



What is one thing we can do about children's learning loss during the pandemic? Put a book in their hands

As children struggle with social isolation, books can offer them a window into new worlds – and make them happier, healthier and wealthier too

SARMISHTA SUBRAMANIAN

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO

41 COMMENTS

SHARE



TEXT SIZE



BOOKMARK





ALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLISON + CAM

[Sign up](#) for our *Books* newsletter for the latest reviews, author interviews, industry news and more.

During the pandemic, readers seeking literary antecedents for their experiences snapped up books such as *The Plague* by Albert Camus and Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Anyone wanting a glimpse of a child's view of life in lockdown could turn to *A Child's Garden of Verse*, the classic 1885 volume by Robert Louis Stevenson. Among the sweet rhyming lines about lead soldiers and hollyhocks is a section of poems, *The Child Alone*, that illuminates with perfect wistfulness the loneliness of the confined existence. In one, a child trapped at home with only his parents for company goes into imagined worlds made of curtains and furniture: "These are the hills, these are the woods/These are my starry solitudes."

Stevenson was drawing from experience. He wrote thrilling adventure stories of pirates and kidnapped boys, but his own childhood was dimmed by illness and isolation. He was sickly, suffering bronchitis, pneumonia, fevers and quite likely diphtheria. For long stretches, Stevenson saw the world through window panes. His nurse, he wrote later, "would lift me out of bed and take me, rolled in blankets, to the window, whence I might look forth into the blue night starred with street lamps and see where the gas still burned behind the windows of other sickrooms ... where ... there might be sick little boys and their nurses waiting, like us, for the morning."

The image presents itself when I see portraits of children during the pandemic – those photographs published in magazines or shared on social media in the past year of people locked behind glass, gazing out at a newly unfamiliar world. The ones of children convey in an instant a magnitude of loss, the time snatched from those who otherwise would have been, like the young of every animal, prowling about in packs, shrieking in glee, investigating their world and generally slobbering all over each other.

MORE IN THIS SERIES

- [From graphic novels to audiobooks, tips to get kids reading more](#)
- [Canadian authors tell us the books that shaped them \(and the ones kids should read today\)](#)
- [Spring 2021 books preview: 45 new titles for you and the young readers in your life](#)

- From dance to drama to drawing, children need an arts education now more than ever

This has been, for many kids, a year of loneliness and missed milestones, of diminished family gatherings and playtime, a year spent away from school and in the glare of a screen. The deficits relating to that last part, at least, have a name. The worry over “learning loss” began as early as last June, and it grew as schools in the country’s COVID-19 hot zones closed in April for the third time. Many children in parts of Canada have spent close to six months out of school since the pandemic began.

Some of the consequences are already evident. Research late last fall from George Georgiou, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Alberta, showed that among Edmonton students surveyed, reading scores in Grades 1 to 3 had fallen on average between six and eight months. (Older children who were already reading fared the same or better.) Preliminary data from the Toronto District School Board similarly found declines among early readers.

The international data also aren’t reassuring. A study in the Netherlands found that, notwithstanding efforts made in remote schooling, kids learned very little during the school closings in that country. Those tested after eight weeks of lockdown were behind on test scores compared with the three previous years, and the decline was substantially steeper for kids from less educated families. (Countries with longer lockdowns, the study suggested, could see greater deficits.)

The pandemic exacerbates pre-existing problems. Even before this exceptional year, one in eight kids below the age of 15, and a quarter of early readers in Canada (Grade 3 or younger), were not reading at grade level, according to the Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation (CCLF).

“In some communities those numbers were higher,” says the group’s chief executive, Ariel Siller, and they have gone up during the pandemic. “It’s worrisome because literacy is so foundational to learning, socio-emotional development and people’s ability to engage in Canadian life.”



Slowed academic progress is only one piece of the past year's legacy. What does a lonely year of physical distancing and compromised social connection do to a child's mind? Loneliness research in the past has focused on those who are more likely to live alone, including the elderly, or on the extremes of experience suffered by the likes of astronauts. There isn't a body of research on the quotidian hell of being a child cooped up at home for months on end, with – if you're lucky – a computer for learning, socializing, distraction and entertainment.

