

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### **Social Engagement Makes a Difference — Focus on Youth**

The experience of COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on our social interactions. For our kids, spending time with other children is a crucial part of their brain and body development — physical, mental, emotional, and social. Socialization also contributes to the formation of their identity and the cultivation of friendships to support overall development. It's how they learn about cooperation, trust, and loyalty, and how to offer and receive support to and from others. Education, friendships, and recess were all limited by the measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus.

For many students in our community, the start of the new school year is less than a month away and we just don't know what that new year will look like. Will students and teachers be back in the classroom? Will remote learning continue or some combination of the two? Will the fall sports season be held, and how? The one thing that is certain is that parents across the Suncoast are concerned what impact all this atypical togetherness and apartness has had on their kids.

Being cooped up together has definitely affected our families. How much of an impact it has had is yet to be understood and varies depending on multiple factors, including our age, environment, and personality. Being separated from social connections is different for boys and girls, toddlers and teenagers, nerds and jocks. The impact is also compounded for families who were thrown into severe economic straits by the shutdown and have had to worry about basic needs such as food, shelter, and medical care. Based on what we know about child development, we can predict which children might be having the hardest time and why.

Children, especially young children, are surprisingly resilient if they have a supportive adult and routine in their life. Younger kids need their parents more than they need their friends. But as they reach early adolescence, they are less likely to benefit from the security that comes from being with their parents. For 10- and 11-year-olds, developing their social skills is crucial for preparing for the dynamics of middle and high school.

The social lives of teens and young adults have certainly been hit the hardest by the pandemic. Instead of practicing independence and establishing their own lives, they found themselves confined to the house or moving back home—dependent once again on their parents.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Helping children build a healthy brain depends in part on a strong sense of security through routine and, currently, socially distanced and age-appropriate interaction with others. Acknowledging the abnormality of the situation, affirming the normalcy of the feelings they may be experiencing, and looking for creative ways to safely engage them with others will help support youths' development during this time.

For children of all ages whose families are coping with the effects of economic hardship, that all-important sense of security might be harder to achieve and therefore they are at greater risk for poorer outcomes related to brain health, daily performance, and brain illness. For these families, the best way to support the kids is to make sure that support is available for the parents. (e.g., food banks, unemployment benefits, public health clinics, youth groups).

While most kids are resilient, for some children the loneliness experienced during the pandemic can turn into depression or other brain health issues. Watch for the warning signs: extremes in behavior, such as sleeping all the time or not at all, increased irritability, and changes in weight.

It's important for everyone stuck at home to acknowledge that this enforced togetherness and apartness is unusual and at some point, it will pass.

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.***

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