

Meet Our New Generation Alpha Students: Implications for Preschool Classrooms

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Abstract

The aim of this conceptual paper is to examine the attributes of the youngest members of Generation Alpha, commonly referred to as pandemic babies, and outline strategies for establishing impactful preschool classrooms for them. Pandemic babies are newborns who were born during or immediately preceding the pandemic. As with any generational cohort, historical and societal factors influence social, emotional, behavioral, and academic behaviors. Current studies reveal that this generation may experience personal-social developmental delays. This article provides insights into how preschool educators can effectively address setting up their classrooms, establishing behavioral expectations, and promoting social-emotional skill development to proactively address potential trauma caused by the pandemic.

Keywords: Generation Alpha; preschool; trauma-informed teaching; pandemic; social-emotional learning

Meet Generation Alpha

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, which triggered a comprehensive transformation in individuals, communities, and economies worldwide (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The virus has been recognized for its propensity to induce severe respiratory illness, particularly among older adults and those with high-risk health conditions (Center for Disease Control, 2022). It has also led to an upsurge in stress and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety among the general population, including both adults and children (World Health Organization, 2020).

Although changes due to the pandemic have been widespread and pervasive, there have been considerable differences in individuals' experiences. The response to the pandemic exacerbated long-standing structural inequities (Garcia et al., 2021), such as health disparities and access to preventative care, with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities being disproportionately impacted (Abrams et al., 2022; Centers for Disease Control CDC, 2022; Khazanchi et al., 2020). Low-income communities experienced a greater degree of pandemic-related hardship than middle- and upper-income communities, including higher infection and death rates, and reduced testing and vaccine access. Low-income communities were also impacted as schools closed, and students' access to online learning often required appropriate technology to proceed with learning at home (UNICEF, 2020). While children and adolescents were less susceptible to experiencing severe health complications from COVID-19 infection, emerging research suggests that school closures, social isolation, and disturbances to daily routines resulted in significant upsurges in mental health psychopathology within this demographic (Adegboye et al., 2021; Murthy, 2021; Patrick et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the long-term implications of the pandemic on the younger generation are not yet fully comprehended.

What is a Generation?

Defining a generation is a complex process due to its subjective and socially constructed nature. While researchers and popular culture have reached a consensus on how to categorize different age groups, there are no universally recognized boundaries for capturing a generation, leading to discrepancies even among well-established groups like Baby Boomers or Millennials (Berkup, 2014; Dimock, 2019). Historical events are often the most significant factor in determining generational boundaries, shaping shared characteristics that, in turn, influence cultural trends, values, and behaviors (Campbell et al., 2015; Töröcsik et al., 2014). For instance, in the United States, John F. Kennedy's assassination shaped the formative years of Baby Boomers, while the September 11th attack impacted many Millennials.

Generation Z (Gen Z) was the last defined generation. Individuals in Generation Z were born between the mid-1990s and early 2000s following the widespread emergence of the World Wide Web (Wood, 2013). Gen Z, often referred to as digital natives, has notably been characterized by their access to and familiarity with technology from a young age (Dimock, 2019). They were the first generation to be raised in the era of smartphones, and many members of Gen Z do not remember a time before social media (Prensky, 2001).

Generation Alpha is emerging in the wake of Generation Z (McCrindle, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic will likely be the defining historical event for this current generation. Generation Alpha will most likely be characterized by the unprecedented challenges and disruptions that resulted from the pandemic, including lockdowns, social distancing, and widespread disruption of daily life.

One of the most significant and pervasive impacts of the pandemic on this generation has been educational disruptions. Many preschools, public schools, and universities were forced to close or shift to online learning, leading to a significant shift in how education is delivered. Specifically, more than 90% of the world's children could not attend school in person (The Lancet, 2020). This has profoundly impacted students, who have missed out on important social and developmental experiences that typically occur in schools and classrooms, and has implications for academic learning (Murthy, 2021).

Defining Generation Alpha

When referring to this emerging generation, authors have used various terms, including *Gen C*, *Coronials*, *Generation Q*, and *Pandemics* (Brinlee, 2020; Yancey-Bragg, 2020). A generation typically captures between 20–35 years, and Generation Alpha has been bound to include individuals born between 2010 and 2024, making most of today's children and adolescents part of Generation Alpha (McCrindle, 2021). This included individuals born during the pandemic—society's pandemic babies.

Emergence of Generation Alpha: A Case Study

To best understand who Generation Alpha is, it is important to examine and acknowledge the sociocultural influences that have shaped them. Here is a case study that can provide a foundation:

Harper, a two-year-old, was born in the spring of 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, at a time when testing was unreliable and difficult to obtain, and long before the COVID-19 vaccination would be developed. When Harper was born, she was only surrounded by medical professionals and her mother and father in the hospital; no other family, including her older sister or friends, were permitted to visit her. When it was time to go home, she entered a “social bubble” with her immediate family, as recommended by public health agencies, to avoid exposure and reduce the spread of the virus (Leng et al., 2021). Older relatives were afraid to travel and visit Harper during her first year, which meant Mom, Dad, and sister spent all their time together. Childcare centers were also closed when Harper was born, meaning all parenting responsibilities and support resided in the household's family unit.

