

Being Human is Hard: Rediscovering Compassion in a Post-Lockdown World

By Holly Novick

One thing we have all gotten very good at in the past year is coping with uncertainty. When we began our long journey through the COVID-19 pandemic, we didn't know how bad it would get, how long it would last, or how it would affect our daily lives in the long run. As parents and teachers, we worried most about our children. I gathered with our faculty and staff, with our Board, and with other Heads of School to do our best to prepare for the inevitable lockdown and shift to remote learning. In all those conversations, we thought about the many unknowns, and these three major areas of concern:



- **Academic Progress:** Would our students stay on track with their grade level? Should we worry about learning loss?
- **Mental Health:** What would the effect of long-term isolation be on children? Should we prepare to handle increased anxiety and depression in our students?
- **Social Skills:** How would students interact with each other from their individual homes? Would we see a decrease in emotional intelligence skills upon our return to “normal”?

While we still have quite a way to go to return to our full pre-pandemic normal, we are finally back, with almost all of our students on campus, in the classroom, every day. We are now able to breathe a tentative sigh of relief, look back over the past 18 months, and assess the answers to our big questions.

Let's start with the very good news. In almost all cases, our students are indeed on track academically for their grade level. This is true for the Country School, even though learning loss is sadly occurring at the national level, with the New York Times reporting that “in math and reading, students are behind where they would be after a normal year,” with an average loss of

between 9 and 12 percentile points. I am so grateful for the hard work of our incredible teachers to keep student engagement, and therefore performance, on par with grade level standards. In terms of mental health, we have found that TCS students, while not immune to the stress that the prolonged uncertainty caused, are incredibly resilient, with low reported stress levels and few increases in expressed anxiety. Again, this data defies national trends. The US Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health published a joint study of psychological effects of the COVID-19 crisis in children, finding that “younger children (3-6 years old) were more likely to manifest symptoms of clinginess and the fear of family members being infected than older children (6-18 years old). Whereas, the older children were more likely to experience inattention and were persistently inquiring regarding COVID-19.” While it would be logical to assume that our TCS students would be affected in similar ways, it turns out that our tight-knit TCS Community and our relationship-building and bonding activities like our Read-Alouds, Coach Jeremy’s all school challenges, and Friday Fifteen, along with introducing Ms. Amber as Director of Student Wellness and Ms. Helen as Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, went a long way to helping students weather the pandemic with healthy psychological perspectives.



Now, however, we must address the one area in which our Country School kids do mirror the national trends: social skills. As we have been fortunate to reconvene as a full school on campus, we are seeing clear gaps in our elementary and middle school students’ ability to regulate their behavior in the context of daily classroom and campus life. In many ways, this makes perfect sense. After all, a child who left campus as a third grader in March of 2020 didn’t return to full campus life until they were weeks away from 5th grade in April of 2021. Academically and psychologically, that child is fully prepared to be a 5th grader, but socially, they are still in 3rd grade. Not only do we have a clear gap, that gap is also amplified to some extent by the age distance between their academic and social selves. An illustrative counterpoint to these elementary and middle school trends is that our preschoolers, who remained on campus and in community with each other for the last whole school year throughout the pandemic, are right on track for social skills.



All those months ago, when we first began grappling with the necessity of remote learning in a pandemic environment, I asked child psychologist and TCS community partner Peter Murphy what to expect, and his response was simply,

“We know that in times of uncertainty, and prolonged uncertainty, there will be stress, so we know that we can expect stress to be a significant factor. But we don’t know exactly. We haven’t lived through a pandemic in our lifetime, so we don’t know what to expect.” In this moment, we must remember his words and apply them to the situation we find ourselves in now.

I’ve heard from a few families in recent weeks expressing concern and dismay about an array of unexpected behaviors in TCS students. We have indeed seen an increase in unkind words, inappropriate classroom behavior, interpersonal relationship problems, reluctance to lead, and even physical altercations. The concern is both understandable and warranted: these are behaviors we have rarely seen on our campus, and it is disconcerting for friends to behave differently than expected.

The reason for the behavior, however, is equally understandable. The children are simply out of practice. Being a human sharing space, and supplies, and attention with other humans is hard work, and we have gotten rusty. According to National Geographic, “Socialization is at the core of how children develop cognitive skills and other tasks that they’ll eventually need in adulthood, and they develop vital social skills when they’re around their peers: They learn to communicate, share toys, wait for their turns, and nurture new friendships. But more than a year of not being around peers is likely going to impact those social skills.” For more than a year, we all lived with a significantly reduced social sphere, a limited and completely controllable physical environment, and a dramatically simplified daily routine. While we interacted with other people on Zoom, we were the bosses of our own world. We could mute ourselves and other people. We could turn our cameras off or simply leave meetings as needed. We did not need to share our colored pencils with anyone if we didn’t want to. And we were surrounded by people who loved and cared for us, people who were working very hard to maintain our sense of safe and predictable normalcy. In many ways, we all built cozy cocoons around ourselves and our families, and now we’ve emerged as new creatures, who have to learn to navigate the world all over again.

But here’s the best news of all: we also know exactly how to get the children back on track. There is, however, one very big, very uncertain variable in the solution: time. To echo Dr. Murphy’s words, we haven’t lived through this before, and we don’t know exactly what to expect. With time, however, all of our TCS students will rediscover the patterns of kindness, compassion, and cooperation that



make our days happy, healthy, and productive. At the Country School, we work hard to foster autonomy, resilience, adaptability, and compassion in our students, and while we didn't know we were preparing them for a pandemic, that firm foundation paid off, and it will again. Have faith in the children, and patience, and they will show us all what they can do.

Resources:

"The Pandemic Hurt These Students the Most," The New York Times, Sarah Mervosh, July 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/us/covid-schools-at-home-learning-study.html>

"Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations," U.S. National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health, August 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7444649/>

"Your kids might now be socially awkward—and they're not alone," National Geographic, Rachel Ng, Aug. 19, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/family/article/your-kids-might-now-be-socially-awkward-and-theyre-not-alone>