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‘Striking cognitive impact’: how Covid babies are different

Babies raised in the isolation of the pandemic had an unexpected start to life, and the results are showing. What happened – and will it be permanent?

By FIONA HARARI



Paz Llorca, 40, with children Jack and Frankie Picture: James Horan

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12 MINUTE READ • 89

Until she became a mother, certainty was an underrated commodity in Paz Llorca's full life. For most of her 40 years she had walked a pathway paved with assumptions. Born in Spain, she could and did move overseas to work as a civil engineer, first to the US and then in 2011 to Australia, where she met her Irish partner Dave and they bought a home on the NSW Central Coast.

When she became pregnant with their first child, new expectations emerged. "My mum was coming to be here in July when the baby was born, and then Dave's family was coming," she says of the plans crafted around their newborn's first weeks of life. The couple had planned, too, to travel to Europe that Christmas with their baby, to meet their extended clans. "So basically we had the first six months sorted."

With no relatives in Australia and no close friends nearby who could assist, "I couldn't really think about it any other way". Even as she parted from her parents at Madrid airport at the start of 2020, in the first half of her pregnancy, and briefly

now to July, Covid will be resolved.” Buoyed with expectation, she flew back to Australia. “When we said goodbye, we said, ‘See you soon.’”

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By the
time
Jack

O’Shea Llorca was born that winter, certainty was a luxury. The rapid global spread of the virus had locked down countries and separated families, and around the [world new parents](#) found themselves isolated. “I think that was the hardest time of my life,” Paz says now. “The feeling of being lost and the unknown, of not knowing how long it is going to go on for. And then the feeling of being alone.”



“I think that was the hardest time of my life,” Paz says now.” Picture: James Horan

It might take a village to raise a child. But what happens when that village is shut down, even temporarily? More than 200 million infants have been born since the onset of the pandemic, and depending on where they live, they have been brought into the world during varying periods of isolation. Babies are not immune to adversity. Generations have been born to wars and famine, bushfires and floods. But none have come into a world quite like this. “It’s a global phenomenon and we have never had anything on this scale in terms of impacting everybody around the world at once,” says paediatrician Professor Sharon Goldfeld.

Even during wars babies can expect to be exposed to a variety of people. The lockdowns of homes and countries that kept many safely inside in recent years added a layer of isolation for every demographic, but especially children. By October 2021, according to Save the Children, youngsters around the world had stayed indoors for an average of six months since the pandemic’s start. As a report on the potential indirect impacts, published in the Medical Journal of Australia last year, notes: “Children are facing a ‘generation-defining disruption.’” And medical authorities are wondering if some of the [most significant effects](#) might be on those born during the height of the pandemic.

For Paz Llorca, her husband and their baby, months of social disconnect culminated at the end of that strange year. “Christmas 2020 we didn’t celebrate because I was so sad,” she says. For Jack’s first Christmas she didn’t even put up a tree. Instead she

toughest time ... just having this baby that no one had met, and being away from my family at that time and not knowing when we were going to meet again, it was just unbearable.”



Llorca with her husband Dave and eldest son Jack. Picture: Paz Llorca

By the time Jack was finally cuddled by his adoring maternal grandparents in the middle of 2022, he was a shy two-year-old. He was also a big brother to Frank, who was born in May and whose first months were noticeably more upbeat, even though both siblings are being raised by the same parents and in the same toy-filled house. “It feels completely different with Frank,” says Paz, whose mothers group second time around has expanded from five to 15, and whose second-born already seems more outgoing and interactive.

While Jack attends childcare and regularly socialises, he dislikes new people and new environments. “But I don’t know if that’s his nature or if it’s to do with the fact that he was just with me for such a long time,” says Paz, who worries about the incremental effects of those restricted early months for the pandemic’s first babies. “They’ve grown without seeing people talking,” she says of the dearth of people - followed by the abundance of masked faces they initially encountered. “I have cried so much because it made me so sad, my mum as well ... the birth of a baby should be a family event.”

“By the time they were one, a quarter of them had not met a child their own age”

A child’s first 1000 days are crucial for brain development. When babies are spoken to or touched, neural connections are built in their brains. Early environments shape their development and wellbeing. For babies born since the first lockdowns in early 2020, those 1000 days have ended and early studies show some notable legacies from their formative months.

Some social and communication skills appear to have been impeded, at least initially. In a recently released Irish study, pandemic babies met fewer

Comparing hundreds of one-year-olds born at the start of the pandemic to others born in the years before it, researchers examined 10 parentally-reported developmental outcomes, including the ability to crawl, stand alone, point at objects and wave goodbye. The pandemic babies were less likely to have one definite and meaningful word by the time they were one. They were also less likely to be able to point or to be able to wave bye-bye.

