





RESEARCH ARTICLE

Children's perspectives on friendships and socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative approach

Danaë Larivière-Bastien^{1,2,3}  | Olivier Aubuchon^{1,2,3} | Aurélie Blondin^{1,2} |
Dominique Dupont^{1,2,3}  | Jamie Libenstein^{1,2,3} | Florence Séguin^{2,3} |
Alexandra Tremblay^{1,2} | Hamza Zarglayoun^{1,2} | Catherine M. Herba^{3,4,5}  |
Miriam H. Beauchamp^{1,2,3} 

¹Department of Psychology, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

²ABCs Developmental Neuropsychology Lab, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

³Sainte-Justine Hospital Research Member (CR-CHUSJ), Montreal, Quebec, Canada

⁴Department of Psychology, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

⁵Department of Psychiatry and Addictology, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Correspondence

Danaë Larivière-Bastien, Department of Psychology, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
Email: danae.lariviere.bastien@umontreal.ca

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Abstract

Background: Good quality friendships and relationships are critical to the development of social competence and are associated with quality of life and mental health in childhood and adolescence. Through social distancing and isolation restrictions, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the way in which youth socialize and communicate with friends, peers, teachers and family on a daily basis. In order to understand children's social functioning during the pandemic, it is essential to gather information on their experiences and perceptions concerning the social changes unique to this period. The objective of this study was to document children and adolescents' perspectives regarding their social life and friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic, through qualitative interviews.

Methods: Participants ($N = 67$, 5–14 years) were recruited in May and June 2020. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via a videoconferencing platform. A thematic qualitative analysis was conducted based on the transcribed and coded interviews (NVivo).

Results: The upheavals related to the pandemic provoked reflection among the participants according to three main themes, each of which included sub-themes: (1) the irreplaceable nature of friendship, (2) the unsuspected benefits of school for socialization and (3) the limits and possibilities of virtual socialization.

Conclusions: The collection of rich, qualitative information on the perspectives of children and adolescents provides a deeper understanding of the consequences of the pandemic on their socialization and psychological health and contributes to our fundamental understanding of social competence in childhood.

KEYWORDS

adolescence, child development, children's views, qualitative research methods, school, social relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

The SARS-CoV-2 COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the habits and social world of all individuals. Health measures and social restrictions taken to curb the spread of the virus directly affect the way in which individuals engage in social interactions, and how they develop and maintain social ties more generally. Quarantine and isolation measures, as well as massive school and business closures implemented in the first wave reduced or eliminated face-to-face contact and interactions. Emerging findings suggest that COVID-19 and restriction measures have had an impact on mental health, causing an increase in depression, anxiety and stress in the general population (Brooks et al., 2020; Hawryluck et al., 2004; Jiao et al., 2020; Leeb et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2012; Loades et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020; Rajkumar, 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Several studies already show negative psychological effects on children and families as a result of health restrictions in the context of the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2021). Some studies report increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as symptoms of boredom, inattention, irritability, worry, and sleep disorders in children and/or their parents (Duan et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Mitra et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2020). A mixed-methods study from Ireland documents parent perspectives during lockdown and reports negative consequences such as feelings of isolation, anxiety and loneliness in 1- to 10-year-old children and reports that they missed their friends and school considerably (Egan et al., 2021).

While adults can maintain social interactions and ties through professional activities and virtual platforms, children typically have less experience with these means, and depend more strongly on school or extra-curricular setting to socialize. Childhood friendships, especially in younger children, are also less stable and could be more easily disrupted (50% of 5-year old friendships are stable over the course of one school year vs. 75% among 10-year-olds; Rubin et al., 2005). Friendships built in a single context (e.g., at school) also tend to be less stable than friendships that are nourished in several contexts (e.g., friendships between children who spend time together inside and outside of school) (Chan & Poulin, 2007). In addition, children's socialization is often dependent on social gatherings planned by adults (e.g., playdates, meetings at the park and leisure activities) and these opportunities have been curtailed by the pandemic. Perhaps most importantly, friendships are usually formed between youth of the same age at school (Rubin et al., 2007), suggesting that school closures may have a direct effect on the creation and maintenance of friendships.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the singular characteristics of friendship relationships provide major psychological benefits both in childhood and adulthood (Bagwell et al., 1998; Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Bukowski et al., 1994; Erdley et al., 2001; Keefe & Berndt, 1996; Kingery et al., 2011; Narr et al., 2019; Oldenburg, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1993; Peets & Hodges, 2018; Townsend et al., 1988; Vernberg, 1990). Friendships also contribute more broadly to the socialization of children and adolescents, including relationships with close friends, but also within peer groups. Social interactions contribute to the construction of identity and provide

Key Messages

- Children's social interactions and friendships have been greatly disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Friendship occupies a central and unique place in the lives of children and adolescents and social and physical distancing has been difficult.
- The use of virtual communication is convenient but does not replace face-to-face peer interactions.
- School represents an essential place for socialization and online school does not satisfy the same needs in daily social interactions.
- Children and adolescents have clear expectations and needs in terms of their social relationships, and these should be taken into account to ensure these relationships are maintained in the event of further health and social restrictions.

