

Psychosocial Development in School-Aged Children After COVID-19:

Peer Development, Social Disruption, and Strategic Educational Scaffolding for Adolescents Transitioning Into Adulthood

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Preface

As a teacher of Grade 4 to 9 students in rural Nova Scotia over the past two years, I have become increasingly aware that my middle school students interact in ways that vary significantly from previous generations. I hypothesized that the COVID-19 pandemic had fundamentally impacted them; however, I did not fully understand the mechanics of this shift or the best practices for helping students navigate this altered approach to social and academic development.

To address this, I conducted an in-depth review of the literature and compiled this research paper. My goal was to better understand the normative psychosocial development of school-aged children, specifically the critical transition from family-centered to peer-centered support. I sought to uncover how the social distancing and disruptions of the pandemic affected these processes—leading to observed increases in social anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and reduced social confidence.

Furthermore, this paper explores the "strategic scaffolding" required in public education today. It examines how we can adapt academic content delivery and psychosocial assistance to meet the needs of these impacted cohorts through relationship-based education and structured social rehabilitation.

I felt that consolidating this research into a single resource would offer a stronger foundation for supporting students as they rebuild their "social musculature" and transition into adulthood. I hope it serves as a helpful guide for you as well.

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Introduction

The psychosocial development of children and adolescents depends heavily on consistent social interaction, emotional modeling, peer engagement, and participation in structured educational environments. During normal development, children gradually transition from relying primarily on parents and caregivers for emotional regulation and identity formation to increasingly relying on peers for validation, belonging, social learning, and self-concept development. This developmental progression is not merely social preference; it is a central feature of healthy cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial maturation.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this process globally. Beginning in early 2020, schools closed, extracurricular activities were cancelled, physical distancing measures limited interpersonal contact, and millions of children experienced prolonged periods of social isolation during sensitive developmental stages. While the public health rationale for these interventions was understandable during a period of significant uncertainty, the developmental consequences for children and adolescents are still being understood.

The students currently entering high school and early adulthood represent a unique developmental cohort. Many experienced pandemic-related restrictions during the precise developmental period when peer relationships normally intensify and identity exploration accelerates. For some students, this disruption resulted in increased anxiety, delayed social confidence, reduced emotional resilience, and difficulty navigating face-to-face interpersonal environments following the return to in-person schooling.

At the same time, outcomes have not been universally negative. Many young people demonstrated significant resilience, adaptability, and technological competence during the

pandemic years. Some students benefited from stronger family relationships, reduced social pressure, or alternative learning environments. Consequently, the developmental effects of the pandemic cannot be understood through a simplistic “damaged generation” framework. Instead, the evidence suggests the emergence of a cohort with a distinct psychosocial and social-developmental signature shaped by prolonged disruption to normative peer ecology.

This paper examines the normal psychosocial development of school-aged children and adolescents, the developmental shift from family-centered to peer-centered social support, and the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these processes. It also explores emerging evidence regarding social anxiety, emotional regulation, peer functioning, school engagement, and identity development among pandemic-affected youth. Finally, the paper provides practical recommendations for educators and schools to support students transitioning into secondary education and emerging adulthood following this unprecedented developmental interruption.

Theoretical Foundations of Psychosocial Development

Developmental psychology has long recognized that human development occurs through dynamic interaction between the individual and their social environment. Emotional regulation, self-concept, identity formation, and interpersonal competence emerge gradually through repeated interaction with caregivers, peers, schools, and broader social systems.

Erikson and Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding social and emotional development across the lifespan. Erikson (1963) proposed that development progresses through a series of psychosocial stages characterized by central developmental conflicts.

During middle childhood, children enter the stage of Industry versus Inferiority. In this period, competence, achievement, peer comparison, and mastery become increasingly important.

Children begin evaluating themselves relative to others and derive growing amounts of self-worth from academic success, social inclusion, and skill development.

Adolescence introduces the stage of Identity versus Role Confusion. During this period, young people begin actively exploring values, beliefs, social roles, and identity. Peer relationships become critically important because they provide feedback, validation, social comparison, and opportunities for identity experimentation. Adolescents increasingly rely on peers rather than caregivers to interpret social norms and reinforce self-concept.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted many of the social conditions that normally support successful navigation of these developmental stages. Reduced peer interaction limited opportunities for identity experimentation, social comparison, conflict resolution, and autonomy development.

Bowlby and Attachment Theory

Attachment theory also provides an important framework for understanding psychosocial disruption during the pandemic. Bowlby (1988) argued that secure attachment relationships create a “secure base” from which children can safely explore the world and develop independence.

