

SOCIAL BELONGING AND CONFIDENCE

Most of us remember how tough middle and high school could be in terms of your social life – and that was before what social media is today. As adults it can be hard to think back and remember that social acceptance or popularity is a genuine priority in children and adolescents' lives. When something matters to young people, the adults in their life need to take it seriously – especially when it has real impacts on their health the way socialization does.



WHY DOES YOUTH SOCIAL LIFE & CONFIDENCE MATTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH?

It's human nature to want to fit in and be accepted by our peers. As young people start to become aware of feelings of belonging, they typically seek it out in friends and social groups – a big part of developing a sense of identity outside of their family. Adolescent brains are hardwired to be focused on this social acceptance. Growing up is full of everyday challenges, and studies have found peer friendships to be particularly helpful in coping with stress.¹ By contrast, brain imaging studies have found that the same parts of the brain are activated by social rejection as by physical pain.²

Unfortunately, feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance isn't as easy as just finding some people to hang out with. Even if someone has a great friend group and healthy peer relationships, insecurity or low self-esteem can have them feeling on edge, fearful, or more likely to engage in unsafe behaviors.

WHY ARE YOUTH FEELING INSECURE AND DISCONNECTED FROM THEIR PEERS?

Even the most confident people have insecurities and overcoming self-doubt during adolescence is part of maturing into an adult. Young people are facing very real pressures from peers, parents, and society, on top of hormonal changes – all of which can set them up to feel bad about themselves.

Life is full of shifting social dynamics, most notably during adolescence. Kids and teens frequently have difficult social situations going on, whether it's a breakup, a fight with a friend, or being excluded by classmates. Even the kids and teens who seem to get along with everyone may struggle with not having a close friend group to turn to or feel like no one *truly* knows them. Feeling lonely or disconnected doesn't necessarily mean being alone – it's a subjective feeling of loneliness that can exist even when around others.

This generation of students has also had to cope with situations you didn't experience as an adolescent – the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual schooling. While it's true these youth are used to connecting with friends online, young people have been deeply impacted by social isolation. Just a few months into the pandemic in June 2020, a study found nearly 30% of high school youth didn't feel at all connected to teachers, classmates, or the school community.³

Low self-esteem and social isolation are major risk factors in developing a mental health condition, like depression.

If you think your child is struggling, take the Parent Test at MHAScreening.org to see if they're dealing with symptoms of emotional, attentional, or behavioral difficulties.



HELPING YOUTH BUILD CONFIDENCE

Be their cheerleader. Young people need a lot of validation and reassurance as they learn to feel secure in themselves. Name their successes, be excited for them (even if they roll their eyes in the moment), and keep letting them know that they matter to you.

Notice triggers. What causes the young person you care about to shut down or turn inwards? Is there a pattern or common factor you can identify when they struggle with insecurity? Finding the root of their feelings can guide you to a clearer starting point on how best to support them.

Guide them in establishing goals and strategies to achieve them. Feeling accomplished goes a long way in building self-confidence. Help them figure out what matters to them – what do they want to achieve? Support them in making an action plan and sticking to it.

FACILITATING CONNECTION AMONG YOUTH

FOR PARENTS:

Be mindful of your own self-talk.

Even if it doesn't always seem like it, kids listen and pick up on the negative ways their parents talk about their own bodies, intelligence, and self in general. If it would hurt you to know your child is thinking the same thing about themselves, don't say it in front of them (and work on it for yourself, too!).

Help set them up for social success.

You might feel helpless when it comes to their relationships with peers at school, but that's not the only place to meet people their age. Don't shame them for not having friends at school. Find other opportunities to connect them with peers – do you have coworkers with children their age? Are there neighborhood kids? What about local events, clubs, or classes?

Foster open communication.

Vulnerability begets vulnerability, so be open to sharing a bit about your feelings or struggles with them. Ask questions, be interested in their answers, and follow up with them so they know you genuinely care.

FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL:

Establish a classroom community.

Set expectations together – what values does this group have? What behavior is and isn't okay in the classroom? While it's the teacher's responsibility to ensure a conducive learning environment, valuing the input of students sets the tone that the class is a team and you're all here to support each other.

Help them meet people with similar interests.

Hear of a new book club starting up? Tell the student who you always catch reading at their desk. Have a few students who always turn in amazing art projects? See if they want to have a drawing meet-up during lunch one day.

IN CRISIS?

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting MHA to 741741.

SOURCES

- ¹ Scheuplein, M. & van Harmelen, A.L. (2022). The importance of friendships in reducing brain responses to stress in adolescents exposed to childhood adversity: a preregistered systematic review. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X22000124>
- ² Weir, K. (2012). The pain of social rejection. *Monitor on Psychology*, 43(4). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/04/rejection>
- ³ The Center for Promise. (2020). *The state of young people during COVID-19: Findings from a nationally representative survey of high school youth*. https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/YouthDuringCOVID_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf