

Loneliness & Social Isolation: How to Foster Connection in Families, Schools, and Communities

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What We Will Cover

- What are social connection, social isolation and loneliness
- Risks and consequences
- Warning signs and family interventions
- Promoting connection in schools and communities
- Resources
- Q & A





Social Isolation and Loneliness in Youth

3 Main Components of Social Connection

- 1. Structure-** The number of relationships, variety of relationships (e.g., co-worker, friend, family, neighbor), and the frequency of interactions with others.
- 2. Function-** The degree to which others can be relied upon for various needs.
- 3. Quality-** The degree to which relationships and interactions with others are positive, helpful, or satisfying (vs. negative, unhelpful, or unsatisfying).

Factors That Can Shape Social Connection



Individual

- Chronic disease
- Sensory and functional impairments
- Mental health
- Physical health
- Personality
- Race
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status
- Life stage

Relationships

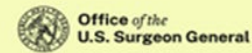
- Structure, function, and quality
- Household size
- Characteristics and behaviors of others
- Empathy

Community

- Outdoor space
- Housing
- Schools
- Workplace
- Local government
- Local business
- Community organizations
- Health care
- Transportation

Society

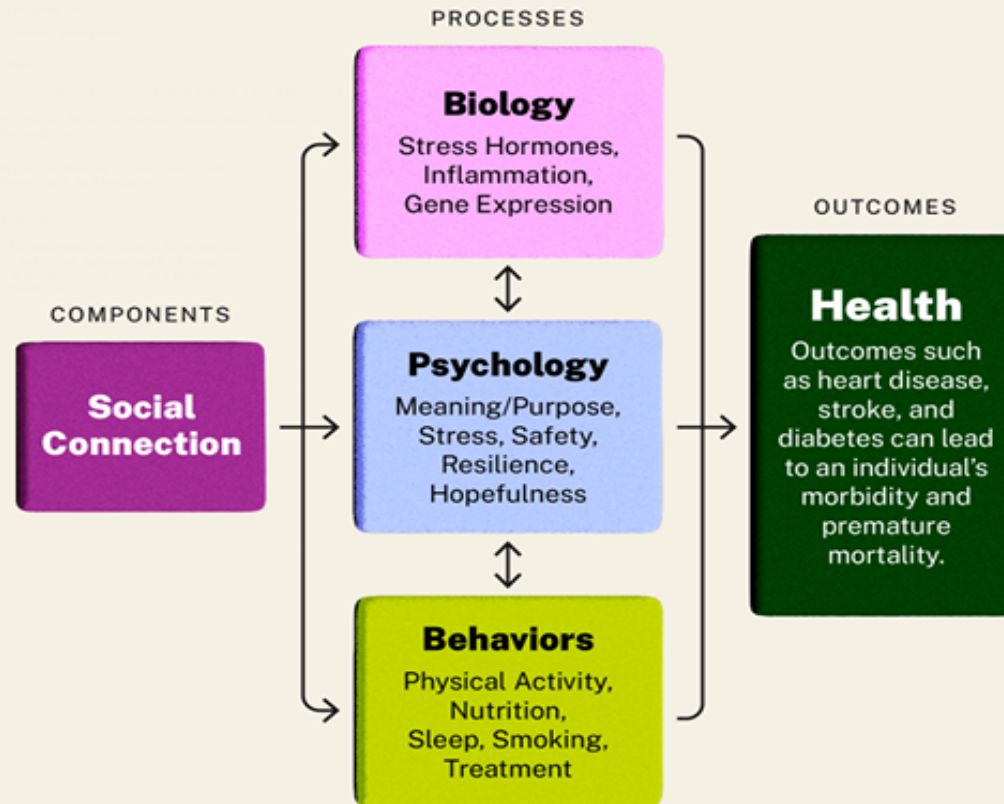
- Norms and values
- Public policies
- Tech environment and use
- Civic engagement
- Democratic norms
- Historical inequities



Office of the
U.S. Surgeon General

How Does Social Connection Influence Health?

Social connection influences health through **three principal pathways**: biology, psychology, and behavior.



Source: Holt-Lunstad J. The Major Health Implications of Social Connection. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2021;30(3):251-259.