In early childhood, caregivers serve as the primary emotional regulators and sources of security. However, healthy development eventually requires gradual movement outward into peer relationships and broader social systems. Secure attachment supports confidence in social exploration.

During the pandemic, many children experienced increased time within the family system while simultaneously losing access to external peer systems. For some families, this strengthened attachment relationships and emotional closeness. For others, prolonged confinement intensified family stress, conflict, economic hardship, and emotional dysregulation.

Importantly, attachment theory suggests that peer development is not intended to replace family support but rather to expand beyond it. Healthy psychosocial development involves increasing interdependence rather than total independence.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a particularly useful framework for understanding the developmental effects of the pandemic because it situates child development within interacting environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

According to Bronfenbrenner, development occurs through interaction between the child and multiple ecological systems, including:

- The microsystem (family, peers, school)
- The mesosystem (interactions between those systems)
- The exosystem (community structures and institutions)
- The macrosystem (culture, economics, politics)
- The chronosystem (historical events and time)

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a large-scale disruption across nearly every ecological layer simultaneously. Schools closed, peer systems fragmented, extracurricular activities disappeared, family stress increased, and broader societal anxiety became normalized. From an ecological perspective, the pandemic did not simply interrupt schooling; it temporarily altered the developmental architecture surrounding children and adolescents.

Vygotsky and Social Learning

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning and development occur through social interaction.

Cognitive growth is shaped by collaborative dialogue, observation, modeling, and participation within social environments.

Peer interaction plays an important role in this process. Children develop conversational reciprocity, emotional interpretation, negotiation skills, and perspective-taking through repeated social experiences. Informal peer interactions during recess, group work, extracurricular activities, and unstructured socialization contribute significantly to social-cognitive development.

Virtual learning environments during the pandemic preserved some instructional continuity but could not fully replicate the spontaneous and emotionally rich interactions that occur within physical social environments.

The Normal Developmental Shift From Family-Centered to Peer-Centered Support

Research in developmental psychology consistently demonstrates that children gradually shift portions of their emotional and social reliance from caregivers toward peers during middle childhood and adolescence. Brown and Larson (2009) describe peer relationships as one of the defining developmental features of adolescence, noting that young people increasingly spend more time with peers, place greater importance on peer opinions, and rely more heavily on peer groups for emotional validation and identity formation.

This developmental transition is associated with increasing autonomy from parents and growing participation in peer-centered social systems. De Goede et al. (2009) found that parent-

adolescent relationships gradually become more egalitarian and less authority-driven during adolescence, while friendships simultaneously become more intimate, emotionally supportive, and central to psychosocial functioning. Their longitudinal research demonstrated that adolescents increasingly orient themselves toward peer relationships while still maintaining important attachment relationships within the family system.

Importantly, contemporary developmental research no longer frames family and peer systems as competing influences. Instead, researchers increasingly emphasize their interconnectedness. Cooper and Ayers-Lopez (1985) argued that healthy peer functioning is often rooted in earlier family relationships and attachment experiences, suggesting substantial continuity between family relational dynamics and adolescent peer competence.

The increasing importance of peers during early adolescence is also associated with major cognitive and emotional developmental changes. Mitic et al. (2021) note that peer relationships become increasingly influential in shaping emotional well-being, identity development, and social adjustment during middle childhood and early adolescence. As adolescents seek belonging, autonomy, and social identity, peer relationships begin serving developmental functions that extend beyond companionship and become central mechanisms of psychosocial growth.

Research further suggests that this transition toward peer orientation is developmentally adaptive rather than problematic. Allen and Loeb (2015) describe adolescence as a period characterized by the “autonomy-connection challenge,” in which young people attempt to establish greater independence while simultaneously maintaining meaningful emotional relationships.

Successfully navigating peer relationships during adolescence is strongly associated with later social competence, emotional adjustment, and adult relational functioning.

Early Childhood: Family as the Primary Social System

In early childhood, family relationships dominate the child's social world. Parents and caregivers regulate emotions, provide behavioral guidance, interpret social situations, and model interpersonal relationships.

Children initially learn emotional regulation through co-regulation with caregivers. Secure attachment relationships help children develop trust, emotional stability, and confidence in exploration.

At this stage, peer relationships are generally activity-based and relatively simple. Young children often define friendship through proximity or shared play rather than emotional intimacy.

