Children's social distancing from peers predicts more social-emotional problems: The case for fostering social understanding as a protective factor

Susan Birch, Charlotte Stewardson, Allegra Passacantilli

University of British Columbia (UBC)

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', 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).

PREDICTIONS

Hypothesis 1:
Reductions in social interactions, especially in-person peer interactions, would predict increases in social emotional difficulties (e.g. conduct problems, emotional symptoms).
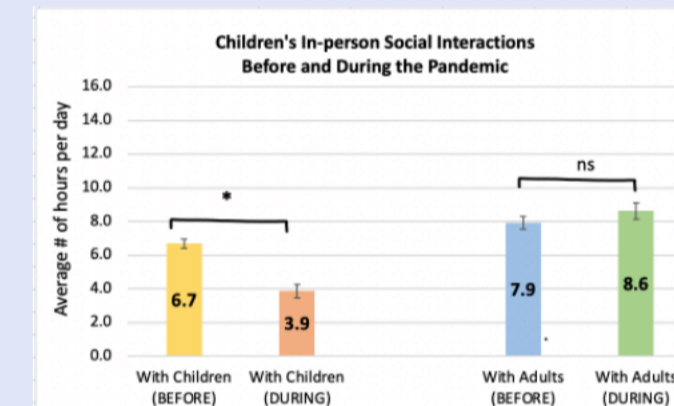
Hypothesis 2:
Children with more advanced ToM would experience fewer increases in social-emotional difficulties during the pandemic.

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

Children's In-person Social Interactions Before and During the Pandemic

With Children (BEFORE) 6.7, With Children (DURING) 3.9, With Adults (BEFORE) 7.9, With Adults (DURING) 8.6

*Changes in in-person interactions with adults and changes in virtual interactions were unrelated to children's social-emotional well-being

Current Social-Emotional Difficulties (n= 110)

Using Stepwise Regression we predicted children's current level of social emotional difficulties from the child's age, gender, social understanding, change in in-person peer interactions, and parents' loneliness and stress.

5 factors accounted for 38% of the variability:

Variance Explained in Children's Social Emotional Difficulties
- Reduction in in-person peer interactions
- Child's Social Understanding
- Unexplained
- Parent's Stress
- Loneliness
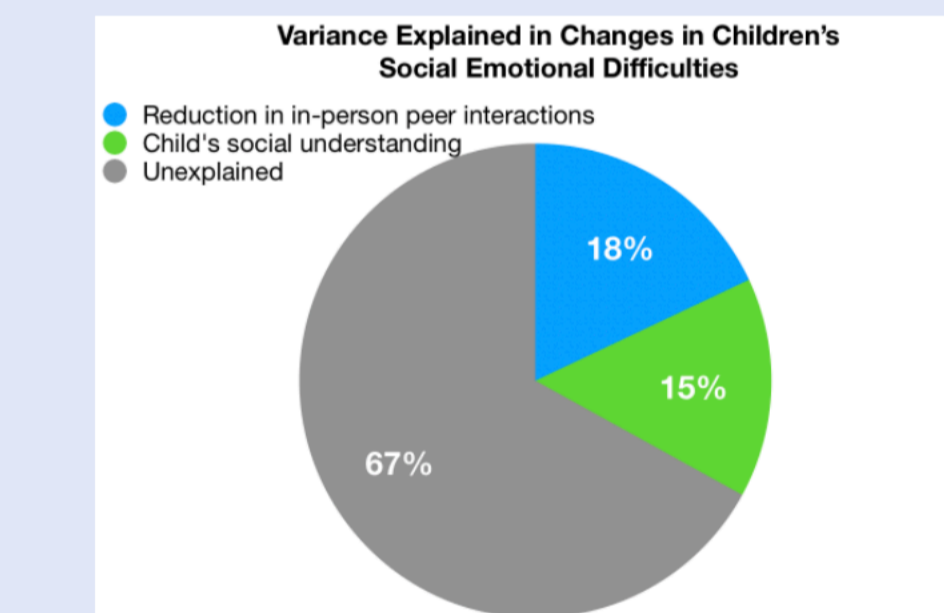- Gender

2%, 5%, 8%, 18%, 5%
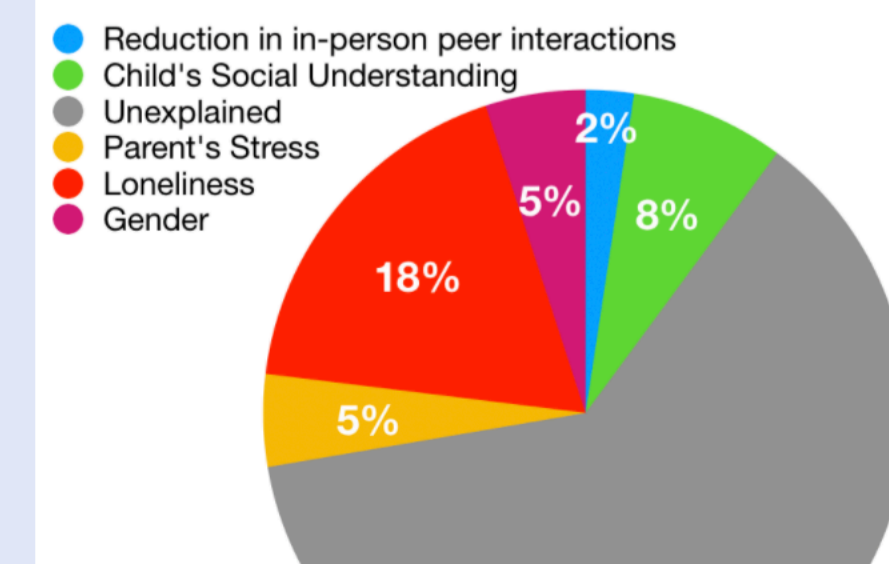
RESULTS

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

Table 1:
Partial Correlations Controlling for Child's Age & Gender & Parent's Perceived Stress and Loneliness

	Changes in Children's in-person peer interactions	Changes in SDQ (Total Difficulties)	Changes in SDQ (Prosocial behavior)	Changes in SISS (Total Social Skills)
Changes in Children's in-person peer interactions	--	-0.473*	0.022	-.132
Significance (2-tailed)		0.004	0.898	0.538
df		34	34	22

Changes in Social-Emotional Difficulties (n= 40)

After controlling for prepandemic levels of children's difficulties, only 2 predictors remained significant:

Variance Explained in Changes in Children's Social Emotional Difficulties
- Reduction in in-person peer interactions
- Child's social understanding
- Unexplained

18%, 15%, 67%

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

Table 2

	Changes in Children's in-person Interactions	Changes in SDQ Emotional Problems	Changes in SDQ Conduct Problems	Changes in SDQ Hyperactivity	Changes in SDQ Peer Relationship Problems
Changes in Children's in-person peer interactions	--	-0.495*	-0.553*	-0.310	.113
Significance (2-tailed)		0.002	0.000	.066	.513
df		34	34	34	34

Partial Correlations controlling for Child's Age, Child's gender, Parent's Perceived Stress, and Parent's Loneliness

CONCLUSIONS

Reductions in children's in-person peer interactions during the pandemic predicted increased social-emotional difficulties.

Children with better theory of mind exhibited fewer increases in social-emotional problems.

Limitations include the correlational design and reliance on parent-report.

Interventions aimed at fostering children's social understanding may minimize the negative effects of social distancing.

REFERENCES & NOTES

Footnotes:

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

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