

Lifestyle Smart

Tips to reduce post-lockdown social anxiety over the school holidays

Experts report increased social anxiety in children since Covid lockdowns. In school holidays you can do something about it.

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Giving kids permission to play this summer may be one of the best decisions parents could ever make.

Just as some adults have struggled to re-engage socially, so have many children, with experts noting increased social anxiety, particularly among 5 to 13-year-olds.

School education adviser Nikki Bonus says while some kids have relished being back to school after lockdowns, others have been delayed in their ability to play and relate well with others.

“Open and shut lockdowns have caused a lot of children to miss out on foundational points through the primary school year, such as sharing, taking turns and considering others,” Bonus says. “We’re seeing a huge amount of social anxiety in children, largely based on a lack of confidence.”

The problem has not escaped the attention of state governments with Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews recently committing \$112.9m to help primary and secondary school students returning to camps and excursions as well as art, sport and cultural activities.



Nikki Bonus, founder of Life Skills Group. Picture: Supplied

Bonus’s Life Skills program operates in 850 primary and secondary schools and is aligned to the Australian curriculum as a way to improve personal and social skills.

She says play, in and out of school, is one of the main ways children can learn life skills, urging parents to encourage and arrange as many play opportunities with children as possible these holidays.

“Sport is a great way for children to learn basics such as how to take turns, how to lose, how to win, consider others, gain perspective and it’s also where their emotional wellbeing sits,” she says.

“Kids begin to identify, communicate and manage their emotions. If children, who often experience very large emotions, can’t regulate those, they’ll be incapable of learning.”

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There are also some calls for children to brush up on their scholastic skills over summer, with an increased demand on tutors.

Australian Primary Principals Association president Malcolm Elliott says learning does not always have to be about intensive study, especially for children under 12.

“The opportunity for learning comes in many ways and, when it’s linked to the world around us, it opens up the inquiring mind of your child,” Elliott says.

“Parents feeling anxious that their child may be falling behind can place great pressure on the child and what we know is that stress and anxiety do not lead to great educational outcomes.”

Simple outings such as a trip to the supermarket can be a way to teach children about money and improve mathematic skills.



Play is a good way to learn life skills. Picture: iStock

Beyond Blue lead clinical adviser Dr Grant Blasnik says it's worth remembering that kids are very resilient and adaptable.

"The important thing is to keep up the communication and normalise any feelings of stress or worries kids may have as they have had an extraordinary and unusual couple of years of disconnection and many have missed important social milestones," he says.

"Take things slowly and don't be surprised that many children will feel quite fatigued when they start re-engaging with their friends."

With older children or teens, it may be useful for parents to also suggest breaks from social media.

"Kids will always pick up on your reactions, too, so if they come to breakfast and you're commenting on more bad news, flip it so you talk about how clever the scientists are to come up with treatments and give kids a sense of security," he says.



Experts recommend using natural objects to provide mental stimulation and connection between kids. Picture: iStock

Consultant play specialist Cat Sewell says while some kids are being challenged socially, sport won't be the solution for all of them because some children respond more to quiet more creative engagement.

"Role play is great for empathy and understanding because it's about safely learning what it's like to be someone else and it's usually a power figure such as a policeman, teacher, doctor or a parent," Sewell says.

"Play isn't just about a bat and ball or toys. Sharing pretend play is really important as a way to learn social skills."

TOP TIPS

- 1. **PLAY DATES** Organise play with other families or extended family who have a different view of the world and a fresh perspective on play.
- 2. **TRADITIONS** Don't underestimate the benefits of ball games, skipping, kicking a ball.
- 3. **HOBBIES** They can be a way to learn a new skill outside the home, encouraging curiosity and learning.
- 4. **SOCIAL SKILLS** They take practice so the more opportunities, the better.
- 5. **HELP KIDS** Come up with conversation starters: What are you doing for your holidays? What are your favourite foods? What music do you like?

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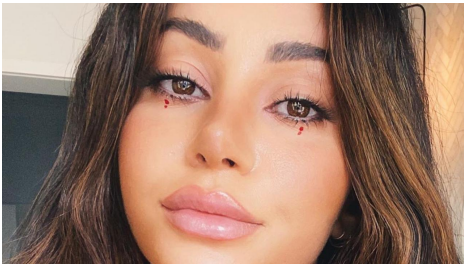
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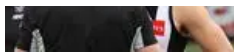
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