Middle Childhood and Emerging Peer Orientation

Middle childhood represents a particularly important transitional period because children begin developing increasingly sophisticated peer competencies, including empathy, reciprocal communication, social negotiation, and group identity formation. Monahan et al. (2016) found that peer social competence during the transition from childhood to adolescence predicts later emotional, academic, and behavioral adjustment. Positive peer relationships during this developmental period contribute to increased prosocial behavior and stronger psychosocial adaptation over time.

The transition toward peer-centered social support generally begins between ages 8 and 10.

During this period, peer relationships become increasingly stable, emotionally meaningful, and influential.

Children begin developing stronger social awareness and become more sensitive to inclusion, exclusion, popularity, and group dynamics. Friendships shift from activity-based interactions toward reciprocal emotional relationships.

This developmental period is especially important because it establishes many foundational social competencies:

- Conversational reciprocity
- Conflict resolution
- Emotional interpretation
- Cooperation
- Social negotiation
- Empathy
- Group participation
- Social comparison

Children also begin spending more emotional energy evaluating themselves relative to peers.

Peer approval becomes increasingly tied to self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Early Adolescence and Identity Formation

The transition intensifies significantly during early adolescence, generally between ages 11 and

14. During this stage, peer relationships often become central to identity development.

Adolescents increasingly seek:

- Emotional validation from peers
- Social belonging
- Autonomy from family systems
- Opportunities for identity experimentation

- Romantic exploration
- Increased independence

Peer groups begin shaping values, interests, clothing, language, attitudes, and behavioral norms.

Adolescents also become highly sensitive to social exclusion and rejection.

Importantly, this process is developmentally adaptive. Adolescents are preparing for adult social functioning by gradually shifting portions of their emotional reliance from caregivers to broader social systems.

The Continued Importance of Family

Although peer relationships become increasingly important, family relationships remain critically important throughout adolescence. Healthy development does not involve abandoning family support.

Research consistently shows that adolescents who maintain supportive family relationships demonstrate better emotional regulation, stronger resilience, lower rates of depression, and healthier peer functioning (Butler et al., 2022).

The developmental transition is therefore best understood as a rebalancing of social influence rather than a replacement of one system with another.

Schools as Developmental Ecosystems

Schools are not simply academic institutions. They function as complex developmental ecosystems where children acquire social competence, emotional resilience, identity feedback, and peer belonging.

Schools as Social Laboratories

Daily school life provides repeated opportunities for students to:

- Negotiate conflict
- Build friendships
- Practice communication
- Develop leadership skills
- Experience inclusion and exclusion
- Learn emotional regulation
- Engage in teamwork
- Navigate authority structures

Many of these developmental experiences occur outside formal curriculum instruction.

Hallway conversations, lunch interactions, extracurricular activities, sports, clubs, performances, and informal peer encounters all contribute to psychosocial development.

For many students, school also serves as a compensatory social environment. Students experiencing instability at home may rely heavily on peer groups, trusted teachers, coaches, or school communities for emotional support and identity validation.

School Connectedness and Mental Health

Research increasingly demonstrates that school connectedness is strongly associated with mental health outcomes, resilience, and academic engagement.

Students who feel connected to school environments generally demonstrate:

- Higher academic engagement
- Lower rates of anxiety and depression
- Greater emotional resilience

- Improved attendance
- Better behavioral outcomes
- Stronger peer relationships

Long et al. (2021) found that positive school climate and supportive peer relationships significantly contribute to adolescent well-being. Similarly, Widnall et al. (2022) reported that school and peer connectedness functioned as important protective factors during the pandemic. When schools closed during COVID-19, many children lost not only educational structure but also critical developmental environments.

COVID-19 and the Disruption of Psychosocial Development

Nature of the Disruption

The COVID-19 pandemic produced one of the largest simultaneous disruptions to child and adolescent social development in modern history.

Children experienced:

- School closures
- Social distancing requirements
- Cancellation of extracurricular activities
- Reduced face-to-face peer interaction
- Increased screen exposure
- Family stress and economic instability
- Reduced access to mental health supports
- Interrupted routines and developmental rituals

For adolescents, the disruption was particularly significant because it occurred during a developmental stage heavily dependent on peer interaction.

Children who were approximately 9 to 15 years old during the peak restriction period may have experienced disruption during a particularly sensitive developmental window.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

One of the most consistently documented outcomes of the pandemic was increased loneliness among children and adolescents.

Loades et al. (2020) found strong associations between social isolation and increased risk for depression and anxiety in youth. The duration of loneliness appeared particularly important, with longer periods of isolation associated with greater mental health risk.

Adolescents are neurologically and psychologically oriented toward peer engagement. During adolescence, social belonging and peer acceptance become strongly linked to emotional regulation and self-concept.

The sudden removal of peer ecosystems, therefore, represented more than a temporary inconvenience. For many students, it interrupted a central developmental process.

Increased Anxiety and Emotional Dysregulation

Multiple studies identified increases in anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents during and following the pandemic.

Observed symptoms included:

- Social anxiety
- Generalized anxiety
- Emotional withdrawal
- Increased irritability

- Reduced frustration tolerance
- Emotional reactivity
- Avoidance behaviors

Educators returning to in-person instruction frequently reported that some students appeared socially younger than their chronological age. Students who missed critical years of peer interaction sometimes demonstrated reduced conflict-resolution capacity, lower conversational confidence, and increased discomfort in unstructured social environments.

Wang et al. (2023) found significant associations between pandemic-related stressors and psychosocial adjustment difficulties among adolescents.

Disruption to Identity Development

Identity development relies heavily on social experimentation, feedback, and comparison (Gadermann et al., 2022).

Adolescents normally develop identity through:

- Peer interaction
- Group belonging
- Exploration of interests
- Social experimentation
- Exposure to differing perspectives
- Participation in activities and communities

Pandemic restrictions narrowed many of these opportunities.

For some adolescents, identity development became increasingly mediated through digital environments. Social media, online gaming, virtual communication, and algorithm-driven interaction have partially replaced in-person developmental experiences.

While digital spaces provided important social continuity, they may also have intensified certain developmental risks, including:

- Social comparison
- Perfectionism
- Online performative identity
- Reduced tolerance for interpersonal discomfort
- Fragmentation between online and offline identity

Erikson's concept of identity versus role confusion becomes particularly relevant here.

Adolescents deprived of normal peer ecosystems may have experienced reduced opportunity for stable identity integration, as pandemic-related stress has been shown to exacerbate identity confusion during this critical developmental window (Azarmehr et al., 2023; Branje et al., 2021).

Digital Communication and the Limits of Virtual Interaction

Technology played a complex role during the pandemic.

Digital communication platforms allowed many young people to maintain friendships, continue schooling, and access emotional support. For some students, digital environments reduced social pressure and created safer avenues for interaction (Marciano et al., 2022).

However, virtual communication could not fully replicate in-person developmental experiences.

Face-to-face interaction involves:

- Nonverbal communication
- Physical co-presence
- Emotional immediacy
- Group dynamics
- Informal spontaneous interaction

- Conflict negotiation in real time

Manis and Stewart (2024) found that virtual peer interaction maintained partial social continuity but did not replace the developmental richness of in-person socialization.

Many educators and parents observed that students returning to physical classrooms demonstrated increased discomfort with spontaneous interaction and reduced social stamina.

Emerging Evidence Regarding Long-Term Effects

Social Anxiety and Reduced Social Confidence

Emerging research suggests that some pandemic-affected cohorts continue to demonstrate elevated levels of social anxiety and interpersonal discomfort.

Many adolescents who experienced prolonged isolation during early adolescence appear more hesitant in social situations and less confident initiating interaction (Kerekes et al., 2021).

Educators frequently report:

- Increased avoidance of presentations
- Reduced classroom participation
- Fear of embarrassment
- Difficulty working collaboratively
- Heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation

Importantly, these patterns do not necessarily indicate pathology. Rather, they may reflect developmental delays in social exposure and confidence-building opportunities.

Students who missed critical years of peer interaction may simply require additional scaffolding and practice.

Emotional Resilience and Frustration Tolerance

Some researchers and educators have observed reduced frustration tolerance among post-pandemic students.

During digital learning, many environments became highly individualized and flexible. Students could mute conversations, disengage temporarily, or avoid difficult social situations more easily than in physical environments.

Returning to structured social environments, therefore, required significant emotional adjustment.

Some students appear less comfortable with:

- Delayed gratification
- Interpersonal conflict
- Academic struggle
- Social ambiguity
- Public performance
- Unstructured peer interaction

This does not imply weakness or deficiency. Rather, these students experienced developmental conditions substantially different from those of previous cohorts.

Academic Engagement and Motivation

Psychosocial disruption also appears linked to changes in academic engagement.

School motivation is deeply social. Students are influenced by peer norms, teacher relationships, extracurricular involvement, and school connectedness.

Students who became socially disconnected during the pandemic sometimes demonstrated:

- Lower school engagement

- Reduced attendance motivation
- Difficulty re-establishing routines
- Increased disengagement
- Greater emotional exhaustion

At the same time, some students demonstrated improved independence and technological adaptability.

The developmental impact of the pandemic remains highly variable across individuals and contexts.

Resilience and Recovery

Despite legitimate concerns regarding developmental disruption, evidence also strongly supports youth resilience.

Many children and adolescents demonstrated remarkable adaptability during the pandemic.

Protective factors associated with stronger recovery include:

- Supportive family relationships
- Stable peer friendships
- Positive school environments
- Access to extracurricular activities
- Strong teacher relationships
- Community support systems

Importantly, developmental trajectories remain highly plastic throughout adolescence.

The evidence does not support deterministic assumptions regarding permanent impairment.

Rather, it suggests that intentional support, social reintegration, and positive developmental environments can significantly promote recovery.

Educational Implications for Secondary Schools

The students now entering high school and emerging adulthood may require a more intentional approach to psychosocial support than many previous cohorts.

Schools are increasingly functioning not only as educational institutions but also as social rehabilitation environments, helping students rebuild developmental competencies interrupted during the pandemic.

Rethinking Student Readiness

Many educational systems continue operating under assumptions regarding social maturity that may no longer fully reflect the experiences of post-pandemic students. In many classrooms, teachers are encountering adolescents who appear academically capable but socially hesitant, emotionally fragile, or unusually avoidant of interpersonal risk. Behaviours such as reduced participation, social withdrawal, conflict avoidance, or emotional sensitivity may be interpreted as immaturity, disengagement, or lack of motivation. However, developmental literature increasingly suggests that some of these behaviours may instead reflect interrupted opportunities for social rehearsal during critical developmental periods (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). From a developmental perspective, psychosocial competence is not acquired automatically through age progression alone. Competencies such as conversational reciprocity, conflict management, emotional regulation, and collaborative confidence typically emerge through repeated exposure to social environments. Students who experienced prolonged social restriction during middle childhood or early adolescence may therefore require additional time and structured support to rebuild interpersonal confidence.

This interpretation aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on socially mediated learning and Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, which situates development within interacting social systems. When schools, peer groups, extracurricular activities, and broader community structures were simultaneously disrupted during the pandemic, many students temporarily lost access to the developmental environments that normally support psychosocial maturation. Recognizing the developmental context behind these behaviours allows educators to respond more effectively and compassionately while maintaining appropriate expectations for growth and accountability.

The Importance of Relationship-Based Education

Post-pandemic students may benefit particularly strongly from relationship-centered educational approaches. Research consistently demonstrates that strong teacher-student relationships contribute significantly to emotional safety, school engagement, resilience, and academic persistence. Long et al. (2021) found that positive school climate and supportive peer relationships are strongly associated with adolescent well-being, while Widnall et al. (2022) identified school connectedness as an important protective factor during and after pandemic-related disruption.

Relationship-centered education is especially important for students who may have experienced developmental interruption during periods of social isolation. Adolescents who feel psychologically safe within classrooms are generally more willing to participate socially, take academic risks, seek assistance, and tolerate temporary failure or embarrassment. In contrast, students experiencing heightened social anxiety or reduced interpersonal confidence may avoid participation unless supportive relational conditions are intentionally established.

Importantly, relationship-centered pedagogy does not imply reduced academic standards or excessive emotional permissiveness. Rather, it reflects the understanding that learning and

psychosocial functioning are deeply interconnected. Li et al. (2011) demonstrated that peer relationships and school belonging contribute significantly to student engagement during adolescence, suggesting that social connection is not peripheral to academic success but foundational to it. For post-pandemic cohorts, emotionally supportive educational environments may therefore function not only as places of instruction but also as developmental stabilization systems that help students gradually rebuild confidence, resilience, and interpersonal competence.

Strategic Scaffolding

The concept of scaffolding traditionally refers to temporary supports that assist learners in developing competencies they are not yet able to perform independently (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of post-pandemic adolescent development, however, scaffolding extends beyond academics alone. Increasingly, educators are being required to support the redevelopment of social confidence, emotional regulation, interpersonal resilience, and independent functioning among students whose developmental experiences were interrupted during critical formative years.

A growing body of literature suggests that many students returning from prolonged pandemic isolation demonstrated characteristics associated with developmental regression, including heightened social anxiety, diminished frustration tolerance, avoidance of peer interaction, and increased emotional dependence on adults (Loades et al., 2020; Samji et al., 2022). While these effects were not universal, they were sufficiently widespread that schools across North America reported substantial increases in student disengagement, absenteeism, behavioural dysregulation, and mental health referrals (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Importantly, these challenges often

emerged even among students who appeared academically successful. In many cases, cognitive performance masked underlying psychosocial vulnerabilities.