regular opportunities to practice social skills and develop social knowledge and competence (Berndt, 2002; Carpendale & Lewis, 2004; Umberson & Montez, 2010), ultimately contributing to academic success (Blakemore, 2012; Romano et al., 2010) and promoting mental health (Lee et al., 2010). When social skills do not develop appropriately, the consequences can range from mild functional impairments to externalized behaviours such as aggression or relational difficulties leading to conflict with peers or adults (Contreras & Cano, 2016; Farmer & Bierman, 2002). Suboptimal social competence and poor social skills are also risk factors for peer rejection (Newcomb et al., 1993), social anxiety (Chen et al., 2020), and engagement in maladaptive behaviours (Palmer & Hollin, 1999; Stevenson & Goodman, 2001). In turn, children who tend to be more rejected or socially isolated have poorer physical and psychological health (Lacey et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2010).

Given the importance of friendships and social interactions for child development and psychological well-being, it is essential to better understand the social impacts of the pandemic and ultimately how to promote optimal social development in youth despite the pandemic context. For a theme as complex and nuanced as socialization, a qualitative approach makes it possible to youth perspectives and their subjective experience. The objective of this study was therefore to document the perspectives of children and adolescents regarding their friendships and social life during the COVID-19 pandemic, through qualitative interviews.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

This study was approved by the Sainte-Justine Hospital Institutional Ethics Board and parents and children consented or assented prior to

their participation. Families were recruited through convenience sampling using social media and web advertisements. Participants were also recruited through word of mouth and 'snowball' or 'network' recruitment, whereby a previously recruited participant suggests a potential participant to the researcher. Inclusion criteria were (a) child aged between 5 and 14 years, (b) living in the province of Quebec, Canada, and (c) attending regular school. Exclusion criteria were (a) insufficient English or French language proficiency and (b) any

diagnosed, severe neurodevelopmental disorder or acquired brain injury. Between 15 May and 22 June 2020, 67 children and adolescents participated in semi-structured interviews by telephone or videoconferencing (see Table 1). Sample size was determined using the theoretical saturation criterion (Bowen, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2017). An a priori sample of 45 participants was initially determined based on recommendations for qualitative studies of this nature, examples of similar studies, as well as the desired level of

TABLE 1 Participants socio-demographic characteristics ($n = 67$)

Variables	Definition and description	Distribution
Age	5–6 years of age	16 (23.9%)
	7–8 years of age	17 (25.4%)
	9–10 years of age	16 (23.9%)
	11–12 years of age	7 (10.4%)
	13–14 years of age	11 (16.4%)
	M	8.91
	SD	2.64
Sex	Male	36 (54%)
	Female	31 (46%)
Ethnicity	Caucasian	50 (74.6%)
	Other	7 (10.5%)
	Unknown	10 (14.9%)
Maternal education (years) ^a	M	19.1
	SD	3.1
Paternal education (years) ^a	M	17.3
	SD	3.2
Maternal employment status	Employed, including self-employed, full- or part-time	50 (74.6%)
	Out-of-work, including homemaker, looking for job	5 (7.5%)
	N/A, including, retired, student and other	2 (3%)
	Unknown	10 (14.9%)
Paternal employment status	Employed, including self-employed, full- or part-time	55 (82.1%)
	Out-of-work, including homemaker, looking for job	0 (0%)
	N/A, including, retired, student and other	0 (0%)
	Unknown	12 (17.9%)
Place of residence	Urban setting	44 (65.7%)
	Suburban setting	23 (34.3%)
Schooling at the time of the interview	School attendance in face-to-face classes ^b	9 (13.4%)
	Home schooling ^c	58 (86.6%)

^a11 years of schooling is equivalent to a high school education and between 12 and 14 years of schooling, to a college education (called CÉGEP in Quebec). Between 14 and 17 years of schooling is equivalent to a bachelor's degree and more than 17 years of schooling generally corresponds to graduate studies (Masters, Doctoral degree).

^bParticipants had returned to school in the classroom because schools had reopened in their place of residence and parents chose to send their child to school.

^cParticipants were still home schooled, either because schools in their area remained closed or because parents chose not to send their child to school. Modality of school attendance varied across participants, with some attending daily online courses and others sporadically receiving online course materials without regular follow-up with a teacher.

representativeness of the sample (a sufficient number of participants in each age group was sought) (Morrow, 2005; Saunders et al., 2018). Once 67 interviews were conducted, it was found that the same terms were frequently used in participants' discourse and that no new themes emerged from the analysis of their experiences.

2.2 | Setting

The interviews were conducted in the context of the lockdown following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic. A state of health emergency was declared in the Canadian province of Quebec on March 13th (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020d) leading to the closure of all schools and most early childhood care centres, as well as non-essential workplaces and businesses. At the time of the interviews, lockdown measures, that is, restriction of any non-essential outings outside the home, physical and social distancing (minimum distance of 2 m between individuals) were in place. Outdoor and indoor gatherings were banned and parks and playgrounds were closed (Gouvernement du Canada, 2020). Crossing Canadian borders was severely restricted; travelers from all countries were banned from entering or subjected to a mandatory 14-day quarantine (Van Nuland et al., 2020). Telework was favoured whenever possible for all sectors (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020b). As of the end of May 2020, some measures were eased or abolished as part of a six-phase deconfinement plan (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020c). Parks reopened in June, but schools remained closed in Montreal until the start of the following academic year at the end of August (Gouvernement du Québec, 2020a). Twenty-three participants lived in a city where elementary schools and daycare services opened on 11 May 2020. Parents in this city had the choice to send their children to school or not. Of the participants, nine had returned to school at the time of the interview. The remaining 58 participants were still homeschooled (either because schools in their area remained closed or because parents chose not to send their child to school). Home schooling arrangements varied among participants, with some attending daily online classes and others sporadically receiving online academic content without regular follow-up with a teacher.

