vs. virtual interactions with adults and other children

PRE vs. POST Subsample: 40 parents completed the child-specific measures prior to the pandemic allowing us to also examine changes in their child’s behavior

RESULTS

CONCLUSIONS

REFERENCES & NOTES

Footnotes:
*The conference abstract presented preliminary data for only 80 participants resulting in minor deviations in the data reported between the abstract and the current poster.

*More information on the parent's social-emotional health is presented in an SRQD poster by Stewardson & Birch.

Hypothesis 1:
Reductions in social interactions, especially in-person peer interactions, would predict increases in social emotional difficulties (e.g. conduct problems, emotional symptoms).

Hypothesis 2:
Children with more advanced ToM would experience fewer increases in social-emotional difficulties during the pandemic.

5 factors accounted for 38% of the variability:

The largest effects were in children's conduct problems, followed by emotional symptoms:

Changes in Social-Emotional Difficulties (n=40)
After controlling for prepandemic levels of children's difficulties, only 2 predictors remained significant:

PRE vs. POST Subsample:
40 parents completed the child-specific measures prior to the pandemic allowing us to also examine changes in their child's behavior.