Office of the
U.S. Surgeon General

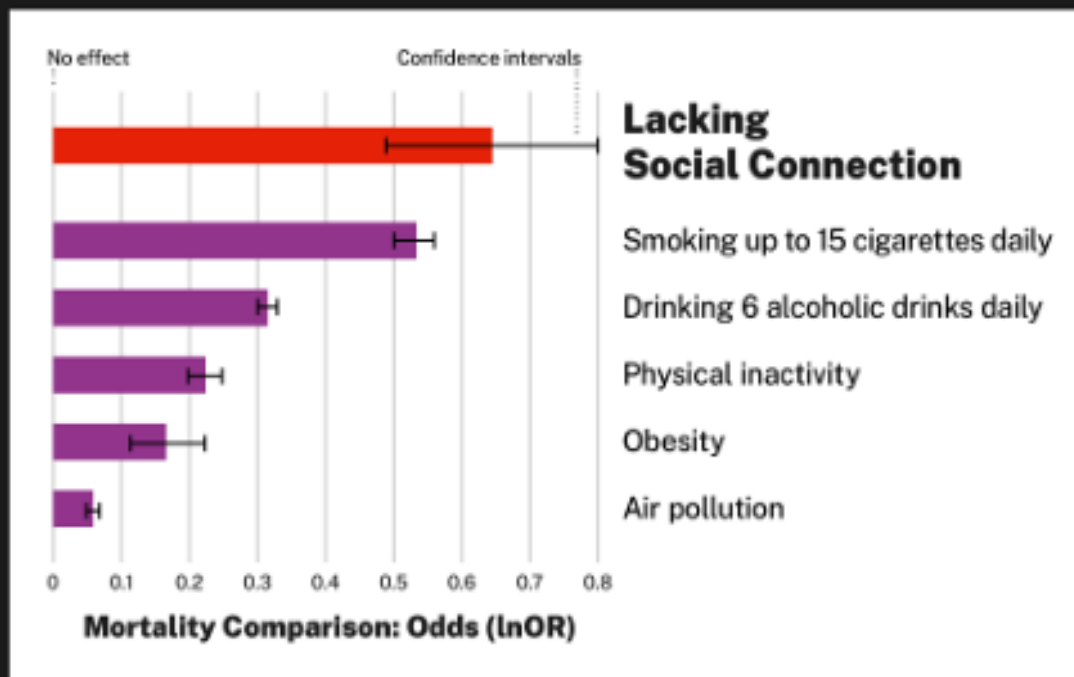
Social connection is vitally important for mental health AND physical health

Social Connection and Health

Having high-quality close relationships and feeling connected to the people in one's life are associated with decreased risk for all-cause morbidity and a wide range of diseases.

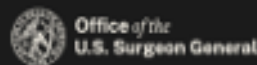


Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



Comparison groups: Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



What is Loneliness? Social Isolation?

Loneliness: *Perceived* social isolation, *a feeling* of not having the social contacts one would like.

Social isolation: *Lacking access* to friendships, communities, or other peer groups that offer support and connection.

Loneliness is Subjective

- Loneliness is not just about the number of friends someone has or how often they have social interactions.
- Some people may have a group of close friends and still feel lonely, whereas some may have few friends but not feel lonely.
- There are individual differences in need for social
- Young people who are lonely are more critical of themselves and others and more likely to expect rejection, which can cause them to avoid social situations, deepening their loneliness.

“Does your current group of friends create a sense of fulfillment and belonging?”