Educational scaffolding in this context, therefore, involves intentionally rebuilding the developmental competencies that would normally emerge through repeated peer interaction, extracurricular participation, collaborative learning, and increasing independence during adolescence. Rather than assuming students naturally reacquire these capacities over time, educators may need to explicitly model, structure, and gradually release responsibility for interpersonal and self-regulatory skills.

One important area of strategic scaffolding involves rebuilding what might be described as adolescents' "social musculature." During the pandemic, many students lost extended opportunities to practice conflict resolution, cooperative problem solving, conversational turn-taking, and interpretation of non-verbal social cues. Developmental psychologists have long emphasized that these competencies are not merely personality traits but learned and reinforced behaviours shaped through repeated social exposure (Erikson, 1968; Steinberg, 2017).

Consequently, some students returning to in-person schooling demonstrated reduced confidence navigating ordinary peer tensions or unfamiliar social environments.

Schools can respond to this challenge by creating intentionally structured opportunities for low-risk interpersonal engagement. Cooperative learning environments, peer mentorship programs, restorative circles, collaborative project-based learning, and extracurricular participation may all function as forms of developmental rehearsal. These environments allow students to rebuild social confidence gradually while receiving support and feedback from peers and adults.

Importantly, the literature suggests that belonging and peer connectedness are strongly associated

with improved emotional regulation, school engagement, and resilience following adversity (Wentzel, 2017; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Another critical area involves scaffolding emotional resilience and tolerance for discomfort. Several researchers have argued that pandemic-era educational accommodations, while necessary during crisis conditions, occasionally reduced opportunities for students to experience manageable levels of challenge, frustration, and recovery (Duckworth et al., 2007). Some adolescents became accustomed to highly flexible deadlines, reduced social expectations, and avoidance of stressful situations. While these practices were often compassionate and necessary during acute disruption, there is increasing concern that prolonged over-accommodation may inadvertently contribute to avoidance-based coping patterns.

Strategic scaffolding does not imply withdrawing empathy or support. Rather, it involves gradually increasing expectations while maintaining psychological safety. Effective educators frequently balance warmth with structure by normalizing challenge, encouraging persistence, and framing setbacks as developmental rather than catastrophic. This approach aligns closely with resilience literature emphasizing the importance of supportive exposure to manageable stressors in the development of coping capacity (Masten, 2014). Students who are never required to navigate discomfort may struggle to develop confidence in their ability to tolerate adversity.

Transition planning for older adolescents represents another particularly important dimension of post-pandemic scaffolding. Many students entering late adolescence during the pandemic experienced disruptions to employment opportunities, volunteer experiences, athletics, leadership programs, travel, and social rites of passage that traditionally contribute to identity development and autonomy formation. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, adolescence represents a critical period for identity exploration and consolidation

(Erikson, 1968). When opportunities for experimentation and social role exploration are restricted, some young people may experience prolonged uncertainty regarding competence, direction, and self-concept.

Educational institutions can support this developmental transition by emphasizing experiential learning, career exploration, mentorship, and authentic responsibility. Co-operative education placements, service learning, student leadership opportunities, and community partnerships may provide adolescents with opportunities to rebuild confidence in their own agency and capacity. Research in adolescent development consistently demonstrates that self-efficacy develops not through passive reassurance alone but through successful participation in meaningful, increasingly independent activities (Bandura, 1997).

Importantly, strategic scaffolding should not be interpreted as a deficit-based framework in which pandemic-era adolescents are viewed as permanently damaged or incapable. Many young people demonstrated remarkable adaptability, technological competence, empathy, and resilience throughout the pandemic period. In some cases, students developed heightened awareness of mental health, social inequity, and collective responsibility. Educational responses should therefore avoid pathologizing an entire generation. Instead, schools should recognize that developmental trajectories were altered unevenly and that many students may benefit from intentionally rebuilding opportunities for social engagement, autonomy, resilience, and identity formation.

Ultimately, the goal of post-pandemic scaffolding is not to return students to a previous developmental norm as though the pandemic never occurred. Rather, it is to help adolescents successfully integrate the experiences of disruption, isolation, uncertainty, and adaptation into healthy developmental trajectories that prepare them for adulthood. Effective scaffolding

provides temporary support while gradually restoring independence, confidence, and social competence. In this sense, the educational challenge emerging from the pandemic is not simply academic recovery but developmental reconstruction.