2.3 | Procedure and semi-structured interview

Parents completed a socio-demographic questionnaire. Interviews with participants were conducted by eight team members (and authors of this article), both male and female research assistants, graduate or undergraduate students with experience in conducting qualitative interviews. All interviewers had a background in developmental psychology. The semi-structured qualitative interview (about 10–20 min) consisted of 15 questions and sub-questions, covering themes related to perceptions of friendship, experience of virtual communication, and perspectives on likes or dislikes since the beginning of the pandemic (see Table 2). The interview guide was developed collaboratively by experienced clinician-scientists and revised by the research team. In

TABLE 2 Interview guide

#	Questions
1.	How old are you?
2.	How are you doing?
3.	Why is it important to have friends? a. What do you like about your friends? How do you benefit from having friends?
4.	Is it important to be able to see/play in person with your friends? Why is it important?
5.	What do you miss the most since you have to stay home/the school is closed?
6.	How do you feel since you cant play/interact/communicate in person with your friends?
7.	Does it bother you to see your friends from a distance and not be able to play with them? Why? a. How does it make you feel?
8.	Since school closed, have you contacted or seen any friends? a. How did you contact them (in person, in person 2 m away, by phone, skype, zoom, Facetime, messenger kids, etc.)? b. What do you do during your calls? (chatting, video games, sharing toys/crafts/etc.?)
9.	(if virtual contact) how do you feel about talking/playing with your friends on the phone/Facetime/...? a. Whats different about seeing them in person? b. Do you think you will continue to communicate this way with your friends?
10.	What can you do with your friends even if you cant see them in person?
11.	(if siblings at home) how have things been with your sister(s) and/or brother(s) at home? a. Are siblings like friends? b. Why? Whats different/similar?
12.	Do you have a pet? a. Do you think a pet can be like a friend? Why?
13.	What did you like most about staying home? a. What did you like the least?
14.	Can you tell me in your own words what a friend is?
15.	What is the first thing you will do when the virus is 'gone'/when you can go out of the house/see people again? a. What are you most looking forward to? b. Are you looking forward to going back to school? Why?

order to encourage elaboration, interviewers asked participants for clarification when their responses were not spontaneously developed (e.g., using the 'naïve inquirer' approach [Morrow, 2005]: 'why is it different when you see your friends in person?'). Examples were offered to participants if they had difficulty developing a response. Participants were also encouraged to provide examples if this would allow for a

more complete response. The questions were kept short, both to accommodate the age of the participants and to ensure depth of response, as recommended for promoting rich and spontaneous responses (Kvale, 1996; Morrow, 2005). The questions were chosen for their simplicity and their potential to elicit participants' perspectives on socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic. When conducting the interviews, the interviewers took time to put the participant at ease by using humour, for example, and rephrased the questions as needed to accommodate the participant's level of understanding. The participant was encouraged to ask questions and to express misunderstanding as necessary. The guide was tested with two children of different ages to verify relevance. Before the interviews begin, interviewers described and explained the reasons for the project to the child and then obtained the child's consent. Interviews were recorded (video and audio).

2.4 | Data analysis

This study falls within the research paradigm called 'constructivism-interpretivism' and follows an inductive and exploratory approach (data-driven rather than hypothesis-driven). The thematic analysis approach was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), referring to a flexible and fluid coding process while remaining rigorous and systematic. The interviews were first transcribed verbatim and then coded using QSR NVivo software (Doncaster, Australia). A coding guide, designed to structure the coding, was developed based on the analysis of the interviews, from which codes were generated in an open coding phase (Supplementary File 1). Data immersion (repeatedly reading all the interviews and re-listening to the recordings of some interviews), consultation of field notes, and active consultation with members of the research team were performed to reduce subjective bias (Morrow, 2005). Codes were sorted into categories based on how different codes were related and linked at a semantic level. These categories were used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters, and to systematically identify both recurring and central themes and sub-themes that were intended to accurately represent the data. One of the two children who tested the interview guide participated in an informal discussion to validate the themes that emerged from the analysis. The main themes were consistent with the experience of this child. Two of the authors collaboratively coded the interviews, but the first author was primarily responsible for the coding and analysis. Periodic checks of the agreement were carried out (Guest & MacQueen, 2008) and the primary coder checked more than 50% of the interviews coded by the second coder to ensure similarity. Another researcher (and author of this article) performed an analysis of a portion (15%) of the raw data and this was comparable to that obtained by the primary coder/author.