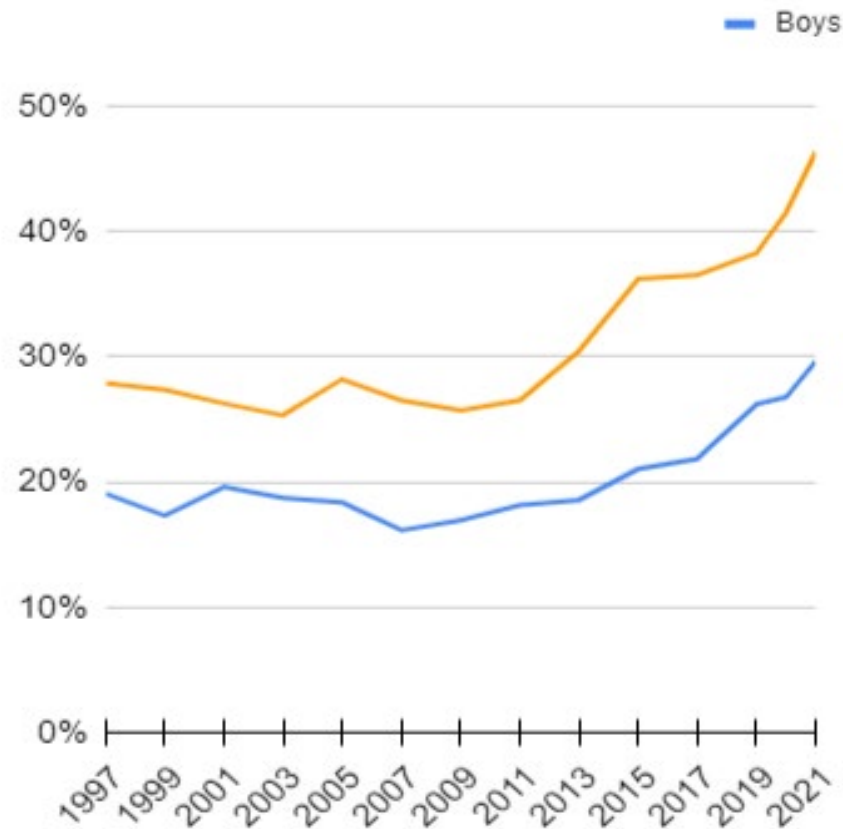
“Do you wish you had more trusted peers to confide in?”

Youth Loneliness

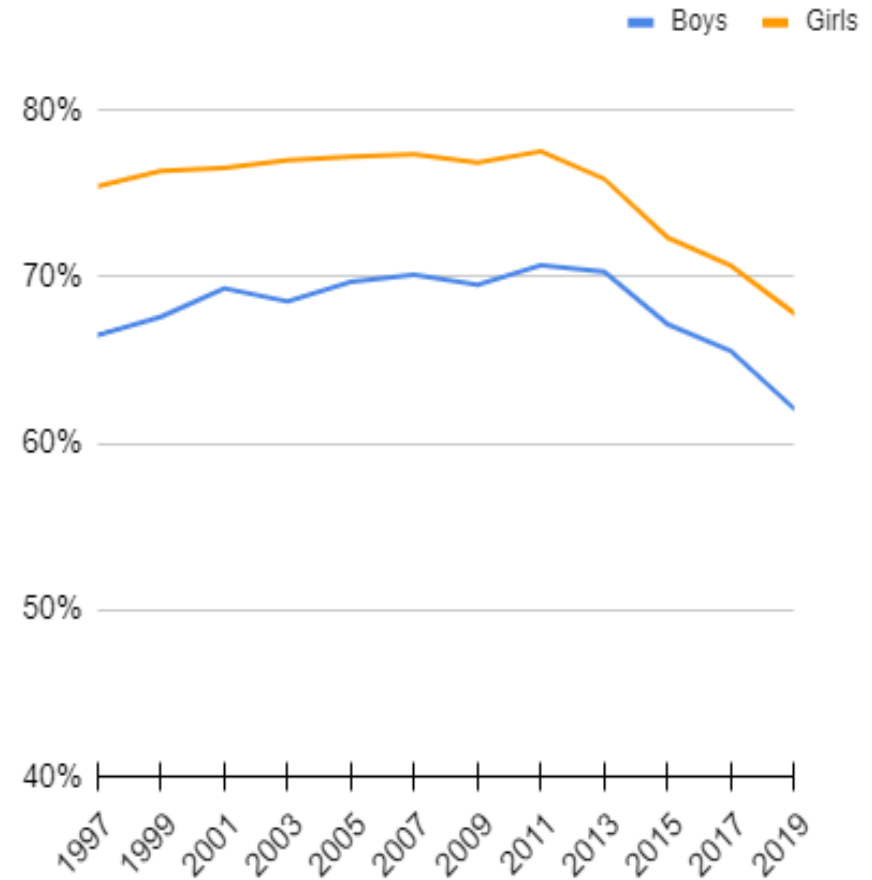
- Social connection is essential for healthy youth development
- Social experiences are how youth learn to make their way in the world, distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, learn from negative experiences and consequences
- Loneliness affects youth more intensely than adults
- Although reported loneliness is high across age groups, younger people report higher rates of loneliness than most adults
- Even though youth are surrounded by peers, they may be lonely: you don't have to be alone to feel lonely

