

Owen Kenworthy

Owen Kenworthy is an 8-year-old white boy who lives with his parents, Erin Dougherty-Kenworthy and Jason Kenworthy, and his younger brother Bryce in Lakewood, a southern suburb of Denver. Erin is the Religious Exploration Director at FUSD, so Owen has a bit of a preacher's kid view on the church he has been coming to all his life.

Does 8-year-old Owen even remember life before COVID? Oh yes!

Before March 2020, "Life was fun. I got to have sleepovers and playdates with friends. I could go inside friends' houses and play with their toys without wearing masks. I could roam around outside without having to stay socially distanced. If people offered me snacks, I could take them and eat without having to keep long arms. We went everywhere -- to parties, church, and sometimes to dad's work. The World was very big."

Owen learned of COVID from his parents a couple of weeks before the virus arrived in Colorado. "On the last day before we couldn't go into people's houses anymore, we and our neighbors had a campfire and roasted marshmallows, played soccer and went inside together to watch TV. We had fun."

"The next day I knocked on my friend's door to play, but our parents said we couldn't go in other yards right now. We had to wait until they came outside to talk to them across the yards. My friend's sister [a 7th grader] made a spitting lama out of cardboard that was 6 feet long to help us keep socially distanced."

At first, everyone thought the virus would be over soon, but now it has lasted more than a year. "Now I am getting really sick of this."

During the year, Owen says, he stayed inside 24/7 and watched a lot of screens: TV, Switch, Nintendo, and computer, especially Minecraft and a lot of movies. There were a few families on the block who got a lot closer than before. In good weather people could go out in yards and play together. "We started having light saber battles like in Star Wars using pool noodles wrapped in duct tape. Sometimes my friends went a little overboard and got a lot of light sabers or two blades." During the summer, the family set up outdoor movies in a tent with the neighbors. But then the wind came up and gusted so hard his mom, Erin, had to keep the tent from blowing away! When weather got cold and snowy, Owen was driven indoors to color, play on screens, or build crazy creations out of Legos for his younger brother.

At first school didn't go, and then it came back online. "I didn't like online school. I really missed chatting with my friends. I did enjoy when we had half days or wacky days."

When they finally returned to in-person classrooms in March 2021, Owen and his friends clapped and talked about what all they were going to be learning in person. "It was great to talk about free Prodigy time, going to library and picking out any book you want." They returned to school entering through a different door than they used in 2nd grade. A screener with a thermometer and hand sanitizer was there to greet them, check that they have masks, and ask questions about how they are feeling before heading them off to class. A new morning routine

has each person trading off classroom jobs and sitting at tables with different people every week so they can get to know all the kids in the classroom. Mr. Turners' class has about 15 kids in each heat (group of students) for one teacher.

The year of staying at home has been tough. "When you need fresh air you can go outside but you need to wear a mask. That is not fresh air!" Sometimes his dog, Isla, helps him calm down. "When I'm in pain, she comes over and gives me licks." Sometimes his younger brother, Bryce, says "What's wrong, Owen?" and offers to share a hug and a toy. If problems with friends get bigger and bigger and his emotional elevator keeps going up and up, his dad, Jason, sometimes steps in to coach and comfort.

Owen picked up a couple of useful tools through this difficult year. His friends started using Google Chats, allowing them to chat with friends who are not physically around. Among the things that Owen would like to see preserved from the COVID era, "I like listening to church while eating bacon and pancakes on Sundays. And on Friday evenings, I enjoy listening to story time while playing Minecraft. I can hear what is going on while doing my own thing." He also thinks it is a good idea to keep remote learning as an option when weather is too bad to go to school. "But we're very lucky to be able to go back to school in person the next day."

Owen's favorite moment of the no-good-very-bad COVID year: "When my mom was driving me home from school and said she was registered to get the vaccine." His next urgent question: "When is the kid vaccine coming out? We need the vaccine!" He understands that it is delayed while the scientists make sure it is safe for children. He reckons that kids are more precious than adults, at least to their adults. "I'm looking forward to being surprised by the vaccine [for kids], maybe sometime in the summer."

Owen thinks that over time there may still be a little bit of COVID around but instead of the problem staying so BIG that it makes people very sick or kills them, it will get to be smaller and smaller and smaller like a cold.

Beyond COVID, Owen guesses that he won't want to spend as much time on screens. "I'm ready to play. Run outdoors. I gotcha world!" He will be lobbying for sleepovers every Friday night and anticipates people being nicer to each other when we're not all shut in together in such small pods.

He expects that the first day we are back to church together as a community, people will be really excited to see each other. Hugging and hugging. He looks forward to awesome dance parties at church with root beer and a DJ. He looks forward once again to bringing friends to our church and seeing friends he has met at church.

When he is an old man, Owen anticipates he will still remember the whole COVID year as having been really big. "I never want to have to deal with this again. I'm done!" But should he need to, "I'll be ready. I was trained in COVID and I know what to do!"