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A brief guide to loneliness among young people and children at school:

Why it matters and what schools can do about it

Written by Dr Helen MacIntyre in collaboration with Professor Jennifer Lau and Dr Laura Riddleston (Wolfson Institute of Population Health, Queen Mary University of London) and Dr Lily Verity and Professor Pamela Qualter (Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester)

April 2025



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Introduction

This guide is based on research evidence. It is intended to support staff in primary and secondary schools to:

- Better understand loneliness among their children and young people
- To think about whether there is a need to address loneliness in their school, and if so, how this can be done.

We include some relevant resources in the text and an additional resource list at the end of the document.

Please [click to give feedback on the guide](#), share your own resources, or if you are interested in being in touch with our research team about tackling loneliness in schools.



About **loneliness** among young people

What is loneliness?

Regardless of age, loneliness comes about when we are unhappy with the quality or quantity of our relationships. This dissatisfaction is accompanied by negative emotions such as sadness, anger, emptiness, frustration and hopelessness. Children and young people associate loneliness with feeling left out or excluded, and with feeling different from others. As they get older some young people also describe feeling alone in the universe.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Time alone can be restorative. And you can feel lonely in a crowd – even a friendly crowd - which may be a particular feature of loneliness at school where children and young people spend so much time surrounded by others.

For most of us loneliness is short-lived. It usually serves the useful function of motivating us to reconnect with others and to strengthen the relationships that are so important for our mental health and wellbeing. But some of us can find it difficult to overcome and become trapped in loneliness which can become frequent, prolonged or intense.

By taking the time to understand how young people experience loneliness we can figure out what changes to the environment, skills and strategies are needed to help them overcome it.

The scale of the issue for young people

Feeling lonely can be a normal part of growing up and part of learning about different social situations and experiences. But it is concerning that young people are currently more likely than other age groups to report the kind of frequent and persistent loneliness that is associated with a range of negative outcomes.

Even before Covid-19,

11% of 10 to 15-year-olds reported feeling lonely often or always - that is three in a class of 30.

And in 2022,

16% of UK 15-year-olds

agreed or strongly agreed that they felt lonely at school specifically.

Among primary age children, loneliness levels are likely to be closer to adult levels of

about 6%.

Together, these statistics equate to

Thousands of children

and young people in UK primary and secondary schools.

Why does it matter?

More severe loneliness in young people can have significant negative impacts including:

- **More negative attitudes to school.**
- **Lower educational attainment.** There is evidence that the impact of loneliness on attainment can last for years, even for young people who are no longer lonely. This may be because struggles with schoolwork that can result from being lonely mean that a child falls behind and never catches up.
- **Poorer mental health.** Higher loneliness in childhood and adolescence predicts later adolescent anxiety (particularly social anxiety), depression and self harm. It can be part of the experience of children and young people with ADHD and other social and behavioural difficulties.
- **Worse physical health and health-damaging behaviours.** Higher loneliness predicts poor sleep, poorer reported general health, and more physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches and back aches. It has been linked to alcohol consumption, smoking, reduced physical activity, over-eating and unprotected sex.

These factors can combine with loneliness to create negative cycles that keep repeating:

- Mental health problems can lead to withdrawal from social situations and disrupt relationships, compounding loneliness with further negative effects on mental health.
- Pressure and challenges of schoolwork can undermine capacity to address loneliness which, in turn, reduces capacity to manage workload.

Which young people are most at risk?

- Although loneliness can affect anyone, some groups of children and young people are more likely to be lonely than others. They include:
- **Teenagers, because they** will be increasingly focused on peer relationships, exploring their identity and may be struggling to work out where and how they fit in. All this happens at a time when their relational skills are still developing.
- Those from **lower socio-economic backgrounds** who have fewer resources to access social opportunities.

The UNITE project (a collaborative project between researchers at Queen Mary and King's College London, is currently working to fully understand the pathways to loneliness in young people from socio-economically marginalised backgrounds.

- Those from **marginalised groups:** ethnic groups, sexual and gender minorities, those with mental ill-health, physical disabilities, and alternative identities are all more likely to report loneliness. These groups are more likely to experience discrimination, which is a significant risk factor for loneliness.
- Those who face **challenging life experiences or home circumstances**, for example younger carers or bereaved children and young people.

Since these groups will overlap, some students will face multiple risk factors for loneliness.

Creating less lonely schools

Schools make a difference to how lonely their students feel.

Schools can also lessen the negative impacts of severe loneliness. And since social environments play a big part in predisposing to and perpetuating loneliness, the strongest response will be to consider whether action is needed for the whole school and whole classes, as well as for individuals who are facing particular challenges.

We fully recognise that schools are under great pressure and that spending on new resources to address loneliness may not be possible. But where schools do decide to work on this issue, many helpful changes can be achieved by adjusting everyday education practice and environments so that they take account of what we know about loneliness.

- To make progress both in preventing children and young people from becoming severely lonely, and helping them when they do, we suggest that – over time – a ‘belonging check’ is applied to every aspect of school life.
- We intend suggestions for action below to be selected, adapted, and added to so that they work for your school and your students.
- A strong recommendation is that children and young people are involved in decisions about what should and shouldn’t be changed to make sure that action is effective. Care should be taken that diverse views and experiences are represented in such a process.



Possible areas for a 'belonging check' at the school organisational level

Do you know how many young people are feeling lonely in your school?

If you feel it is appropriate, you may want to monitor levels of loneliness among children or young people in your school, perhaps as part of an existing wellbeing survey. Understanding the scale of loneliness will show if lonely young people are being overlooked by staff and so if there is a need for more thought about how to find and support them.

[Brief-Guide-to-measuring-Loneliness-Feb2019.pdf](#) includes measures used by the Office for National Statistics and Children's Society with 10- to 15-year-olds and will allow comparison with their data for this age group

» [Information and updates about a new Youth Loneliness Measure](#) being developed and validated with children and young people by researchers at Queen Mary University of London and the University of Manchester.





Do school environments feel safe and comfortable for children?

Different places in a school – classrooms, corridors, halls, toilets, lunchrooms, playgrounds - vary according to how lonely they are for students. And some places may be lonelier for particular groups, for example those with mental health issues or with a broader set of social and behavioural issues. Understanding how children experience places can inform action to make them welcoming, safe, comfortable, socially supportive environments and so remove barriers to participation and to a sense of school belonging.

[University of Glasgow SOCITS Webinar Using participatory systems workshops in school](#) shows one approach to exploring young peoples' feelings about different school environments.



Are relevant policies informed by our understanding of loneliness and are they applied to minimise loneliness? For example:

- **Equality, diversity and inclusion policies** need to be effective in addressing factors which lead to social exclusion. They should promote understanding and acceptance of difference, and address challenges faced by children and young people from marginalised groups. They need to address discrimination by staff or students which can fuel negative interactions, bullying or feelings of difference from the majority.

- **Anti-bullying policies** need to work since bullying is linked to loneliness in childhood and adolescence, sometimes long after the victimisation itself has stopped. In addition, some children are bullied because they are seen as lonely.



Do staff need training to equip them to address loneliness among children and young people?

If so, training will need to include a focus on loneliness stigma which causes shame and can prevent young people from talking about their experiences and from seeking help.

Related is the fact that using the language of loneliness may make some children and young people feel worse. In some work with young people, it may be better to emphasise our need for connection and school belonging.

[Training on loneliness | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)



Possible areas for a **‘belonging check’** at the interpersonal and individual levels

Do children and young people understand loneliness, its damaging effects, and the importance of good social connections and support?

Explicit, sensitive teaching about loneliness and social connection will be necessary for helping children to understand their own experiences as well as for encouraging them to play a role in creating an inclusive, supportive social environment.

» **Loneliness: Finding our connections to feel less lonely** – from the Mental Health Foundation and Anna Freud Centre - school pack which includes lesson and assembly plans covering key dimensions of youth loneliness





Are children and young people equipped to address the negative thoughts that accompany loneliness?

- Negative or distorted thinking can lead someone who is lonely to avoid the very social interactions that may be needed to overcome loneliness. Approaches to address this thinking include

Building self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy including in relation to social interactions. One possibility is to provide socially supportive companions through a buddying system or activity group.

Changing biased perceptions of social threat. Loneliness can lead us to expect rejection and hostility from others and to evaluate our social performance negatively. Encouraging more positive interpretations of social situations may help.

[This academic paper](#) reports on development of a training task to address such bias, although in a slightly older age group.

- **Encouraging balanced attributions for social exclusion.** This involves challenging the tendency of lonely young people to blame themselves and their character for times when they are socially excluded; and to explain times when they are socially included as the result of external factors such as the actions of other people.
- **Encouraging use of helpful emotion management strategies** to avoid the damaging effects of negative emotions that accompany loneliness on health and functioning. This might include teaching young people to reframe situations in

a positive way instead of suppressing feelings or ruminating on problems.

[The Fit to Belong Handbook \(fit2belong.eu\)](https://fit2belong.eu) includes sessions for work on loneliness designed with young people and a framework for designing new session

[PATHS® Childhood Development Programme for Schools](#) is a paid for programme that supports social and emotional skills





Do children and young people need more opportunities to interact with other people? And support to improve and practice social skills?

Alongside work to address self-defeating thoughts, formal or informal teaching of social skills may be needed for children and young people to develop positive relationships. Schools also need to consider if there are enough social opportunities for practising and developing these skills and building relationships, especially since opportunities for socialising outside school have been diminishing. Even difficult social situations can be important opportunities for social learning.

- **In classrooms**, teaching and classroom organisation that encourages cooperation and collaboration between students may be helpful since loneliness is associated with perceptions that these are lacking.

[Promoting Effective Group Work in the Primary Classroom – A handbook for teachers and practitioners](#)

- **Playgrounds and lunchrooms are key contexts for social learning. It will be important to think about whether:**
 - » Playgrounds offer engaging environments where children and young people have time and varied possibilities for play, to develop interests, and to take part in rich interactions with those who share them.
 - » Eating times allow time for free conversation with peers.

- » Children feel safe and can access support from adults or peers when they need to.

- **Activity clubs or free choice activity sessions** after school or during the school day can also be valuable times for following and developing interests and for developing relationships with peers.



Do children and young people need support to use social media and digital environments in healthy instead of unhealthy ways?

Social media usage and digital environments can foster social connection, provide sources of support, encourage the development of interests, and so on. On the other hand, it can become addictive, be a context for unhelpful social comparisons and cyberbullying, or, in other ways, act as a barrier to authentic, positive relationships. Children and young people need education and support to understand these differences and how they can create a healthy balance between their online and offline lives.

[Social Media Resource Pack](#)
[\(tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk\)](http://tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk)



Are school staff supportive in ways that minimise loneliness – and are they supported to be supportive?

Young people are less lonely – and more likely to seek help for loneliness - in schools and classrooms where staff are supportive and encouraging, are seen as interested in their teaching and in students' learning, support cooperation and the development of good relationships between students, and provide a positive disciplinary climate. As such, they have a key role to play in creating less lonely environments and should receive the necessary support and encouragement to do so.



Is there access to specialised, tailored support for individuals facing particular challenges?

While creating a less lonely school will be crucial, individuals may face varied and complex reasons for severe loneliness. There will also need to be effective support which is responsive to individual needs, helping to identify causes of a young person's loneliness and strategies to address both loneliness and its negative impacts. This could come from a teacher, learning mentor, counsellor, youth worker or other support staff who has the time to work with a student. And it may be useful to provide young people with a list of loneliness-trained staff who they can reach out to for support if they need it. More broadly, school support for mental health should also be informed by what we know about loneliness.

[Why Loneliness Matters in Clinical Practice: A Primer for Clinical- and Neuro-Psychologists. This may be of interest to school counsellors](#)

[Apart of Me – An online app helping children, young people, and parents cope with loss and trauma.](#)





Longer resource list

Useful accessible summaries of research on loneliness in schools and what can be done to address it

- Jefferson, R., Barreto, M., Qualter, P. & Verity, L. (2021) Are we doing enough to address loneliness? Fit to Belong (Erasmus+). [Are we doing enough to address loneliness in adolescence .pdf \(fit2belong.eu\)](#)
- Jefferson, R., Barreto, M., Verity, L., & Qualter, P. (2023). Loneliness During the School Years: How It Affects Learning and How Schools Can Help*. Journal of School Health, 93(5), 428–435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13306>

School programmes

- [PATHS® Childhood Development Programme for Schools \(pathseducation.co.uk\)](#) is a paid for programme that supports social and emotional skills.
- [Whole-school programmes: Mentally Healthy Schools](#). A set of programmes listed by the Anna Freud Centre which address issues that are associated with loneliness including mental health and bullying.
- [Only7Seconds®](#) A US organisation focused on tackling loneliness among young people. Includes information about their approach and resources, including videos from young people who have experienced loneliness.
- [Eenzaamheid op school - Join Us \(join-us.nu\)](#) JoinUs is a Dutch programme for tackling loneliness among young people. Useful for reading about their approach and includes advice for schools although in the Netherlands context. Translate the webpage to read. An overview of their work can also be found here.

Classroom and assembly resources

- [Loneliness: Finding our connections to feel less lonely](#) – from the Mental Health Foundation and Anna Freud Centre - school pack which includes lesson and assembly plans covering key dimensions of youth loneliness.
- [The Fit to Belong Handbook \(fit2belong.eu\)](#) includes sessions for work on loneliness designed with young people and a framework for designing new session
- [Rise – Films and Downloads – Make Some Noise \(make-some-noise.com\)](#) Lesson plans aimed at Years 6 & 7 including a focus on transition to secondary school [But lacking focus on dealing with negative emotions which accompany loneliness]
- [Lonely Not Alone - Partner Resources](#) - See the Youth Work pack. This includes plans for discussing loneliness with young people.
- [Marmalade Trust Education Resources and plans for assemblies and lessons](#) – including resources for thinking about loneliness at Christmas.
- [Promoting Effective Group Work in the Primary Classroom | A handbook for teachers and practitioners](#) A resource to help staff to develop effective collaborative work in their classrooms.
- Riddleston, L., Bangura, E., Gibson, O., Qualter, P., & Lau, J. Y. F. (2023) Developing an interpretation bias modification training task for alleviating loneliness in young people. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 168, 104380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2023.104380>

Additional advice and resources from UK Youth and others, aimed at young people as well as those working with young people

- [Our Resources - Tackling Youth Loneliness](#)
- [Social Media Resource Pack \(tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk\) Loneliness-Pack-Care-Leavers.pdf \(tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk\)](#)
- [How To Cope With Loneliness | Mental Health Advice | YoungMinds](#)
- [15 things to do if you're feeling lonely | Mental Health Foundation](#)

Training materials for adults

- [Training on Loneliness | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)
- Note that the resource pack from the Mental Health Foundation and Anna Freud Centre [Loneliness: Finding our connections to feel less lonely – school pack | Mental Health Foundation](#) includes a guide on loneliness among teachers and school staff.

Loneliness measures and methods for exploring young people's experiences of school environments

- [Brief-Guide-to-measuring-Loneliness-Feb2019.pdf](#) includes measures used by the Office for National Statistics with 10- to 15-year-olds and will allow comparison with their data for this age group
- [Information and updates about new Youth Loneliness Measure](#) being developed and validated with children and young people
- [University of Glasgow SOCITS Webinar Using participatory systems workshops in school](#) shows one approach to exploring young people's feelings about different school environments.

Organisations/services outside of school supporting young people to address loneliness and strengthen social connection

- [Childline | Childline and Building Connections | Support service for young people | NSPCC Learning](#)
- [Virtual Buddying befriending service - Sense](#)
- [Whizz Kidz | Children's Wheelchair Charity | Whizz Kidz \(whizz-kidz.org.uk\)](#)
- [UK Youth Network](#) UK Youth's website includes information about local organisations that work with young people.

Search the internet for local social prescribing services that support young people to access help to build social health, or to address other issues which are barriers to social connection.

Two local examples are:

- [Mind the Gap: Community Support \(age 11+\) — Brighton and Hove Wellbeing Service](#)
- [Cumbria LINK - Young People's Social Prescribing Service | Barnardo's \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)



Thank you for taking the time to read this guide and for giving thought to the issue of loneliness among children and young people at school. We hope you found the information useful.

A reminder that you can use [this online form to give feedback or suggestions](#). We are interested in being in touch with schools working on loneliness.

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This guide was funded through a research grant from the ESRC [Grant reference ES/T00004X/2].

We gratefully acknowledge their support.