

Social Interaction During Remote Learning

I talked to a calzone for fifteen minutes last night before I realized it was just an introverted pizza. I wish all my acquaintances were so tasty. Jerod Kintz

Social creatures by nature, remote learning coupled with social distancing has undeniably added to the stress of many students. Ask them what they miss most about school, among the top answers are seeing their friends and teachers, and the sense of community that school provides. School is hardly a utopia, but it does go a long way towards meeting the social needs of our children. Remote learning, however, may impact students differently, depending on whether a child leans toward extraversion or introversion. Understanding the dispositions of introverts and extroverts and the how they may be experiencing remote learning dissimilarly can offer insight into how to support them during this novel time.

For some students, particularly those who are inclined toward introversion, remote learning has made school less stressful. Unlike extroverts, introverts tend not to seek social interaction to recharge their batteries, thrive on the constant buzz of school life, and clamor to engage in collaborative work, Socratic seminars, and make presentations before their peers. On the contrary, remote learning has gifted introverts with the time for introspection, the flexibility to opt in on Zoom time or office hours on their own terms, and hopefully the chance to work quietly. While introverts are more comfortable with being alone, this is not to say that they can't feel lonely sometimes. Moreover, while solitude may be a prerequisite for deep thought, as Dr. Patricia Kuhl posits, social interaction and student collaboration can amplify learning. Kuhl is referring to our social brain and how cognitive growth can be enhanced by students working together collectively. Consequently, a potential concern that remote learning raises for our introverted students is the possibility that too much of a good thing may lessen their development. Indeed, despite the likelihood that many of our introverted students are enjoying the beauty of solitude, it is in their interest to engage with others regarding their school work and assignments. Whether it is partnering with another student, engaging with a teacher during office hours, dropping in on an optional class, or simply dialoguing with a family member, students need to have their thinking challenged and probed. Such conversations may not happen on the scale that a regular school experience can offer; nonetheless, they could happen formally through required check-ins with teachers, student-to-student feedback or informally with parents inquiring about their child's lesson beyond its completion. For instance, parents could ask:

- How does what you learned/did today relate to what you learned earlier in the year?
- Why is it important to learn this? Can you offer an example of why knowing this concept is important?
- If what you learn/did today is unimportant, why do you think this? What would make it relevant/interesting?

The design and structure of school clearly benefits extroverts. Whereas introverts have been training all their lives for social distancing, extroverted students may feel abnormal for once.

Remote learning does offer the opportunity for extroverts to come to experience, if not also appreciate, the benefits of slowing down, living more quietly, and finding pleasure in the subtleties of life. All the same, there is no substitute for real social interaction for extroverts. Practicing physical distancing should not be confused with social distancing. Like introverts, extroverts need to engage with others as much for their own intellectual benefit as well as for their personal well-being. Extroverted students can interact with others safely, by:

- Leveraging technology to connect with friends. To an extent, we are living in backwards times. While excessive use of social media can be unhealthy for kids, given our current context, it may also have a restorative effect for extroverts when used appropriately.
- Extroverts are inclined to think out loud and therefore sometimes need a sounding board for their ideas. School assignments that offer guidance and opportunities to process their thinking with another person in a structure manner could be of significant value to extroverts.
- Despite the best efforts of keeping a regular schedule, getting physical exercise, and keeping on top of school assignments, the feeling of social isolation may be overwhelming from some students. Parents and/or students should not hesitate to reach out to their school counselor and/or the district help line for additional support.

In such uncertain times, it is hard to ignore the low-level, yet persistent stress many of us feel. Fortunately, students are both resilient and resourceful. And, so are teachers and parents. Working together, we can learn from this experience, and our students will be the beneficiaries of our effort.

For more on introverts, see Susan Cain's TED talk (https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_cain_the_power_of_introverts#t-431106) or read her book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*.

For more on the social brain, see Patricia Kuhl's presentation: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/videos/learning-and-the-social-brain/>