3 | RESULTS

Analysis of the data allowed participants perspectives to be grouped into three main themes, each with several sub-themes: (1) the

irreplaceable nature of friendship, (2) the unsuspected benefits of school for socialization and (3) the limits and possibilities of virtual socialization. Details on these themes are presented below and corresponding, representative verbatim examples from the interviews are presented in Table 3.

1. The irreplaceable nature of friendship

a. The possibility of shared quality time

Participants talked about their friends and what friendship means to them. The data show that they consider friendship to consist of pleasant moments and shared enjoyment. For almost all participants, a friend is first and foremost a play partner. Older participants (10–14 years) describe friends as people with whom to share enjoyable activities and have a good time. Participants see having fun, laughing and joking as fundamental elements of what friendship means to them. Many also described their friends as people with whom they feel comfortable, get along well and do not fight. The importance of shared enjoyment in friendship emerged when participants were asked to explain how siblings or pets were, or were not, like friends. In response to this question, the importance of play emerged again as the main element of friendship; the majority considered pets to be friends if they could play with them and different from human friends if this was not possible. For most, siblings are 'kind of like friends' since they can play with them. Playing with friends appears simple and instantaneous described by participants. The inability to see friends during the pandemic led participants to note that this ease of playing together factor is not found in their other relationships.

b. The possibility of peer identification

The second important element that defines friendship according to participants is identification with peers who resemble them. Nearly half of the participants consider friends to be people who have the same tastes, share the same interests and activities, and are similar to them. For these participants, it is essential that their friends understand them. A significant proportion describe their friends as people their own age who like the same games but who are not siblings: 'A person you love and know well, but is not in your family' (P27 girl, 8 years). Participants' responses also highlight the importance of peer relationships that are experienced outside the family environment. For example, they spoke of their social relationships as belonging to their personal universe, and through which they can gradually break free from their family environment: '(Friends are) people to whom I can say things that sometimes I do not want to say to my family' (P60 girl, 14 years). For many, it is important to be able to confide secrets to their friends, which highlights the importance of relationships that occur outside the home environment. Approximately one-quarter of participants emphasized the importance of sharing things with friends that they do not necessarily share with family members. Some form of

TABLE 3 Representative verbatim examples from the interviews

1. The irreplaceable nature of friendship

a. The possibility of shared quality time

Umm ... it makes me happy to socialise, lots of laughs ... like umm ... I dont know how to say it ... enthusiasm. (P16 boy, 13 years)

I play a lot of hockey with my friends and we also laugh, and like, after a hockey game or whatever other activity we do, together we always laugh and after we ... at the next recess/activity we always want to have a good time together. And just have fun. (P62 boy, 10 years)

So ... we always find games that we all like and ... we never argue. A friend is someone you love, that you almost never fight with, that you can play with often. And ... a friend umm ... usually they are always nice to you. (P11 girl, 9 years)

b. The possibility of peer identification

My friends like Pokémon, like me. But my sister ... she likes princesses. It makes it too different when we play together. (P05 girl, 8 years)

Sometimes you dont want to always do things with your family like, I dont know, you want to go to the movies, well youre not always going to go with your family, so your friends can go with you. (P57 girl, 12 years)

It (friendship) provides different support than my family gives me. It isnt the same thing to talk about your day with friends as it is to talk about your day with your parents. I can talk about things with my friends that I dont talk about with my parents. And, were the same age, and were experiencing the same things, so its easier, theyre more able to identify with what Im living through and Im more able to identify with what they are living through than my parents or brothers. (P42 girl, 13 years)

c. The possibility of a bi-directional and egalitarian relationship

A friend, is someone who can help you feel better, and for example, when you are sad, when you are at school, they help you ... well ... not only when youre at school but sometimes if you have a friend next to you, and youre crying, well, it helps you feel better. Because they help you, they give you hugs, and thats it. (P19 boy, 5 years)

A friend is someone who is there for you, that is loyal, that wont get rid of you after a few seconds, that has time to be your friend, someone who you can tell secrets to. Someone you believe, you know that you can appreciate ... you help each other. (P16 boy, 13 years)

Well ... because friendship ... if not ... wed always be alone, and well ... when wed be at school, wed be all by ourselves ... it is important because well ... its not nice to be alone. (P08 boy, 9 year)

2. The unexpected benefits of school for socialization

a. The importance of school in childrens lives

Well ... school, friends, teachers, everything we did before ... now I dont like staying at home anymore. I prefer being with my friends and playing with them at school. Now I like school more than home, as opposed to before, now I prefer school. (P10 girl, 8 years)

About school ... what I find is that sometimes in life, when we dont like something, its when we dont have it anymore that we realize we like it ... (P43 boy, 10 years)

I never really loved school but now I feel like I miss it a lot. (P46 girl, 10 years)

b. Multiple and diverse opportunities for socialization

Well I miss it because yeah, I cant see them and I liked seeing them every day when I went to school. At the same time, I have social media, but its for sure not like in real life, its more boring. (P39 boy, 13 years)

Umm, surprisingly, Im excited to go back to school. But not for the school part of school. More for the part of being surrounded by people my age. Because now I see my friends, but otherwise I have brothers that are younger than me and I have parents who are older than me. So, being surrounded by people my age and people with whom I wouldnt necessarily spend an afternoon with at the park, but that its fun to see during the day, in the hallway. (P42 girl, 13 years)

But theres people in my class that I havent seen yet because Ive only known them since the beginning of the year and Im not that close to them, so I never saw them outside of school. I still miss them a lot and I find it boring to do school without them. (P60 girl, 14 years)

c. The importance of in-person classes

I dont like learning on a computer, I find it a little depressing. I dont see anyone, and the cameras are closed. Essentially,

Well because when you go to school, you learn and now we do school on zoom and its harder to concentrate and to learn

Well, I miss it! In science, for example, we have a really cool science teacher and every time we make inside jokes in class.

TABLE 3 (Continued)

<p>we only see the teacher who is talking, so its not really fun. So, I dont like it, I really dont like distance schooling. And, I dont feel like doing that at all. And now, theyre giving exercises, deadlines and it stresses me out and I dont like it. (P60 girl, 14 years)</p>	<p>because we are far and the teacher isnt really there beside you to be able to explain. (P01 girl, 13 year-old)</p>	<p>With online classes, you cant mess around. It doesnt work like that in online classes. You know, you cant go off on another topic. So, I really miss real school, especially that I cant talk... And I love science, but I dont love it when its an online class. (P50 girl, 12 years)</p>
<p>3. The limits and possibilities of virtual socialization</p>		
<p>a. The limits of virtual means of communication</p>		
<p>Well, I for sure would rather see them in real life! Well, because theyre really there, theyre really with me, but if were on Facetime, or if were on the phone, theyre not really with me, I only see them through a screen. (P03 boy, 10 years)</p>	<p>Umm, well yes, it is important. Because, you have to see each other, because if you never see your friends, well ... the friendship can regress, and you might not be friends with these people anymore. Its not the same thing to have physical contact with someone and see them, as just talking on the phone without being able to be with the person and be in the same space. (P43 boy, 10 years)</p>	<p>Well for sure its better when you see them in real. Like with FaceTime, you dont really see the real person, and when you see them for real, well you know its, like, easier, I dont know how to explain it. Of course you talk to them, but sometimes they can do other things at the same time, but like lets say they can turn off their camera and then do other stuff and then youre on your own, compared to when youre with the real person, they cant just tell you wait here Im just going to go do something and then ill be back in 30 minutes! (P57 girl, 12 years)</p>
<p>b. The possibilities of virtual means of communication</p>		
<p>Sometimes we play at a distance, like, I take my games and she takes her games then we play together. We took our dolls and we played at a distance by video. (P48 girl, 8 years)</p>	<p>Well, we could play games at a distance on a computer, like I did with my grandmother. We played battleship and yum. If we dont cheat at yum and that we really say whats on the dice, it can work. And umm, to play battleship, its really simple, we just have to talk. (P43 boy, 10 years)</p>	<p>I have Lego challenges that I like to make a Lego thing and then I show them how, I send them several pictures to show them how to build it and then thats it. And I send them some little ideas they could do to... We send each other little things so we dont get bored. We tell each other jokes. (P53 boy, 13 year)</p>

shared intimacy with friends and identification with a group also appeared in the discourse of some participants.

c. The possibility of a bi-directional and egalitarian relationship

Many of the participants, even the younger ones, noted that their friendships were different from their other relationships. They were able to convey that their friendships were more complex and deeper than relationships with acquaintances, for example. While most describe their relationship with pets as unidirectional ('I take care of my pet'), friendship was seen as a two-way relationship that provides satisfaction and happiness. Participants also observe that having friends is beneficial in their everyday lives. Nearly half of the participants emphasized that friends were an important source of support and comfort: 'When I hurt myself they are there, when I'm sad they are there' (P38 girl, 8 years). Participants said they felt confident that they could always count on their friends when needed, to defend them and take their side for example, that they could confide and express themselves without fear of being judged, and that they could always find a listening ear among their friends. Many also spoke of the importance of mutual trust and respect, as

well as a sense of loyalty. For half of the participants, the fact that having friends prevents loneliness is a key element in defining friendship. Together, these elements underscore that for participants, friendship must be mutual, and friends are people with whom they feel equal.

2. The unexpected benefits of school for socialization

a. The importance of school in children's lives

School closures affected all participants in the study. Nine out of 67 participants had returned to in-person classes and all others remained at home. The frequency and duration of distance education provided to the participants varied depending on the age of the children, their schools, and their teachers. Regardless of these differences, school was an important element in the life of the vast majority of participants. Half identified school as the element, or one of the elements, that they missed the most during the pandemic and more than two-thirds of the participants indicated that they were looking forward to returning to school. The majority of participants, both

younger children and adolescents, reported that they significantly missed at least one aspect of school life. Several clearly noted that they previously did not like school but that the lockdown made them realize that in fact they did, or at least some aspects of it. Some were surprised by this observation.

b. Multiple and diverse opportunities for socialization

Although no questions specifically targeted the question of school as a social setting, over half the participants said they were looking forward to going back to school because of the social aspects of school life. The majority said they looked forward to going back to school first and foremost to see their friends. In addition, a significant proportion recognized that the social part of school was not limited to their friends; about a third of participants said they missed their teachers or educators. Several participants also noted the multiple opportunities for socialization that are created or facilitated by school attendance. For example, school allows them to socialize with friends or acquaintances with whom they were not yet at the stage of meeting outside of school. The opportunity to see friends daily was also noted as an important benefit of school attendance. For older participants, the importance of social opportunities outside the family was a central theme. Many missed the possibility of being in a more personal world that is not shared with their families. They saw school as a place to socialize with other young people who are neither friends nor potential friends, but simply people of their own age, or even people of different ages who represent important individuals in their social network.

