

# Distance learning can lead to emotional, social issues in children

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*Victor Santos of Beacon Falls and his daughter Juliette Santon, 7, out in front of Laurel Ledge Elementary School in Beacon Falls where Juliette will be attending the second grade in the fall. Jim Shannon Republican-American*

Instead of seeing friends in the hall, collaborating on projects, and chatting with teachers, Maddy Vallillo woke up each morning, logged on to her computer, and completed assignments before a screen.

“It was definitely culture shock. It was really sad. As time progressed, I definitely felt that sadness a lot more,” said Vallillo, a member of Woodland Regional High School’s Class of 2020, of her experience with distance learning.

Districts statewide are releasing their plans for the fall as the COVID-19 coronavirus restrictions continue. Early last week, Region 14 and Waterbury announced hybrid plans, where students would spend some days in the classroom and some days working from home. Other districts are expected to do the same.

The impact on students’ mental health and performance could be as much of a concern as the COVID-19 health scare, some educators and counselors say. The loss of social interaction that comes with attending school virtually affects students from kindergarten to grade 12, said Laura Saunders, a Hartford Health Care clinical psychologist.

“The main job of educators really is to teach children academics,” Saunders said. “There also is an equally important job that happens in school and that is the social and emotional aspect of learning.”

Vallillo said it was difficult not seeing her friends and teachers every day. Saunders said teens rely heavily on friends to fulfill their social and emotional needs.

“I loved going to school,” Vallillo said. “I love learning but a lot of the fun that was in learning was being able to do that with my friends and teachers that I really enjoyed.”

Vallillo will attend Pace University in New York City this fall where she will attend class both in person and online. She said she is glad to attend classes in person and feels it would be difficult to do well in rigorous online courses.

Henry James, incoming senior at Shepaug Valley School in Washington, said distance learning made it more difficult to manage his challenging course load.

“Being at home, your body automatically wants to just lay down, watch Netflix or read a book,” James said. “Being at home in that environment that’s closed off, it just kind of felt suffocating sometimes.”

For younger children, Saunders said skills like learning how to share, how to make friends, and other communication cues are often learned in school. She said virtual learning can cause some children to suffer developmentally.

“All those little subtle nuances that are part of friendships and socialization are learned in person,” Saunders said. “When we really cut that off you stunt an aspect of developmental growth for children and adolescents as well.”

Victor Santos said his daughter Juliette struggled with distance learning. His daughter recently completed first grade at Laurel Ledge Elementary School in Beacon Falls. Santos said she did not enjoy video class meetings. Santos said his daughter would rather talk on the phone with her friends instead of messaging them through virtual platforms.

“It’s more of an emotional thing I think for my daughter seeing her friends on the computer screen and not being able to touch them or talk to them,” Santos said.

Even with back-to-school restrictions like mask wearing and social distancing, children are adaptive, flexible, and tolerant by nature, said Allison Spitzer, a therapist in Trumbull.

“I think what they can take from this, what children really have to gain from it, is that they can learn to verbalize in a clearer way what they feel, what they need and what they treasure,” Spitzer said.

To prepare for a return to school this fall, Santos said he has been teaching his daughter about social distancing and getting her used to wearing a mask.

Waterbury Superintendent of Schools Verna Ruffin said the district is considering the mental health and well-being of students when coordinating reopening plans. She said the district has discussed additional training to equip teachers and staff with the skills needed to help students cope with emotional stress.

The impact of proposed restrictions for in-person learning on students is yet to be determined due to limited data, said David Fitzgerald, director of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic at Uconn Health. He said allowing kids to go outside for play, socialization, and even education will be important to limit mask wearing.

“Kids want to be kids,” Fitzgerald said. “They want to see their friends, play with their friends, and particularly with school age kids, continue to grow in competence and self-confidence.”

Many parents have faced financial and emotional stress during the pandemic, Saunders said. She said this stress within the home can often affect children. As districts anticipate a return to in-person learning this fall, Saunders said support staff will be needed in schools for students who may have been affected by these stressors.

“Once they get back to school, which is a hopefully safe environment for them, they may start to show some of the effects of that trickle-down stress,” Saunders said.