The few times that Harper left the house, mostly for medical check-ups, she encountered everyone wearing masks and was unable to perceive facial expressions that conveyed emotion and cultural meaning. Speech patterns were also muffled behind these masks since people generally remained six feet away, making hearing or interacting with others outside the home increasingly difficult.

Harper remained in her social bubble, isolated from peers, other than her sister, for the first ten months of her life. At first, it was because all childcare centers were closed, but once they started opening, there were limited openings. When spots opened, there were no full-time and only part-time openings, meaning the family still had to juggle childcare and work. When a spot opened in early spring, Harper began attending childcare part-time and interacting with teachers who wore masks the entire day. Participation was inconsistent for several reasons. First, settings were often closed for a minimum of five days each time a child exhibited symptoms of COVID (e.g. a temperature). If a child or staff member tested positive for COVID, a 10–14-day quarantine was required and ‘close contacts’ were also required to quarantine for a minimum of five days. In childcare settings, all children in the classroom were considered close contacts—thus, one case of COVID could result in weeks of subsequent closures. Similarly, if multiple children and/or staff in a childcare setting test positive in a given time period, the entire childcare facility shuts down for several weeks.

In addition to inconsistent participation, increased health and safety concerns resulted in less time and fewer opportunities for Harper to interact with peers. Specifically, time typically allocated for social interaction was reduced to provide time for frequent handwashing and classroom cleaning. Similarly, mandated social distancing requirements ensured that interactive activities such as sensory tables and dramatic play were replaced with more individualized activities.

Fast-forward to today, and Harper is now three years old. She has met older relatives who still wear masks to visit with her. Harper is very much attached to her mother and remains by her mother's side when she is around. Harper's language is developing on schedule, with some unexpected speech patterns and limited facial expressions. At childcare and on the playground, she plays in isolation and is not near her other peers. Anytime Harper sees soap or hand sanitizer, she must use it. Harper's gross and fine motor skills seem to be developing as expected. Harper's parents are left wondering, are Harper's developmental patterns because of this pandemic? Did the lack of experiences with others and the constant masking impact Harper's linguistic and social development?

Generation Alpha: Ages Zero to Three

There is growing evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted infant neurodevelopment, particularly in personal-social domains (Bianco et al., 2023; Deoni et al., 2022; Giesbrecht, 2022; Shuffrey et al., 2022). Several studies suggest that the developmental delays observed in pandemic babies are not associated with exposure to the virus but rather due to the environmental impacts of the pandemic (Bianco et al., 2023; Shuffrey et al., 2022). These delays are particularly concerning as pandemic babies existed in 'social bubbles' following their birth due to pandemic-related restrictions (Shuffrey et al., 2022). Access to routine healthcare check-ups was also disrupted during the pandemic, which is particularly concerning for the early developmental years. With childcare closures and limited access to healthcare professionals, parents have had to rely solely on their understanding of social and emotional development milestones. While many of these studies are not yet peer-reviewed, they suggest that the pandemic's impact on infant neurodevelopment warrants further research and attention.

Neural Connections During Trauma Events

According to Black et al. (2017), the quantity and quality of life experiences affect brain development. The more neural connections and synaptic pathways an individual has, the easier it is for them to learn and connect information. However, pandemic babies may have had limited life experiences due to childcare closures, reduced visits from extended family and friends, and limited community opportunities. Researchers have considered the pandemic a traumatic event due to social isolation, limited access to childcare, and limited time spent with extended family and friends (Bridgland et al., 2021; Miller, 2020). The pandemic, therefore, could be considered an overwhelming prolonged event that resulted in chronic trauma for many children.

Additionally, parents and caregivers often felt isolated during the pandemic, and this may have led to the development of exacerbated depression (Prime et al., 2020). Parents with mental health concerns may have impacted the poverty of experience that pandemic babies had regarding stimulations and sensory exposures. This lack of experience may have emotional and cognitive consequences for infants, including language delays, mental health issues, a lack of social skills needed to form lasting relationships, and an inability to self-regulate and manage stress (Sorrels, 2015). Pandemic babies, therefore, may have limited mental models due to their limited experiences.

Mental models help individuals create generalizations about experiences and share their expectations about the world (Jones et al., 2011). Implicit memories are developed in the early years of life and filter how the child processes life. Scarce or disjointed learning opportunities result in limited mental models and cause children to behave academically and socially younger than their chronological age (Sorrels, 2015). As pandemic babies enter preschool, teachers need to pay special attention to setting up their academic environment, teaching behavioral expectations, and developing social-emotional learning competencies. These children have only known the world, as shaped by the pandemic, and their mental models have developed amidst it.