Conclusion for the Post-Pandemic Cohort

Rebuilding Social Confidence Through Structured Interaction

Many students now entering secondary education appear to require additional opportunities for guided social interaction.

Educators can support this process through intentional collaborative structures.

Low-Stakes Collaboration

Structured group activities provide important opportunities for students to rebuild interpersonal confidence through repeated low-risk social interaction. Developmental research suggests that social competence emerges gradually through practice, feedback, observation, and collaborative participation rather than through isolated instruction alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Many students affected by prolonged social disruption may therefore benefit from intentionally scaffolded peer interaction that allows them to practice communication, negotiation, leadership, cooperation, and conflict management within psychologically manageable environments.

Low-stakes collaboration is particularly important because some post-pandemic students appear highly sensitive to public evaluation or social embarrassment. Educators across multiple jurisdictions have reported increased reluctance toward presentations, spontaneous participation, and unstructured group interaction following the return to in-person schooling. Cameron and Tenenbaum (2021) argue that developmental recovery following pandemic restrictions requires renewed opportunities for social participation rather than assumptions that students will automatically reacquire these skills independently.

Importantly, the goal is not forced socialization or artificial extroversion. Rather, it is the gradual rebuilding of interpersonal confidence through predictable and supportive social experiences. Small-group discussion, collaborative inquiry, peer editing, and project-based learning can all provide manageable opportunities for students to redevelop social fluency while maintaining emotional safety.

Explicit Instruction in Social Skills

Historically, schools often assumed that social competence would emerge naturally through ordinary maturation and peer exposure. However, post-pandemic cohorts suggest that this assumption may no longer be sufficient for all students. Some adolescents experienced prolonged reductions in face-to-face interaction during key developmental years, limiting opportunities to practice conversational reciprocity, conflict resolution, nonverbal communication, and collaborative problem solving.

As a result, schools may increasingly need to approach social competency as an instructional domain rather than an implicit byproduct of schooling. Explicit teaching of active listening, respectful disagreement, presentation skills, emotional regulation, professional communication, and group participation may become increasingly important in secondary education. These skills are not merely supplemental “soft skills”; they are foundational competencies required for post-secondary education, employment, civic participation, and adult relationships.

This approach is also supported by developmental and ecological theory. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that higher-order competencies emerge through guided participation and social modeling, while Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted the role of environmental systems in shaping developmental outcomes. When social developmental environments become disrupted, intentional scaffolding may help compensate for lost experiential opportunities. Explicit

instruction in social functioning, therefore, represents not remediation of deficiency, but adaptive educational response to altered developmental conditions.

Building Emotional Resilience

A second priority involves rebuilding frustration tolerance and emotional resilience.

Productive Struggle

Students benefit from experiencing manageable challenges within supportive environments.

Teachers can intentionally normalize:

- Mistakes
- Revision
- Failure as part of learning
- Discomfort during growth
- Academic perseverance

Students who experienced highly flexible or fragmented learning environments during the pandemic may require more guided exposure to productive struggle.

The educator's role becomes less about removing all frustration and more about helping students tolerate and navigate difficulty.

Metacognitive Reflection

Helping students reflect on their emotional responses to challenge can improve self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Questions such as:

- “What part of this situation feels difficult?”
- “What specifically triggers avoidance?”
- “What strategies help you persist?”

encourage students to develop greater emotional insight and agency.

Identity Development and Hybrid Social Reality

Many adolescents now navigate identity formation across both digital and physical environments simultaneously.

Educational approaches should recognize this hybrid reality rather than treating digital culture as entirely separate from “real” life.

Bridging Digital and Physical Participation

Teachers can use digital competencies as pathways into face-to-face engagement.

Examples include:

- Digital research leading into live presentations
- Online collaboration transitioning into in-person teamwork
- Multimedia projects connected to community involvement
- Digital storytelling combined with classroom discussion

This approach helps integrate online identity with embodied interpersonal experience.

Authenticity and Vulnerability

Students raised within highly performative digital cultures may struggle with perfectionism and fear of embarrassment.

Educators who appropriately model:

- Professional mistakes
- Learning from failure
- Emotional resilience
- Intellectual humility

help normalize growth as an imperfect process.

This is particularly important for students who appear highly risk-avoidant socially or academically.

Supporting the Transition Into Adulthood

As students approach graduation, schools must increasingly focus on preparing them for adult social functioning.

Tiered Autonomy

Many students benefit from gradual increases in responsibility rather than abrupt transitions.

Teachers and schools can support autonomy development by:

- Reducing reminder frequency over time
- Encouraging self-management
- Allowing low-risk natural consequences
- Promoting independent problem-solving
- Supporting executive functioning development

Controlled opportunities for failure within supportive environments can build resilience and adaptability.

Peer Mentorship and Community Belonging

Peer mentorship programs can provide particularly valuable developmental support.

Older students mentoring younger students promotes:

- Leadership
- Social confidence
- Community belonging
- Empathy
- Responsibility

Mentorship structures also leverage adolescents' natural peer orientation in positive ways.

Mental Health Supports in Schools

The psychosocial effects of the pandemic also highlight the growing importance of school-based mental health support.

Schools increasingly require:

- Accessible counseling services
- Trauma-informed practices
- Mental health literacy
- Early intervention systems
- Collaborative support teams

Importantly, schools should avoid pathologizing normal developmental adjustment.

Some level of anxiety, awkwardness, emotional sensitivity, or social hesitation may represent an understandable adaptation to prolonged disruption rather than a clinical disorder.

The goal is not to frame students as damaged, but to recognize that they may require additional developmental support.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted normative psychosocial development during a developmental period heavily dependent on peer interaction, social learning, and identity exploration.

Evidence suggests that many children and adolescents experienced:

- Increased loneliness
- Elevated anxiety

- Reduced social confidence
- Emotional dysregulation
- Academic disengagement
- Delayed interpersonal development

However, these effects are not universal, deterministic, or irreversible.

Many students demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and recovery when supportive environments were restored. Outcomes varied substantially depending on family stability, school connectedness, peer support, socioeconomic factors, and access to mental health resources.

Importantly, the current cohort of adolescents should not be viewed through a purely deficit-based framework.

This generation also developed:

- High technological fluency
- Digital collaboration skills
- Adaptability
- Increased mental health awareness
- Greater familiarity with global interconnectedness

The challenge for educators is therefore not remediation alone but integration.

Schools must help students reconnect digital competence with face-to-face interpersonal functioning, emotional resilience, and adult autonomy.

The pandemic also reinforced the reality that schools serve developmental functions extending far beyond academics. Peer ecology, emotional safety, school connectedness, and social participation are central components of healthy development.

Future educational policy and practice must recognize that academic achievement cannot be fully separated from psychosocial well-being.

Conclusion

Normative psychosocial development involves a gradual transition from family-centered dependence toward increasing peer integration, emotional autonomy, and identity formation.

This developmental progression intensifies during middle childhood and adolescence and plays a central role in emotional regulation, self-concept, and social competence.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of the social ecosystems that normally support this transition. School closures, social distancing measures, and prolonged reductions in peer interaction interrupted opportunities for social learning, identity exploration, emotional development, and peer belonging during sensitive developmental periods.

Research suggests that many children and adolescents experienced increased loneliness, social anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and reduced social confidence following pandemic-related disruption. Some students continue to demonstrate difficulty with interpersonal communication, frustration tolerance, academic engagement, and identity integration.

At the same time, the evidence also strongly supports the resilience and developmental plasticity of young people. Many students demonstrated significant recovery when supportive peer environments and school structures returned.

The current developmental cohort is best understood not as permanently damaged, but as socially shaped by an unusual historical event that altered developmental timing and social experience.

For educators, this reality requires a more intentional approach to psychosocial scaffolding.

Secondary schools increasingly need to support not only academic development but also the

rebuilding of social confidence, emotional resilience, interpersonal competence, and healthy autonomy.

Relationship-centered education, explicit instruction in social competencies, structured opportunities for collaboration, gradual autonomy-building, and accessible mental health supports will likely remain essential as this cohort transitions into adulthood.

Ultimately, the long-term developmental outcomes of the pandemic are still unfolding.

Continued longitudinal research will be necessary to fully understand how this generation adapts over time. However, current evidence suggests that with intentional support, stable relationships, and opportunities for meaningful social reintegration, adolescents affected by pandemic disruption remain highly capable of healthy psychosocial growth and successful transition into adult life.

AI Statement

I used Gemini and ChatGPT to help me with organizing ideas, finding information on a topic, checking facts, formatting references, fixing grammar and spelling, and suggesting ways to improve. I contributed by conducting all of the foundational research, creating the original outline for the document, and creating the initial drafts. This began as two documents: the first for the psychosocial disruptions of COVID-19 and a second for the academic scaffolding required to address the related challenges faced by this cohort. They were merged into one document for this publication.

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