c. The importance of in-person classes

Although more than half of the participants said they missed going to school in person, not all expressed a clear opinion about their appreciation for home schooling. A quarter of the participants specifically said they did not like online or home schooling, while only nine participants (13%) indicated that they liked online or home schooling. Thus, the data show a preference among participants for in-person schooling. In relation to their dissatisfaction regarding virtual classes, participants noted specific difficulties encountered online (e.g., poor concentration and technical problems) and reduced motivation. Several participants also emphasized notable elements they miss from in-person schooling, like their work environment at school, for example, their desks, familiar objects in the classroom, books and toys. They sometimes talked about their class routine, way of working and habits with their teacher and said that they appreciated these aspects. Participants became aware that they enjoyed attending school in person: 'It's cool to learn with everyone around me' (P60 girl, 14 years), never having had to think about the issue of in person or virtual school before. Some explained that school social life takes place in a variety of ways and is not limited to recess or lunchtime. Interactions between students during class and in response to what happens in class seem to be important to them and these are not possible in virtual classrooms.

3. The limits and possibilities of virtual socialization

a. The limits of virtual means of communication

During lockdown, participants engaged in virtual communication with friends and extended family. Their perspectives reflect a wide variety of experiences, with some already having used virtual means of communication prior to the pandemic and others trying them for the first time. The majority plan to continue using virtual means of communication after the end of the pandemic, but mostly as a tool to organize face-to-face meetings with their friends. A third no longer wish to use virtual means of communication and are adamant that they would prefer to only see their friends in person. Whether or not they wish to continue using virtual means of communication, almost all participants still prefer to see their friends and family in person: 'When we hang up, I always still want to go and see them in real life' (P62 boy, 10 years). More than half mentioned feeling that they do not feel that they are really with family or friends during virtual contacts. Some were already aware that they preferred face-to-face relationships, but most had had little experience with virtual communication and appeared to be unaware of their preference.

While several participants could not articulate exactly why they preferred face-to-face contact, others gave detailed reasons. Not being able to play or do certain activities was the most common barrier identified in the experience of virtual communication. Many participants, especially younger children, reported technical problems and the complexity of using virtual and online tools as underlying their preference for face-to-face interactions: 'with Messenger Kids, sometimes it does not work, so we always have to restart. It's more complicated. I prefer real life' (P48 girl, 8 years). Several participants expressed feeling a lack of spontaneity in their virtual interactions: 'You can express yourself more in real life than with a screen' (P16 boy, 13 years). Many participants explained not having as much fun when interacting virtually: 'Well ... now we laugh less, since we are not in person' (P50 girl, 12 years). For some, the screen was seen as 'cold' and as an obstacle between them and their friends, preventing them from feeling really close. Finally, several older participants mentioned loss of non-verbal elements of language during virtual interactions. For example, some noted more frequent awkward moments in conversation, or difficulties perceiving non-verbal social cues, such as facial expressions and emotions, and in interpreting the intentions of the speaker.

The inability to cuddle or get close to their friends was also a limiting factor in virtual communications: 'On Instagram you cannot give them hugs, see their smile and all that' (P49 girl, 11 years). The importance of physical proximity with friends was a major element that emerged from the data: 'I miss hugging them, chatting for hours and playing with them ... I feel sad' (P49 girl, 11 years). Participants felt that friendship was best experienced in person and wanted to meet their friends in the physical (not virtual) world. Many participants also stated that they missed affection, hugging and physical closeness with extended family members (mainly grandparents). As with their friends,

they engaged in virtual communication with extended family, but the vast majority were not satisfied with this mode of interaction. Many said they felt a need to hug significant others, such as their teachers or neighbours.

b. The possibilities of virtual means of communication

Despite the significant limitations identified, most appreciated the fact that virtual communication at least allowed them to see or talk to friends or family members. Many participants discovered new ways to communicate and described creative ways of interacting online. For example, several shared in joint online activities simultaneously (e.g., playing board games and cooking). Several participants said they spent much of their time playing video or online games, and many were initiated to social media and online gaming sites for the first time. A significant proportion of participants had their first experience with video conferencing (e.g., Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and with chat applications, such as Messenger Kids. A few did homework together or helped each other with schoolwork, through online platforms. Finally, the majority of participants said that their main use of online resources and virtual means of communication was to talk with their friends or exchange information by showing each other games, toys or drawings.

