

The Star-Ledger

A troubling silence

**‘COVID babies’ aren’t talking as much as they should.
How much is the pandemic to blame?**

Twins Thaddeus and Magnus had just turned 1-year-old when the pandemic hit. Their mother, a special education teacher, knew they were behind and needed speech therapy. She enrolled her children in therapy at the Suburban Speech Center. Their progress has been outstanding.

Babies born during the pandemic are talking later and saying fewer words, according to a growing body of academic research. Speech problems are also cropping up in preschoolers whose early social needs were put on the back burner during the chaos and fear generated by COVID-19, according to speech and health experts.

Children are showing the consequences of closed day cares, mask wearing, overwhelmed parents juggling remote work, and months without visits from grandma and grandpa. According to Dr. Nancy Polow, Director of Suburban Speech Center in Short Hills, *“I have never seen such an influx of infants and toddlers unable to communicate.”*

Born into isolation

When Charlie’s parents were expecting, everyone had the same advice: It takes a village.

But three days after Charlie was born, the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. Society shut down. “Outside of us, he had no interaction with anybody,” said Charlie’s mom, who was on leave from her job in marketing.

At Charlie’s 1-year checkup, the pediatrician said the toddler should be saying at least five or six words. “He said zero, unless you count “uh-oh.”

Suburban Speech Center



Speech pathologist Kim Minero works with Thaddeus during a therapy session at Suburban Speech Center in Short Hills.



Speech pathologist Diane Manahan works with Charlie during a therapy session at Suburban Speech Center in Short Hills.

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Catching up

Charlie was far from alone, according to research published earlier this year. Children born nine months into the pandemic produced “fewer coos, grunts, babbles, and other precursors to speech,” according to a study from the LENA Foundation, an organization that works to accelerate language development in toddlers. A Brown University study also found children born during the pandemic had weaker verbal skills.

Charlie now speaks in full sentences and asks and answers questions. After 10 months of speech therapy, he is about to graduate from Suburban Speech Center because he will have met all the developmental milestones for children his age. “He’s a talking little boy,” said Charlie’s parents, “We are so grateful.”



Speech pathologist Kim Minero works with Sofia during a session at the Suburban Speech Center in Short Hills.

Sofia was the center of her mother’s world when she was born in October 2019. But when the pandemic hit, this stay-at-home mom couldn’t give her daughter her full attention. Her twin first grade boys required her assistance with virtual schooling.

Sofia was in a crucial stage for learning speech and language skills. “Kids are supposed to say words and phrases at 2 ... and I noticed she just wasn’t doing that.” Sofia started speech-language therapy at the Suburban Speech Center shortly after she turned 2. Sofia was later diagnosed with apraxia of speech, a neurological disorder that affects the brain’s ability to plan and sequence sounds.

Approaching her 3rd birthday, Sofia is now communicating in phrases. Her mom feels fortunate. What if she had waited longer to get help? What if she

hadn’t insisted on in-person therapy sessions? “I don’t think she’d be anywhere (close to) where she is right now.”

The pandemic created an agonizing guessing game for families. Is their child behind because of the pandemic? Are other developmental factors at play? How long should parents wait for words to come before getting worried? For some toddlers, the pandemic may have exacerbated speech problems that likely already existed.

The Suburban Speech Center is still seeing “lots and lots” of COVID babies, Dr. Polow said. It’s also seeing an increase in what she called “COVID children.” “We were missing kids that should have been evaluated sooner.” When the masks came off and children returned to in-person learning, they struggled to communicate at an appropriate level, Dr. Polow said.

If you have questions about your child’s speech-language development, please contact Dr. Nancy Polow.

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