Setting up the Classroom Environment

It is important for preschool teachers to create a structured and predictable environment that promotes a sense of security and safety for pandemic babies. The environment will need to be set up in a structured way that allows students access and independence. It also involves setting up the environment, so each child has a space to keep their belongings and feel included and part of the classroom environment. This classroom setup should have limited changes because this will give students greater independence once they have learned where all the material is. Predictability and structure will be very important to this preschool population that were pandemic babies because routines provide a sense of security and safety (Pickens & Tschopp, 2017).

It is, therefore, important to have predictability in as many daily routines as possible. This may include the morning greeting used, the structure of circle time, how students are asked to transition between activities, and even how students are asked 'to get ready' for specific parts of the day. Using familiar routines gives the child a sense of comfort—decreasing their anxiety and worry about the unknown. Teachers should provide these familiar routines and comfort as often as possible, given that pandemic babies lived their first three years with aspects of the unknown present constantly (Schwartz-Henderson, 2016).

Preschool teachers should also try to minimize the number of transitions they ask of their students. Transition, in general, may have a feeling of loss associated with it as children are asked to leave one activity to go to another (Sorrels, 2015). Preschool teachers need to have a heightened awareness of this preschool cohort and the loss they have all endured. Visual schedules can help assist in transitions and provide predictability in the overall routine of the classroom and even specific routines within specific areas of the classroom or during particular times of the day.

Teaching Behavioral Expectations

Behavioral expectations and classroom management procedures should also be consistent and predictable. This includes having the classroom teacher manage their own emotions and anxieties so that the young child does not move from a calm to an alarmed state (Wall, 2021).

Students can feed off the emotions of others and may become emotionally charged if the adult is either internalizing or externalizing negative emotions. When children take on the stress of an adult, they often respond by either displaying challenging externalizing behaviors themselves or internally perseverating on this stress (Minahan, 2019). Preschool teachers need to know that this cohort of pandemic babies most likely had many stressed adults in their lives, as parents were asked to take on all the caregiving without the help of their extended support system.

Preschool teachers must be well-versed in guiding this cohort of students to develop self-regulation and coping strategies to respond to stress. It is important to teach self-regulation skills because they are the strongest predictor of well-being in all areas of life (Tamir & Mauss, 2011). This will require preschool teachers to guide students through explicitly teaching self-regulation skills. Teaching self-regulation begins with the teacher serving as a student's external regulator (Kramarski & Kohen, 2017). The teacher will have to model and bring attention to appropriate behavior models they wish their students will emulate. This also requires coaching and shaping behavioral responses, and having the students demonstrate behaviors through practice opportunities.

Another way teachers may approach teaching students how to self-regulate is through creating social stories. Social stories are scripted stories that explain how a child should behave when faced with certain stressors. Social stories that aid self-regulation are best used when an antecedent (or trigger) to a behavior is known (Briody & McGarry, 2005).

Teaching Social-Emotional Skill Development

Social-emotional skill development starts by building positive relationships between the teacher and each student. Trusting relationships require regular, predictable interactions and communicate the message "You matter to me" (Sorrels, 2015). Building relationships begins by welcoming each student as they enter the classroom each day and even doing so in a child's preferred way (such as with a high-five, a hug, a wave, or a special handshake). This small act lets children know that their teacher is looking for them. It is also important to ensure that students feel included throughout the day by using their interests to guide learning and give them a choice (Cavanaugh, 2016). These are small ways that preschool teachers can help let students know that "they matter". Small ways to include students' choices and voices throughout the day are important. The end-of-the-day transition from school to home should also let students know their presence in school was appreciated, the class enjoyed learning with them today and they are excited to see them tomorrow.

Conclusion

Children born during the COVID-19 pandemic face unique challenges and potential long-term consequences compared to children born before the pandemic. However, the full extent of these impacts and their long-term consequences are still not fully understood, and further research is needed to better understand and support this generation. Until this research is gathered, educators need to, at minimum, provide structure and teach pro-social behaviors to help this generation continue to progress. Overall, while the pandemic has presented significant challenges for children born during this time, there are also some potential positive outcomes that may emerge from their experiences. For example, the pandemic has required individuals and communities to adapt quickly and find new ways of doing things. Children born during the pandemic may have developed greater creativity and problem-solving skills as a result. Additionally, COVID-19 forced many people to rely on technology to stay connected, work, and learn. Children born during this time may have developed greater proficiency in using technology and digital platforms, which could benefit them in the future. Researchers, educators, and policymakers need to continue to study the impacts of the pandemic on this generation and to develop strategies to support their growth and development. By doing so, we can help ensure that this generation has the resources and tools they need to succeed in the future.

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