4 | DISCUSSION

The COVID-19-related health measures taken in the spring of 2020 have led to a substantial reduction in children and adolescents' social contacts. The objective of this study was to document their perspectives on their socialization and friendships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that participants greatly missed their friends, more than anything else during the pandemic. While they enjoyed other aspects of their lives during the lockdown (having more free time, seeing their parents and siblings for longer periods of time, doing activities with them that they never had the opportunity to do under normal circumstances), they still clearly expressed a significant loss in terms of friendships and relations with peers. This social contact deficit was present despite the fact that most had virtual contact with their friends and were typically well-surrounded by siblings or parents at home. Participants were often aware that they missed their friends even though they expressed being happy at home with their families. Thus, it appears from their perspectives that friendships cannot be replaced by family relationships, fun leisure activities at home, relationships with pets, or virtual communication. In describing what friendship means to them, participants explained why their friendships are unique and not interchangeable with other relationships. Friends are partners with whom it is easy and simple to play and with whom the act of playing goes without saying. Friends are also people with whom they can identify, who can understand them. Finally, through mutual support, friends are people who enrich their life but also to whom they can offer support and caring. Interestingly, these fundamental characteristics of friendship evoked by participants correspond

closely to descriptions from the literature, many of which align with Parker and Asher's (1993) criteria including: (a) the extent to which the relationship offers children **opportunities for play, companionship**, and recreation; (b) the degree of **intimate** disclosure and exchange that characterizes the relationship; (c) the extent to which the friends **share, help, and guide** one another; and (d) the extent to which children find the relationship **validating** and enhancing of self-worth. In their own words, the study participants refer to these same characteristics. The results suggest that definitional (and largely theoretical) characteristics of friendship represent values actually experienced and endorsed by children. Even at a young age, children can conjure specific examples of these characteristics in their friendship roles and relations. The context of the pandemic added a particular lens to the perspectives of the participants, who, by being deprived of their friends, seemed to become aware of the special nature of friendship and the fact that it cannot be replaced by other relationships.

A novel finding is that the importance of physical closeness in friendship emerged as a main theme for participants and is not represented in seminal descriptions of friendship characteristics. Bukowski et al. (1994) do include the characteristic of 'closeness', but this seems to refer to feelings of acceptance, validation and attachment, rather than to a physical parameter. Participants explicitly mentioned physical closeness and the importance of cuddling in particular. They felt that friendships definitely require face-to-face meetings. Expressions of affection are part of the friendship relationship for them, and they admitted to greatly missing this aspect. Since children have been unable to get physically close to their friends during at least part of the pandemic, it is logical that this emerges as an important factor. Future work could seek to determine whether this factor generalizes to settings beyond the pandemic. Participants also extensively emphasized the importance of friendship to 'avoid loneliness'. Although they gave examples unrelated to the context of lockdown ('friends are important for not being alone at recess'), it is possible that a general sense of loneliness or isolation may have coloured their perspectives or that the particular context of the pandemic led them to highlight the importance of this characteristic. There is emerging evidence that feelings of loneliness have increased since the start of the pandemic (Goarke et al., 2020). Various factors increase children's feelings of loneliness, including peer acceptance and the quality of friendships (Asher & Paquette, 2003). A study that explored children and adolescents' self-reported subjective well-being during the first wave of the pandemic (Mitra et al., 2021) showed that having access to friends is correlated with a lower likelihood of reporting poor well-being. The current findings add to this knowledge the perspectives of the children themselves, according to which friends prevent the experience of loneliness and underscore this element as critical in the meaning of friendship.

School closures led children and adolescents to reflect on the role that school plays in their development and social lives and constitutes a novel aspect of the findings. They listed benefits of school, such as that it offers diverse and multiple opportunities to socialize and engage in a range of types of learning. They emphasized that the

school context facilitates daily contact with their friends, but also offers socialization opportunities they might not find elsewhere such as being around same-age peers (who are not necessarily friends) or being in contact with younger or older children and teachers. Moreover, these opportunities for socialization are not only experienced at recess or lunchtime but take place between students during class and in response to what happens in class, which is one of the reasons they prefer in-person schooling. Experts have previously identified the benefits of school attendance for social and psychological development (Wentzel, 2015), showing, for example, that the unique social climate experienced by children in school contributes to their psychological well-being and academic performance (Flook et al., 2005). Prosocial behaviours among peers in the classroom have been shown to predict child social competence (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004). Other studies indicate that a positive and encouraging attitude on the part of teachers improves prosocial behaviour and social skills in children (Bub, 2009; Spivak & Farran, 2016). Without being questioned directly on this theme, participants identified social benefits of schooling and this provides crucial elements in our reflection on how to counter the adverse effects of school closures. Together, the results shed light on the little-heard perspectives of children and adolescents on what school provides to them and how it differs from other living environments.

Finally, participants talked about their experience with virtual means of communication. They appreciated the possibilities offered by virtual tools, but in general deemed them unsatisfactory. A central realization was their preference for face-to-face interactions. While many explained this by the fact that virtual platforms do not allow them to play or 'really be with' others, a substantial proportion identified limitations that relate to socio-cognitive factors. For instance, they referred to lack of warmth or spontaneity in their virtual interactions, which could be associated with limitations of virtual interfaces for perceiving, interpreting or analysing social cues (Beaudoin & Beauchamp, 2020). Some mentioned more frequent awkward moments in their virtual conversations, fewer moments of laughter, or difficulties perceiving non-verbal social cues, such as facial expressions and emotions, or difficulties interpreting the intentions of the speaker. These comments are reminiscent of emerging findings suggesting that COVID-19-related social isolation has an effect on social cognition, including poorer facial emotion recognition (Bland et al., 2020). Their study further suggests a link between social isolation, social cognitive skills, and mental health. The full impact of putative alterations in youth's ability to process social information is not yet known but could be a fertile area of investigation as organisations consider both the benefits and limitations of virtual activities.