Rising Rates of Loneliness and Social Isolation

A lot of times I feel lonely



I usually have a few friends around that I can get together with



Youth Loneliness and School Disconnection

Between **2012** and 2019:

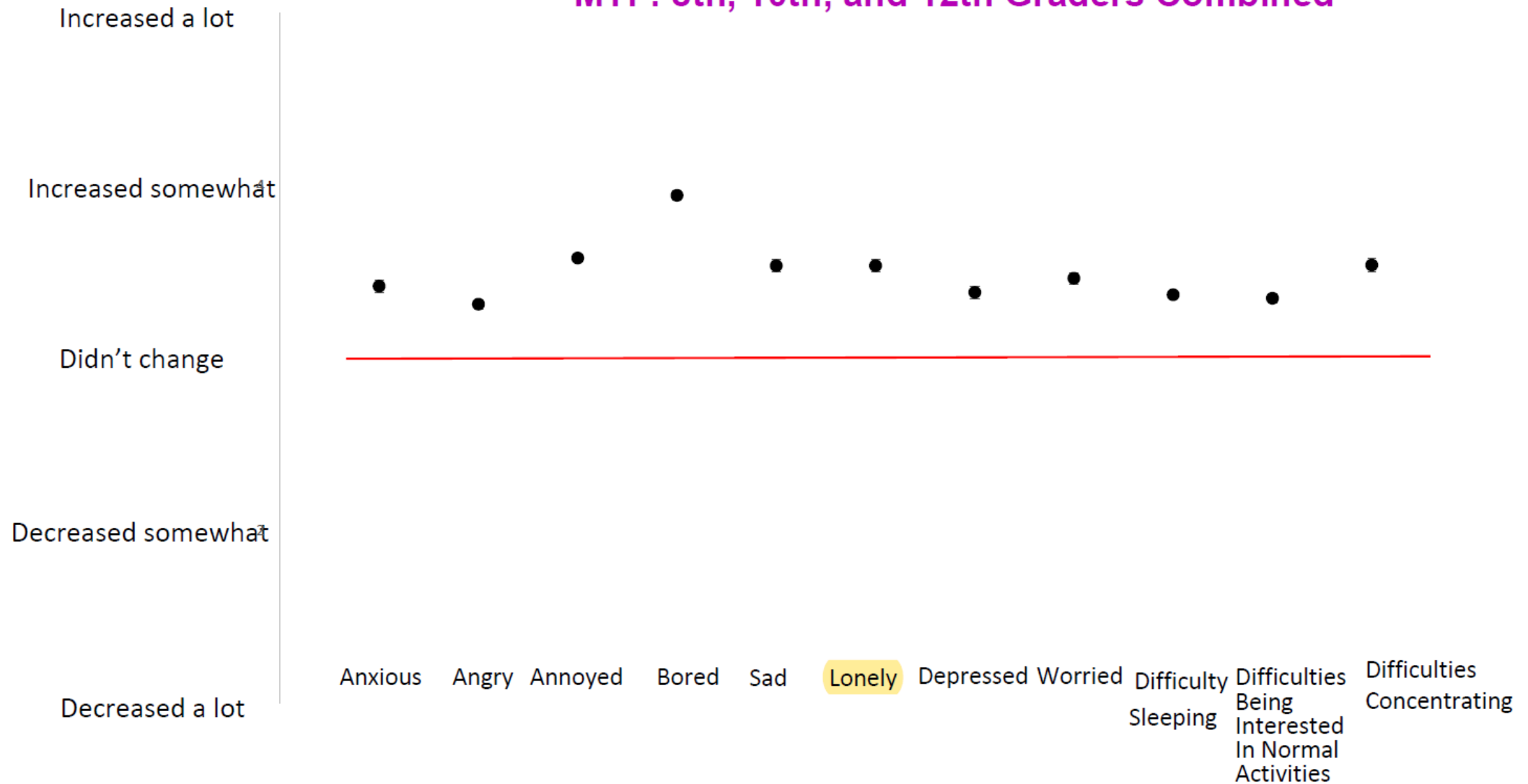
- **51% fewer youth said they visited with friends at least 1X/week**
 - The analysis shows that, over time, adolescents didn't necessarily develop fewer friendships, but the extent to which they engaged with them declined substantially and the amount of anxiety and loneliness they felt increased.
- **14% fewer youth reported enjoying school often or always, with a similar decline in adolescents finding school interesting.**

