



Supporting children and young people with loneliness

As the majority of our school children are now at home, you may notice they seem increasingly lonely at times.

In this resource we look at what loneliness means and how it can affect children and young people; we also look at ways to help overcome loneliness.

People from any background can feel lonely at any time of their lives. We often associate it with the elderly, but children and young people can also become lonely and isolated.

Loneliness is not always visible, but there can be wide-ranging effects on both physical and mental health.



Loneliness in childhood



The Children's Society and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) worked

jointly to develop a set of questions to measure loneliness among children. The resulting briefing document explores how loneliness relates to children's subjective well-being and their material circumstances.

What does loneliness mean?

Most of us will feel lonely at some point in our life; it is normal to want contact and connections with other people. Loneliness is a very personal emotion which affects everyone differently and is not necessarily related to being alone. It is perfectly possible to be on your own and not feel lonely, and equally possible to be surrounded by people and feel very lonely.

'Alone can be many things, personally sometimes I like to be alone because it is very therapeutic, but some people don't like to be alone... Sometimes even, being alone makes you think ahead.'

Loneliness isn't new but the negative impact on health and wellbeing is increasingly being recognised, so much so that there is now a specific government strategy looking at the issue.

It defines loneliness as:

"A subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want."

How does loneliness affect young people?

A group of young people were asked 'What does loneliness mean to you?'

They answered:

"Being physically present but emotionally unreachable."

"Like I could disappear, and no-one would notice."

"Not being able to relate to others."

"Left out from the world."

Loneliness can affect every part of a child or young person's life.

Here are some examples of this:

- **Zack** is bright but is underachieving academically; the stress of feeling lonely is affecting his focus and concentration.
- **Summer** is becoming depressed and finds it hard to get motivated for anything.
- **Meghan** looks at social media and feels even more lonely when she sees other people sharing photos of fun times with friends and family.
- **Charity** feels socially isolated and is starting to develop symptoms of depression.
- **Josef** has low self-esteem; he is not very open to making new friendships as he doesn't think people will be interested in him.
- **Otto** has high levels of social anxiety and he rarely interacts with other people.

Loneliness increases the body's stress levels, which has an impact on how well we can function. Here are some examples of this.

- **Rory's** general wellbeing is poor and anxiety about being lonely makes him regularly feel sick.
- **Helena** is often tired; she doesn't sleep well and usually wakes in the night worrying about the following day.
- **Marco** doesn't eat well; sometimes he feels so worried that he doesn't eat at all, or he eats to make himself feel better.
- **Michael** drinks too much alcohol because it helps him to feel more confident and overcome his low self-esteem.

Longer-term effects of loneliness

The disadvantages young people face can put them on the side lines of their own childhood, leaving them feeling isolated and alone. Young people who are lonely have an increased risk of being exploited, developing unhealthy relationships and being subjected to online grooming.

Ryan feels like no-one understands him, so when an older woman starts talking to him online, complimenting him and promising gifts, Ryan is at risk of grooming and child sexual exploitation (CSE).

Zariah has been excluded by her group of friends and feels lonely. Some new friends invite her to a party and encourage her to take drugs. They say she is part of their group and ask her to deliver a package for them. Zariah is at risk of child criminal exploitation (CCE).

Blake has recently moved and isn't making friends at college. He is approached by a group of guys who make him feel cool and popular. They talk a lot about extreme political ideas and tell Blake he should think about some of their views. Blake is at risk of being radicalised.



Overcoming loneliness

How do you think you currently help young people to overcome feelings of loneliness?

The Children's Society's report 'Loneliness in Children' includes interviews with young people which remind us that loneliness is a complex matter, and like bullying, can be difficult for an adult to solve.

Here are some ideas that can make a difference to loneliness. Think about how they might help the young people with whom you work and how you could implement them.

- **Having someone to talk to**
An adult with an empathetic ear such as a parent, friend or school staff can prompt a friendly chat.
- **Strengthening family relationships**
Being able to spend quality time with family helps a child to have a sense of place within it.
- **Strong relationships**
Helping young people to develop peer relationships and friendships, especially if they might find this difficult for any reason (for example, being in care).
- **Positive adult role models**
Finding opportunities for children and young people to spend time with caring and inspiring adults is a good way to influence behaviour and attitude.
- **Spending time outside or with animals**
Both improve wellbeing which reduces the risk of loneliness.
- **Ensuring a good diet, staying hydrated and getting enough sleep**
Good physical health means that a young person is less likely to feel lonely.
- **Online support**
Online communities are a great way to reach out to others with similar interests, share experiences and ask advice.

Support and further information

These organisations provide support, advice and information about loneliness for young people, parents/ carers and school staff.

The Children's Society

A national charity working with the country's most vulnerable children and young people.

Mind

A charity providing advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Student Minds

The UK's student mental health charity.

