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## Cognition gap Pandemic has affected IQ of infants – study

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Children born during the coronavirus pandemic have significantly reduced verbal, motor and overall cognitive performance compared with children born beforehand, a new US study suggests.

The first few years of a child's life are critical to their cognitive functioning. But with Covid-19 triggering the closure of businesses, daycare, schools and playgrounds – life for infants changed considerably, with parents stressed and stretched trying to balance work and childcare.

With limited stimulation at home and interaction with the world outside, pandemic-era children appear to have scored shockingly low on tests designed to assess cognitive development, said the lead study author, Sean Deoni, an associate professor of paediatrics at Brown University. Before the pandemic, the mean IQ score on standardised cognitive tests for children aged between three months to three years of age hovered around 100, but for children born during the pandemic it tumbled to 78, according to the analysis, which has yet to be peer-reviewed.

The study included a total of 672 children from the state of Rhode Island, of which 188 were born after July 2020 and 308 were born prior to January 2019, while 176 were born between January 2019 and March 2020. The children were born full term, did not have any developmental disabilities and were mostly white. Those who came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds fared worse in the tests, the researchers found.

The biggest reason behind the falling scores was likely to be the lack of stimulation and interaction at home, said Deoni. “Parents are stressed and frazzled ... that interaction the child would normally get has decreased substantially.”

Whether these lower cognitive scores will have a long-term impact is unclear. In the first few years of life, the foundations for cognition are laid, much like building a house – it is easier to add rooms or flourishes when you are building the foundation, Deoni said. “The ability to coursecorrect becomes smaller the older that child gets.”

Sir Terence Stephenson, a Nuffield professor of child health at University College London, said the research was interesting given much has been written about the impact on the education of school-age children but not much has come out on infants.

The key factor influencing the lower scores in infants has likely been stress on parents, he said. “Perhaps it is not surprising that children from lower socioeconomic families have been most affected as this resonates with many of the other financial, employment and health impacts of the pandemic.”