“Babies born during the early stages of the pandemic missed the opportunity of meeting a normal social circle of people outside the family home, including other babies and grandparents,” said the study, published in October in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. “Lockdown measures may have reduced the repertoire of language heard and the sight of unmasked faces speaking to them, while also curtailing opportunities to encounter new items of interest, which might prompt pointing, and the frequency of social contacts to enable them to learn to wave bye-bye.”



Llorca's parents met Jack for the first time they met him at Christmas time. Picture: Paz Llorca

Some of the results had obvious origins. “If no one is coming to your house, there is nobody to learn to say ‘bye-bye’ to,” says paediatric neurologist Dr Susan Byrne, one of the authors. And while babies learn to point before they acquire speech, “if you’re in the home environment mostly, they were not seeing things to point out”.

The study’s 350 children, all born in the first half of 2020, are still being observed. While results of their second year have not yet been published, some of the first year outcomes, Byrne acknowledges, are particularly sad. “By six months only three people on average had kissed the baby. And by one year, one in four had not met a child their own age.” Given that an unspecified number of the infants had no siblings, some of them, she adds, might never have even met a baby.

neurodevelopmental differences once babies reached six months. By then, according to the study published in JAMA Paediatrics last year, the 2020 babies were exhibiting “significantly lower scores on gross motor, fine motor, and personal-social subdomains”.

A 2020 Chinese study found a deficit in communication and fine motor skills among several hundred one-year-olds who had lived for up to three months in the pandemic. And an October report by researchers from the Harvard Medical School, who looked at 21,000 infants covered by eight observational studies, found that being born and raised during the pandemic was associated with the risk of communication impairment.



Professor Sharon Goldfield. Picture: Stuart McEvoy

In their comparatively short lives, evidence is slowly emerging about the variety of impacts that public health measures have had on the youngest children. That list ranges from increased clinginess, anxiety and levels of stress to increased hyperactivity and inattention, according to a report last year from the Centre for - Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. It found that in a pandemic that has brought “momentous changes to children’s lives, which has the potential to impact their health, development and wellbeing”, much of the impact has been the result of indirect effects, including lockdowns, increased parental stresses, financial hardship, and loss of social contact with family.

Those worries have been most notably borne out in a longitudinal study of children from Rhode Island in the US, running for more than a decade, with a preliminary paper released late in 2021. Now being peer reviewed, it found “a striking decline in cognitive performance” among pandemic babies. Verbal, non-verbal, and overall cognitive scores in children under three were significantly lower than over the previous decade, “with this difference amplified in infants” born since the start of the pandemic.

Children born in 2019 “seemed to be doing alright”, lead author Sean Deoni told the British Medical Journal. “It’s really affecting those born during the pandemic.” In tests including language and fine motor skills, their scores began to decline in 2020.

continued, those deficits have accumulated.

Covid's legacies have been manifold for everyone, but for new parents and their babies they have carried a particular resonance. Across the country people have been "navigating pregnancy, birth and early parenthood

through extraordinary circumstances, with more limited access to family and to - formal supports and services," the Australian Institute of Family Studies reported in March.



Melbourne mums during the pandemic.

Everyone's experience of adversity differs. Responses in the AIFS paper on becoming a parent during Covid ranged from exhilaration ("not even a pandemic can change the fact that having a baby is one of the most amazing and wonderful things you can do") to devastation ("missing out on the joy of sharing our baby with their grandparents and aunty, losing that family support option, difficulties meeting other mothers for support, anxiety about taking the baby out of the house, financial stress.")

"Babies are resilient. I'm hopeful that everything will be fine. But it's too early to say"

"It was a very small world," concedes Melbourne teacher Loretta McKail, whose first child Madison was born in April 2020, just as the nation was experiencing its early uncertain weeks of lockdown. Isolation was a defining factor of her daughter's birth in a private hospital, where only Loretta's partner David was allowed in. Long-held assumptions that their extended family would share in the baby's early weeks of life evaporated. "There was no one in the hospital with us. It was literally just us for five days learning how to be parents."

When they brought their baby home, to a world in which nappies were in such short supply that friends in other suburbs had to post them packets, Madison's isolation continued. "People couldn't meet her until she was old. My mum met her when she was six weeks old, and my husband's parents, because they were regional

first few months, then we added in grandparents, and even then there wasn't much beyond that in the first six months ...”



Loretta McKail with her daughter Madison, baby Lucy and husband David.

Madison has been attending childcare since before her first birthday and her language is developing well. “I talked non-stop to her, knowing that helps,” her mother says. But her social development, she adds, might have been impaired in the short term and she is shy around new people, especially compared to her sister who was born in May last year.