Impact of Covid-19 on Youth Loneliness

According to a Harvard study, during the pandemic, 18-25-year-olds were most likely to report feeling lonely (61% vs 24% of Americans ages 55-65).



Self-Reported Change in Mental Health Symptoms Since Pandemic MTF: 8th, 10th, and 12th Graders Combined





Risk Factors for Youth Loneliness/Isolation

Mental Health Challenges

National Emergency

The U.S. Surgeon General and key public health groups have declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health.



Social Disconnection

Youth facing mental health challenges often struggle to maintain social connections, amplifying feelings of loneliness.

Social Media

Loneliness and friendlessness surged in American teens starting in **2012**

This is when young people's social lives moved increasingly online

American teens now spend an average of **5 hours** a day on social-media platforms



Social Media and Smartphone Use

Excessive Use

Excessive use of social media and smartphones can lead to decreased in-person interactions.

Comparative Isolation

Constant exposure to idealized images on social media can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and inadequacy.



Internet vs. Real Life

Youth may prioritize online relationships over real-life connections, leading to social isolation.

Risk of Harassment

Harassment and bullying are common online and more likely to be endured alone.

Gaming

Computer Game Addiction and Loneliness in Children

[Hülya KÖK EREN](#)^{*} and [Özlem ÖRSAL](#)

Comparing the Social Skills of Students Addicted to Computer Games with Normal Students

[Eshrat Zamani](#), PhD,^{*} [Ali Kheradmand](#), MD,^{**} [Maliheh Cheshmi](#), MSc,^{***} [Ahmad Abedi](#), PhD,^{****} and [Nasim Hedayati](#), DDS^{*****}

Social Networking or Social Isolation? A Systematic Review on Socio-Relational Outcomes for Members of Online Gaming Communities

[Tushya](#)  , [Dinesh Chhabra](#), and [Betina Abraham](#) [View all authors and affiliations](#)

Lives Lived Online

- The percentage of teens ages 13-17 years who say they are online “almost constantly” has doubled since 2015.
- In one study, participants who reported using social media for more than two hours a day had about double the odds of reporting social isolation compared to those who used social media for less than 30 minutes per day.

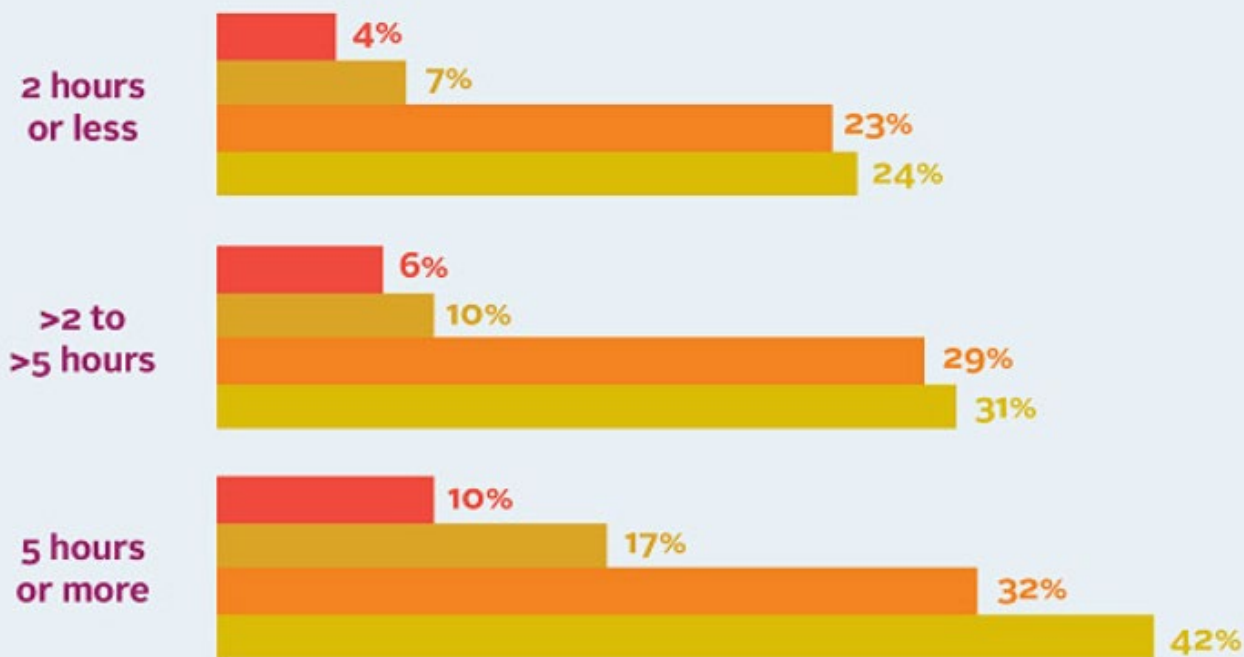
Time Spent Online vs. In Person

- Less attention to those around you
- Reduced conversation depth and quality
- Less practice reading body language, verbal cues
- Reduced attention span/increased boredom from face-to-face interactions
- Persistent sense of missing out
- Easier for conflicts/misunderstandings to escalate when interactions are not eye-to-eye
- Interactions are either more impulsive or more calculated than in person
- Reduced sense of belonging/mattering

Screen Time & Mental Health

Adolescent mental health problems by screen time use.

- Suicidal or self-harmed in the past year
- Experienced a lot of sadness yesterday
- Poor body image
- Poor/very poor mental health



Source: Gallup Familial Adolescent Health Survey, fielded in June-July of 2023. Results are weighted to be nationally representative.

Life Transitions

- Transitioning to new neighborhoods or schools or from living with family to living with peers or alone can disrupt important supportive connections, leading to increased loneliness.
- This can be true even when young people are surrounded by peers.



Photos provided by Pexels

Groups at Heightened Risk

Factors that increase risk of youth loneliness and isolation:

Poor physical
or mental
health

Ethnic and
racial minority
group

LGBTQ+
individuals

People living
with disabilities

Rural residents

Victims of
domestic
violence

Neurodivergent
individuals

Additional Risk Factors

Age

- According to the Surgeon General's report, "While the highest rates of social isolation are found among older adults, young adults are almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely than those over 65."

Financial insecurity

- For kids and adults, having less than one's peers can contribute to isolation and loneliness due to embarrassment or not having the means to socialize.

Protective Factors

Belongingness

- Family
- School
- Community

Evidence shows that something as simple as frequent family meals can aid in **child development, social emotional skills, and resilience** by offering a chance to create or enhance:

- Family cohesion
- Stability
- Connectedness
- Communication



Warning Signs and Effective Parent Interventions

Signs That a Child May Be Experiencing Loneliness

Younger children

- Creating imaginary friends
- Separation anxiety with parents or siblings
- Self-consciousness
- Excessively timid

Teens

- Spending a lot of time in their room
- Not hanging out with friends or mentioning friends
- Changes in social dynamics
- Talking negatively about themselves
- Poor self-image
- Mental health symptoms (e.g., losing passion for prior interests, anxiousness)

How Parents Can Help

Younger children

Reduce screen time

Help the child spend more time outside the home

Reach out to peers' parents

Facilitate play dates and activities

Facilitate multiple types of friend groups (school, neighborhood, summer camp, religious institution, extracurricular) – expands opportunities for social connections

Ask for help from school counselor/pediatrician

Teens

Reduce screen time

Communicate; Ask how to help

Empathize with their situation/don't minimize, be dismissive, blame, shame

Help them problem solve

Foster relationships with other adults

Facilitate multiple types of friend groups

Connect to a therapist to develop social skills

How Parents Can Help

- Understand why your child is lonely
 - Inadequate social skills – common among kids who are immature or have mental health, behavioral, or learning disorders
 - Kids with anxiety may feel overwhelmed in new social situations or big groups
 - Kids who are depressed often want to stay in their rooms and doubt others want to be with them
- Listen more than you talk – ask open-ended questions
- Help with emotional expression and naming and understanding others' emotions – help adjust misinterpretations of others' reactions or behaviors
- Empathize, validate, role play to improve social understanding and skills, reinforce small positive actions
 - Try to avoid judgment or overreacting with too much sympathy or emotion
- Practice with safe relatives (cousins, siblings)

Model Healthy In-Person Relationships

- Model staying in touch with friends, neighbors, extended family members, participating in community events.
- Talk about your own social relationships, discuss ways you connect to different people.
- Model asking for help or support from others.
- Model acceptance, conflict reduction, friendliness.
- Socialize in real life or by talking on the phone rather than via social media or texting – let children see and hear your interactions.



Promoting Connection in Schools and Communities

Strengthen School and Community Engagement

- Children who feel connected to their school and community are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically and socially.
- Strong connections equip children with invaluable life skills, foster a sense of belonging and purpose, and improve academics.



How to Develop School Connectedness

Advocate for schools to provide regular opportunities and spaces for students to develop social skills and strengthen relationships – both through recreational and learning activities.



Factors that Promote Social Engagement

- Adult mentorship
- Participation in safe and challenging activities
- Participating in team activities
- Participation in volunteering/civic engagement → sense of purpose, belonging, mattering

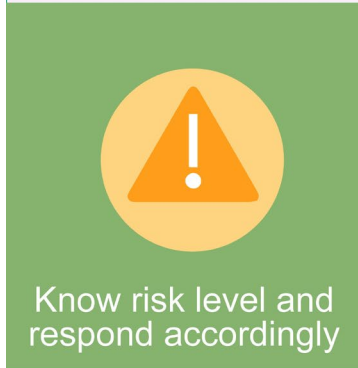
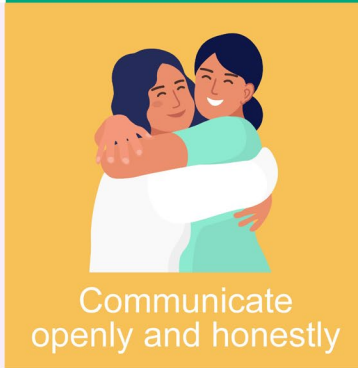
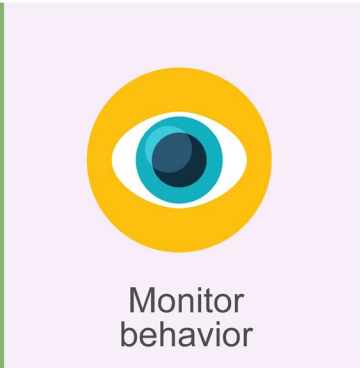
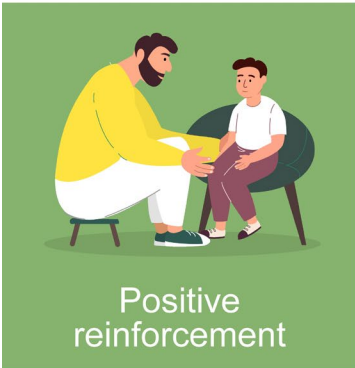
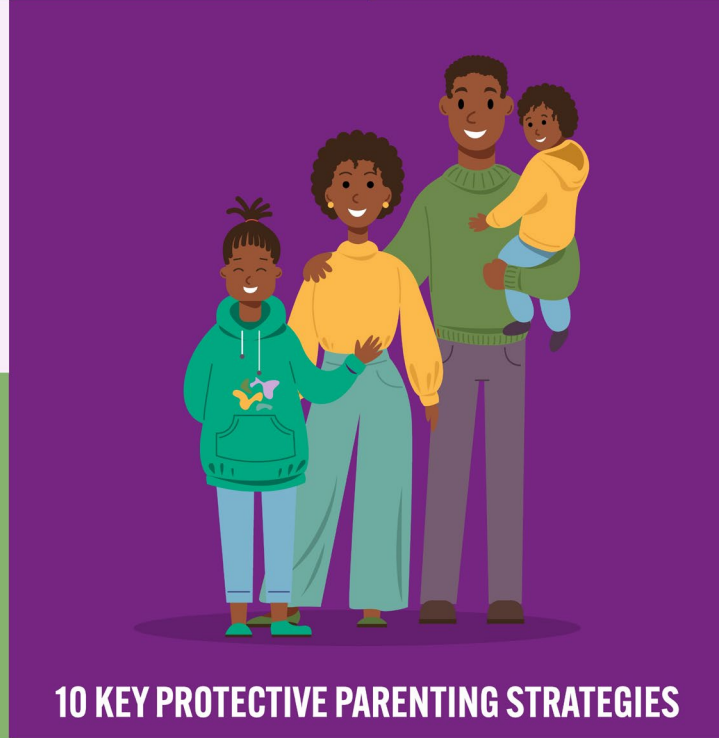
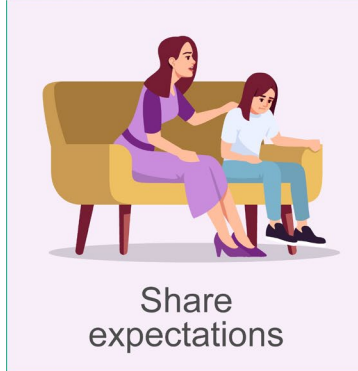
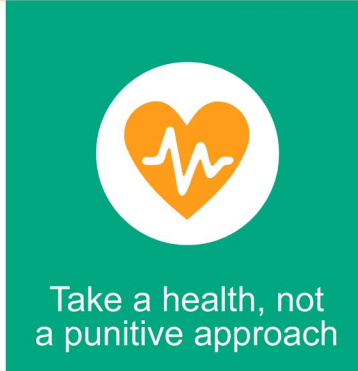
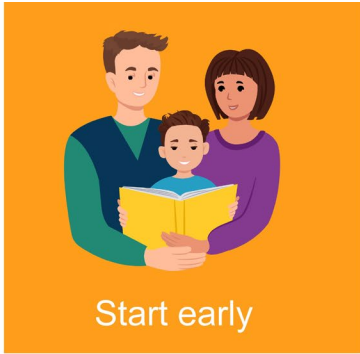




Partnership to End Addiction's Resources for Parents and Other Caregivers

10

KEY PROTECTIVE PARENTING STRATEGIES



Prevention & Early Action

Having Tough Conversations



Raising Resilient Kids



 Partnership
to End Addiction

PRESENTS:

Raising Resilient Kids
Webinar hosted by Elizabeth Vargas

October 29, 2021 at 1:00pm EST


FEATURING:



[Register now >](#)


**Partnership
to End Addiction**





**A Parent's
Guide to Raising
Resilient Kids**

**Partnership
to End Addiction**



**Tools for connection
and learning:**

Resilient Relationships is a **free** text messaging program that aims to empower parents and caregivers to raise healthy, substance-free kids through the foundation of a positive, nurturing relationship. It is part of our larger Help & Hope by Text program, which delivers personalized text messages and resources straight to your phone. Text **PARENT** to **55753** and answer a couple of questions to get started!

Playbooks for parents of tweens and teens



Playbook for Parents of Pre-Teens

Protecting your pre-teen's well-being and heading off problems



Playbook for Parents of Teens

Protecting your teenager's well-being and handling challenges they may face



Parents:

To learn more about risk factors, scan this QR code with your smartphone.



Common Sense Media – commonsense.org



Help students take ownership of their digital lives.

media balance
online privacy
digital footprint
communication cyberbullying
news & media literacy

All students need digital citizenship skills to participate fully in their communities and make smart choices online and in life. Our award-winning K-12 Digital Citizenship Curriculum:

- ✓ Addresses top concerns for schools.
- ✓ Prepares students with critical 21st-century skills.
- ✓ Supports educators with training and recognition.
- ✓ Engages the whole community through family outreach.

Child Mind Institute



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Donate

Family Resource Center

Find information to help you support children who are struggling with mental health, behavior or learning challenges.

Search for resources



Not sure where to start? Try our [Resource Finder](#)





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**for more information and
resources**



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