What we know is that for kids, as for the rest of us, the consequences of prolonged isolation are real. In an attempt to understand the pandemic's impact, a U.K. meta-study published in 2020 reviewed 63 earlier studies that examined the long-term impact of social isolation and loneliness in children; its findings showed that kids who report loneliness may be more susceptible to depression up to nine years later. The longer the isolation lasts, the more dire the effects. A study of the mental-health impact of the pandemic from the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto revealed in February that seven in 10 school-aged children (and a slightly lower number of preschoolers) reported negative effects in at least one mental-health domain, such as irritability, attention span or hyperactivity.

What does a path back from all this look like? On the policy side, that's a complex picture demanding a mix of mental health, social and educational supports. But parents and educators puzzling through this moment could take some inspiration from those literary and real-world images of children standing at windows. Books, too, are windows – ones that show us other worlds and that in this world can be pathways to better outcomes. Children of every

socioeconomic group, the OECD reports, show higher socio-emotional developments when parents read to them, and higher adult literacy correlates with better health outcomes.

“We know that the love of reading is a predictor of success in life,” says Stephen Faul, the president and CEO of Frontier College, a national literacy charity. “Reading opens opportunities, and one thing I hear over and over again from children, youth and adults who are learning how to read and write and use numbers is [that it boosts] confidence. That builds resilience. And, boy, that’s something we need right now.”

Faul’s organization has had to pivot to reach its audience. It now runs tutoring programs online, sometimes relying on simple phone calls to read to kids with poor broadband. It has also shipped off books and thousands of learning kits. To connect with youth in Nunavik, Frontier partnered with two local organizations, Makivik Corp. and Kativik Ilisarniliriniq; the group ran outdoor summer camps and, in some cases, read to kids over the radio. In Grande Prairie, Alta., it took inspiration from StoryWalk, an idea created by a retired health specialist in Vermont, and affixed pages from books such as *Planting a Rainbow* and *Toad Has Talent* to posts through a park, constructing a whimsical literary journey for families.

Children learn more from books than how to decode words on the page. “I honestly think reading is the ultimate form of empathy,” the bestselling, Newberry Medal–winning children’s and YA author Matt de la Peña said. “Because you care so much about these characters who can do *nothing* for you.”

In reading stories, children reason, imagine, interpret, and connect. They interact with the characters on the page. They learn, in other words, to be people.



Reading is also a deceptively social exercise. A 2011 study from the University at Buffalo suggested the human propensity to form group social bonds can be fulfilled through reading – what the researchers dubbed “narrative collective assimilation.” When we read *Harry Potter* or the *Twilight* books (included in the study) or *Anne of Green Gables* or *The Land of Stories*, we come to identify with the characters in a way that amounts to actual social connection. That could be one reason reading has been found to mediate the effects of loneliness.

De la Peña’s daughter, who is 6, explained the experience to him with a simplicity that startles: “I think when I read, it’s almost like I’m not even myself anymore,” she told her dad. “I’m just in that world. But I’m not in that world – I’m in the bushes looking into that world, so they can’t see me, but I can see all of them.” It’s a beautiful encapsulation of the intimacy and wonder of reading.

It’s no surprise books themselves are full of portals that transport characters to other places, wrote Yuji Takenaga, a professor of English literature at Ehime University in Japan in a paper for the Forum on Public Policy: Alice falls down a rabbit hole to enter Wonderland; Harry Potter takes a train from Platform 9¾; and Peter, Susan, Lucy and Edmond go through a mysterious wardrobe to enter Narnia. The reader accompanies them as they travel – a marvellous thought in a year in which other journeys have been all but impossible. If books have always taught us to be people, in our time they may train us, Takenaga argues, to be global citizens.

And more active citizens at home. A report from Deloitte commissioned by CCLF argues that building literacy skills presents a more equitable way forward postpandemic. During the past year, with libraries and schools shuttered for stretches, the CCLF and Frontier collaborated with other groups on a new program, Read On Canada, that got 140,000 books to children through food banks. Reading to and with children, CCLF CEO Siller points out, is also about more than the words: The shared time, she says, “is also essential to developing strong bonds between family members and the community and kids.”

De la Peña has observed an unusual version of these moments. He has spoken to youth in high schools in tough neighbourhoods, and to men, women and kids in prisons. A lot of reading can happen in jail, de la Peña says; they call it “reading on the inside.” He recalls a visit to a women’s prison in Minneapolis with his picture book *Last Stop on Market Street*. He was there to coach the inmates to read, but many of the women asked to record themselves reading. “I was sitting with probably about 50 different inmates as they recorded themselves, reading the book to send back to their child,” he says. “Their kids were going to get to be a part of this. A lot of them were very emotional reading the book.”