In a matter of months Lucy has already been exposed to much more of the world, and its residents, than her older sibling. “She seems to be developing a lot quicker in terms of milestones and rolling over.” Her mothers groups are in person, not online, she has been cuddled by countless people and she seems unfussed about whomever she is around.

Her big sister Madison, on the other hand, was not around other children for the first eight months of her life. “It’s certainly a time of significance,” Loretta says of her firstborn’s birth. “I am not negative about it. I don’t think back and go it was awful. But now having had my second baby I see the potential of what it could have been like.”

The pandemic’s firstborns are approaching their third birthdays. “The question on the table is, what is permanent and what is not?” says Goldfeld, theme director of

would be fine. But it's too early to say."

Most studies that have examined this group stress that the children will need to be followed up, possibly [until school age](#), to ensure that natural resilience and inquisitiveness sees them through the challenges of their early lives. Some of the best insights may well come from an area whose children felt isolation more keenly than most – in Victoria, where a long-term project has begun to track babies born from 2021 to 2023. GenV is one of the world's largest birth and parent cohort studies. Every family with a newborn in the state is being invited to join over a two-year period from October 2021. Already close to 60,000 babies and parents have been signed up.

While they are at the start of a long process, some insight can possibly be gleaned from children who have already faced adversity of a different kind in Australia. Over several years, local and Canadian researchers found that babies born to parents who experienced significant stress as a result of the 2010-11 Queensland floods showed deficits in problem-solving and social skills when they were six months. But by 30 months, things looked different. The more supportive that parents were, the better their children seemed to be – a reassuring reminder of the power of love.

FIONA HARARI, WRITER, THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE

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Hi Rafe Champion

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Jason.Flea 1 HOUR AGO

So no positive impacts then, only negative? What about all that extra time around both parents?

Report  Like  9 Reply 

Jonathan 1 HOUR AGO *(Edited)*

Probably explains a lot about those of us raised on remote cattle and sheep stations 🤔

Report  Like  5 Reply 

Bev 1 HOUR AGO

My kinds were born in country Victoria 50 + years ago. No family or community to help. No car for outings. Gosh they survived and are tertiary educated and raising families. Can't see the problem.

Report  Like  8 Reply 

Tracey 2 HOURS AGO

During the pandemic, politicians and policy-makers were afraid they'd be judged by the number of people who died of Covid. They did everything they could to keep that number low, to 'keep us safe.' We're now seeing some of the consequences of being so safe: kids refusing to go to school, affecting their education; people not going back into the office, affecting their professional development and careers; not to mention all the economic fallout, relationship bust-ups, depression, anxiety, business failures ... Next time, we need to take a broader view of the implications.

Report  Like  6 Reply 

Miriam 2 HOURS AGO

kindergarten and early learning centres have flourished in the knowledge that socialisation is crucial to childhood development in those years. It's very hard to understand why anyone would suggest that removing that overnight and in the case of Victoria, locking down children for 2 years, would not have a noticeable on their cognitive development. For those of us with just a little knowledge about how the human brain develops, these results are not surprising.

Report Like 4 Reply

Nancy 2 HOURS AGO

It doesn't stop at preschool. Primary school teachers have noticed how the Queensland flood babies are different as they go through the grades. These pandemic babies will still be different and likely have different brain pathways well into primary school and possibly lifelong.

There has been research that says premature babies do not have the same immune systems as full term babies. In the first 12 months and, for many, years are different and have an effect.
nancy from Brisbane

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Report Like 1 Reply

Peter V 2 HOURS AGO
I wonder how many Chief Health Officers have bothered to read this disturbing report. Methinks what the CHOs were keeping safe was their power.
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Bella 2 HOURS AGO
Our society sacrificed the young, strong and healthy to "protect" the old, weak and sick. At a time we love to know what Charles Darwin would say about such madness. It appears the law of diminishing returns applies to evolution as well.

ABOUT US

Report Like 9 Reply

About The Australian

Advertise with us Ronald 2 HOURS AGO

Well, that prolonged Victorian lockdown, curfew, other imposed restrictions and government overreach affected all of us. I am still angry that I lost two years of my life for no good reason. I shudder to imagine the silent and unknown impact on babies and parents.

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More and more evidence that the knee-jerk lockdowns and mandates were ill advised

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Report Like 7 Reply

Penny Dreadful 3 HOURS AGO

This was all so unnecessarily cruel but entirely predicted.

Report Like 4 Reply

Ian 3 HOURS AGO

What tripe. Babies have been born into tiny family groups from the beginning. Inuit in winter? Give it a rest.

Report Like 2 Reply

Gordon 3 HOURS AGO

“Babies are resilient” - no they are not, they are vulnerable. Five-year-olds living in fear for extended times of this unseen "killer" and worrying if granny got sick because of them can lead to lifelong generalised anxiety disorder.

This was avoidable, predictable, known child development science and whenever I raised it was dismissed or worse.

Report Like 7 Reply

Emma 4 HOURS AGO

I’ll bet our chief medical officers, so keen to enforce lockdowns to ‘keep us safe’, never gave a thought to these costs that the next generation will have to bear.

Report Like 3 Reply

Jim 4 HOURS AGO

“The more supportive that parents were, the better their children seemed to be – a reassuring reminder of the power of love.”

Mmmh! If only we could apply that across all our Australian societies?

Report Like 2 Reply

Newport 4 HOURS AGO

Slowly, slowly the truth is coming out - with the exception of Scomos initial border closures (to give us time to work out just how dangerous the new virus was), every policy imposed by the politicians and their pandemic followers was counter productive and massive overreach. Mandates, border closures (past mid 2020), masks, lockdowns, school closures, billions in payments, all of it was horrifying.

The damage to children is immense and will take years to unwind. We need a royal commission with honest brokers.

Nobody from the state should be on the panel. It should all be individuals who had the critical thinking skills to see the frauds for what they were.

Report 🚩 Like 👍 2 Reply ↩

Martins 4 HOURS AGO

How could someone / anyone / a parent!! - *NOT* - realize that a baby looking at masked faces the whole time (at least in ALL out of home situations) - is severely disadvantaged. (*Way smart - they are a total SPONGE for info!!*)

How the heck does anyone think the baby can program their brain - other than by associating actions/words and reactions/expressions/responses.

They have almost been PROGRAMMED to be autistic!!

Tragic! Breaks my heart!

BUT - if you were to say that at the time - WOW!!!

(*My qualifications? 6 kids - 9 grands kids - and counting.*)

Report 🚩 Like 👍 1 Reply ↩

David 4 HOURS AGO

Yep, lockdowns were the wrong approach.

Report 🚩 Like 👍 2 Reply ↩

Margaret 5 HOURS AGO

Another story about the fragility of people. How many of you remember the first two years of your life in context of socialising? Parental care, reading, teaching, interacting and loving are more important than fabricated socialising between children so young. These kids had each other for interaction. Sad that grandparents weren't around but that would have been transient without Covid.

Bruce 5 HOURS AGO

These kids are precious victims already Oh pleese ?

Report  Like  2 Reply 

Chris 5 HOURS AGO

Thank you for this article. This is about my Covid granddaughter born in early 2020. There must be many, many affected. It was a very unnatural time to enter the world.

Report  Like  3 Reply 

Trent 5 HOURS AGO

We need to prosecute those in power who panicked and abandoned all the well considered pandemic plans and instead “went on the fly”.

Report  Like  1 Reply 

Rafe Champion 5 HOURS AGO *(Edited)*

Civilisation is a thin crust over barbarism that breaks out on times of war and revolution. In this case it was perpetrated by bureaucrats, public health experts, politicians.and police.

Report  Like  2 Reply 

Michael 5 HOURS AGO

Our pandemic response guidelines always recommended focused protection for the vulnerable and minimal disruption to daily life. Can you see why? Those who ignored their own guidelines and copied the dystopia of communist China have not been held accountable or even apologised. They have been rewarded.

Report  Like  4 Reply 

Ceekay 5 HOURS AGO

How do we determine the effect of the vaccine on the baby?

Report  Like  Reply 

Michael 5 HOURS AGO

Surely this was all part of the ‘expert models’, aka The Science?

Report  Like  1 Reply 

Sally 5 HOURS AGO

We knew this was terrible at the time, we screamed and shouted, we pleaded, we used logic and experience, we were told we were cruel, we were told children were dangerous, we were told children were not important. We failed our children, and our babies. They are our future, they should have been our first priority and they were always last. I will never forgive the Victorian Government, the “experts”, the Health Departments. Never ever.

Report  Like  4 Reply 

John 5 HOURS AGO

We didn't see our grandson until he was a six months old met his older sister the day she was born time lost and never regained

Report  Like  1 Reply 

Philip 5 HOURS AGO

I wonder however! If research was focussed on how new born infants benefited for their mothers being at home, ie constant contact, because of lockdowns, a very different different picture would be apparent.

Report  Like  Reply 

Rafe Champion RIGHT NOW

[EDIT](#) [PENDING](#)

How many mothers go off to work and leave one and two-year old babies in care? Shame on them if they do, unless it is the father who looks after them.

Peter 5 HOURS AGO *(Edited)*

My husband died when our son was three weeks old. Do these privileged parents, and the researchers in child development, say my child is forever scarred. I suspect they are just consumed with their lives not being the way they planned. Poor them. I wish I had owned all their obvious material advantages. Barbara.

Report  Like  2 Reply 