An interesting question that arises given the participant age range is the impact of age on perspectives. Friendship needs and characteristics vary and emerge at specific stages of development (Sullivan, 1953) and social skills mature through the types of relationships specific to each stage (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986). Social needs thus evolve from a need for affection and physical closeness in young children (0–2 years), to a need for companionship (2–

6 years), then a need for acceptance (6–9 years), intimacy (9–12 years), and finally to needs related to sexuality (12–16 years). According to this model, friendships become truly meaningful during preadolescence (9–12 years), when the need for interpersonal intimacy becomes prevalent and overrides the need for acceptance, which is primarily met through peer group participation. Friendships provide children of this age with a form of validation, expressed in the realization that they share common interests, hopes, and fears and that these feelings are valid. Also, at this age, children may derive a sense of self-worth from a friendship, through the realization that they are important to their friend. Social skills such as collaboration, compromise, self-disclosure, perspective-taking, empathy, and altruism are learned in friendship relationships (Buhrmester & Furman, 1986; Sullivan, 1953). The results of this study indeed show that children perceive their friendship relationships differently depending on their age. This was evident, for example, in the description of what they do with their friends. 5-year olds tended to describe games shared in a spirit of companionship or peer group interactions. Early school age children tended to describe activities that involved sharing common interests with one or two peers of the same age and gender, while tweens or teens often described activities that involved a deeper form of intimacy (e.g., talking on the phone or on social networks, sharing confidences). However, despite age and developmental stage differences, it was possible to identify commonalities across their perspectives and these align with theoretical conceptions of the contribution of friendship in the lives of children. For example, sharing quality time, identification with peers, and the possibility of an egalitarian, two-way relationship were all reported both by younger children and adolescents. Of course, participants described these elements differently depending on their age, but it was possible to find examples of these elements in their perspectives. For example, an 8-year-old participant described his view of friendship by explaining that his friend 'likes Pokemon, just like him', while a 13-year-old participant explained that friendship 'gives her a different kind of support from (her) family, because (she) can talk about different things with her friends since they went through the same things she did at the same time, and they identify with what other people go through'. These elements refer to identification with peers, a primary function of friendship (Bukowski et al., 1993, 1994; Parker & Asher, 1993). Although the younger children did not have the vocabulary or degree of introspection necessary for the deeper reflection exemplified by the adolescents, they all described the same phenomena.

4.1 | Limitations

Homogeneity of the participant sample is the main limitation of this study. Most participants came from favourable socio-economic environments and were predominantly Caucasian and thus are not representative of all families. Capturing the full range of experiences and attitudes about socialization during the pandemic will require research with a broader, more representative sample. It has been shown that

children and adolescents who are more vulnerable (socially, environmentally or educationally) are more likely to experience negative impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated measures (school closures among others) (Whitley et al., 2021). Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have limited access to computers, Internet, books and have less time and fewer resources to face pandemic-related stressors such as loss of employment and home schooling (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Another limitation of this study is the fact that the experiences of children living with social difficulties in school (e.g., children struggling to make friends and play with friends) or negative consequences of the lack or modified interactions with friends during the pandemic are not highlighted because the questions of the interview guide were not framed in such a way as to provoke reflection on these specific issues. It would be valuable to conduct a more in-depth study that would include questions to compare the perspectives of children with high social competence with those of children who have more difficulty making friends.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

The study provides potential loci for intervention and policy development by highlighting important priorities and pitfalls associated with social isolation in children and adolescents. Gathering children and adolescents' own perspectives on socialization and friendship during this unprecedented period fosters an understanding of how their relationships were transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic and also how they perceive their social relationships in general, thus informing both on the consequences of the pandemic on social and psychological health, but also contributing to fundamental understanding of social competence formation during childhood. The exceptional context of school closures also provides an opportunity for societal reflection on the role of schools in children's social development. The perspectives identified in this study should ensure that close attention is paid to children's friendships when external events disrupt opportunities for face-to-face contact. Helping them maintain and nurture their friendships should be a public health priority, along with sports activities, for example, and should be weighed in the balance when public health decisions are made. While it is relevant to be concerned about maintaining academic learning during the pandemic, it is also important to ensure that the social needs of children and adolescents are met during this disrupted period. The results of this study tentatively suggest that physical proximity is an important component of children's friendships and maintaining the quality of such relationships. As such, interventions seeking to promote positive interactions and relationships between peers should consider this need both in the pandemic context (and where sanitary rules allow some proximity) and in school and the community more generally. This aspect may become especially important to promote in social intervention as virtual means become increasingly available and accessible even for young children.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was approved by the Sainte-Justine Hospital ethics review board (#2021-2940).

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Parents provided written consent while children provided verbal assent to participate.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Dana e Larivi ere-Bastien  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7216-9281>

Dominique Dupont  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5923-1300>

Catherine M. Herba  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7906-4696>

Miriam H. Beauchamp  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8637-6361>

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