It was literature as a way out of confinement, the book as a portal to freedom and family.

That is a path de la Peña knows well. He didn’t grow up around books, and as a sports-obsessed teenager (he went to university on a basketball scholarship), he didn’t finish a novel until he was out of high school. “I just didn’t get it,” he recalls. “When you don’t have the reps of getting through books, you don’t understand how to square the discomfort you sometimes feel when you pick up a new book. Some of the best books you will ever read start off feeling uncomfortable.”



Eventually, he met the right book. When he tells his story in schools, the boys in the back, hiding under their hoodies, start to listen. "I was so shocked when I read a book that made me feel emotional. I wanted to weep. And this is coming from a boy or a man now who's so similar to them. I'm like their dad. I'm telling them that something clicked. And that there's a possibility that might happen for them, too."

The book was *The Colour Purple*, given to him by a professor, and it started a journey that led to his life as a prolific, award-winning writer. It's a reminder of how transformative books can be. In the months ahead, parents, teachers and policy makers will puzzle over the learning losses experienced by kids in this period – how severe they are, how they can be corrected. For them, literacy represents a measure of hope, an investment that could pay dividends. For the children of lockdown, literature is much more: It means solace, escape, a little joy, a little company – and a powerful reminder that our stories, too, can change.

How will the pandemic affect literacy?

Marsha Lederman talked to four experts about the impact of a year of interrupted learning on kids' potential.



CAMESHA COX

Founder, the Reading Partnership

The thing about the years between kindergarten and Grade 3 is that kids are learning to read. From then on, they're really reading to learn. The ability to read is the thread throughout every aspect of the curriculum from K to 12 and onward, so if you're not reading at level by Grade 3, the likelihood of you continuing to struggle is there. It can affect your life in so many ways. Being able to read gives you confidence. At the end of the day, kids who read succeed. I always like to say today's readers are tomorrow's leaders.

Prior to the pandemic, Black and Indigenous kids were overrepresented among kids who are not meeting the provincial standards for reading. They were overrepresented in not graduating from high school and moving on to postsecondary. If those were the numbers before the pandemic, then we already know what that means for where they are now as a result of the pandemic.

This is a very solvable problem. We can address this. It's just a matter of whether this is important enough to government and to the community.

STEACY PINNEY

Chief executive officer, Calgary Reads

In the United States, they have what's called Reading Corps – they deploy hundreds of thousands of university students, retired seniors and high-school youth into schools for this really important one-to-one reading support. I am very hopeful that the time is right and the case is strong for why a Canadian Reading Corps is going to be essential as part of the “build back better” we're all dreaming about.

We did a research paper on the benefits of reading and how amazing it is for your mental well-being. We can't seem to get literacy on the political agenda, and it's not something that gets much attention or funds. But mental health does. So, if reading with children and reading to each other and reading for yourself are proving to be very good mental-health strategies, let's go after this from a mental health perspective.

ALYSON SHAW

Pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Ottawa

We're just getting started with understanding the consequences of the pandemic on literacy, and it's probably a bit early to tell, but it seems like there was likely a stall in reading progress, at least for the youngest children last spring, when the schools weren't fully set up for virtual learning.

They learn best when they're face to face with an attentive, loving caregiver, but those caregivers might be under an immense amount of stress during the pandemic. Before, we used to talk about planning your screen time. Now, because we're spending so much time on screens, we actually have to talk about planning our off-screen time. And books can really become an important part of that time for families.

STEPHEN FAUL

President and CEO, Frontier College

If you already know how to read, the impact of the pandemic will be a little less than if you were on the cusp of learning to read. The consequences are quite severe. The impact, uncorrected, is that people are going to have less earning potential. That's become a very popular understanding in literacy circles. Why is it so important? Because it connects to so many things: It connects to your employment opportunities, so therefore it connects to income and housing, to your ability to get a higher education. It connects to criminal justice in a couple of different ways. And it connects to health care. It matters so much – and it's a more significant issue in Canada than many people realize. Almost one in five Canadians struggle to some extent with literacy. That's a lot of people. The love of reading is a good indicator of success in life.

© Copyright 2021 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher