

It starts with

hello

A report looking into the impact
of loneliness in children, young
people and families.


HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

IS WORKING WITH

**JO COX
LONELINESS**
start a conversation





“You feel isolated
and have no one
to talk to about
the situation
you’re in.” Mia

Forewords 02

Rachel Reeves MP and
Seema Kennedy MP

Sir Tony Hawkhead,
Chief Executive of
Action for Children

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Foreword from

Rachel Reeves MP and Seema Kennedy MP

It's clear that loneliness affects children, young people and families in the UK. In the past loneliness was sometimes seen as a problem for older people, but the voices in this report reveal the painful impact of loneliness on our younger generation.

Many children, teenagers, young people and parents experience loneliness in different ways. As mums of young children ourselves we felt lonely at times, as we adapted to a new way of life.

But there are some that are particularly at risk: young carers who often feel isolated from their peers, children in care who have moved away from their family networks and young parents who sometimes feel they don't fit in with either their friends or older parents.

Feeling lonely for long periods can cause serious problems, and there are links between young people's experience of loneliness and poor mental and physical health. Our friend Jo Cox recognised the need to start a national conversation on loneliness. And in Jo's own words, "Young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate."

Here Action for Children puts the spotlight on the problems children, young people and families face, highlighting some of the solutions but also where more research and support is needed if we are to make a lasting difference to the next generation and reconnect with one another.

02

Foreword from

Sir Tony Hawkhead, Chief Executive of Action for Children

Action for Children is proud to be the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness' partner for children and families. We work with over 370,000 children, young people, parents and carers across the UK, and we know how loneliness can impact on lives – from a toddler who seldom meets people because of her mother's anxiety, to young carers with no time to make friends with people their own age.

Children, young people and their families come to our services across the UK in part because we work with them to combat loneliness – through parent support groups, nurseries, networks for young carers, and for those in care. This report aims to make their voices heard. But no-one can tackle this issue alone.

For a problem of this size we need a collective effort. The stories and research from Mumsnet, Barnardo's, The Children's Society, Homestart, NSPCC and YoungMinds, amongst many others, have contributed to this report which seeks to break the silence on loneliness amongst our children and families.

But this is only the first step. We now need to raise the volume on this issue and ensure much-needed research, funding and support is put in place. And whilst part of the solution lies with funders and policy makers, there is a role for each and every one of us in addressing loneliness in our communities.



1. Executive summary

The impact of isolation and loneliness is often viewed through the prism of old age. This report clearly shows that that is not the whole story, showing the impact of loneliness on children, young people and families.

The consequences of long-term loneliness are now widely recognised. In young people, there are clear correlations between loneliness and poor mental and physical health, and between loneliness and lower academic attainment.¹ The personal consequences of loneliness are powerfully voiced in the stories of young people and parents throughout this report.

“So many people in this world, yet no one will listen or understand.” Joe²

Loneliness can be experienced at any age:

- ➔ **Research with pre-school children found that more than one-in-ten say they are lonely and unhappy with their social relationships.³**
- ➔ **One-in-five children aged seven to 12 say they are lonely sometimes or often.⁴**
- ➔ **Four-out-of-five adolescents report feelings of loneliness at some time, and almost a third describe these feelings as persistent and painful.⁵**
- ➔ **In a survey on student mental health, loneliness was ranked as the fifth most important out of ten ‘grand challenges’ faced by university students in the UK.⁶**
- ➔ **Action for Children’s recent poll of over 2000 parents found that more than half had experienced a problem with loneliness, with a fifth feeling lonely in the last week.⁷**

Certain children, young people and families may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness. This report looks at the experience of those most at risk, including children who experience neglect, young people in care, disabled children, young parents and parents with mental health problems.

We also explore how modern communication and social media can be both the cause and cure of loneliness. Nearly half of 11-16 year olds find it easier to be themselves online than face-to-face⁸ and three-in-five said they would be lonely if they couldn’t talk to friends via technology.⁹ And yet in a recent survey 4% of 11-25 year olds said they had been bullied on line in the last month.¹⁰

Finally we look at what support can be put in place for those experiencing loneliness – from what we can do as individuals to how central and local government can ensure the right services are in place in the future.

2. What is loneliness?

Loneliness can affect children, young people and parents as much as older people. But what is it?

“A subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.” The Campaign to End Loneliness

For a lonely child, it is much simpler. Young children, when asked, may say they are “bored”, or that they have “nothing to do.” Older children sometimes don’t speak at all, not trusting anyone to understand them. Disabled children can lack friends despite their families’ best efforts. Parents can struggle to adapt to a new routine and feel isolated and alone.

The feeling of loneliness can be a painful but normal reaction to an uncomfortable situation. However, when it occurs often or lasts for a considerable time, it can become a chronic state¹¹. This can then have significant long-term impacts on a person’s mental and physical health. Its effects are as detrimental to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹²

Chronic loneliness can begin in childhood, when the need for a close and intimate relationship is rooted in early parent-child attachment.¹³ The key factors are closeness, consistency, openness, trust and a sense of belonging – factors which Arainn’s story lacked when he was growing up.

Arainn’s story

When we feel we do not fit in it is very easy to feel a lack of belonging or being wanted. For me, this state of being goes back a long time.

I had a difficult childhood – my parents’ relationship was not good, and I was bullied at home and at school. I ate to make myself feel better and was quite a recluse. I never went out, like a lot of kids my age would after school, due to anxiety and bouts of depression.

I felt closed off, resigned to being quiet and not engaging socially out of fear, only furthering the sense of loneliness I felt. I fell into a vicious cycle, feeling alone and set apart from my peers.

When I was 14 I moved in with my grandmother, which instantly made me feel safer. We cared for each other while I studied for exams, and I stayed with her until my early twenties. She died when I was 21.

I moved into a bed and breakfast for homeless people, and the sense of isolation started up again. The man living next door to me was being threatened by another resident, and I stopped leaving my room unless I was sure no one else was around. It was six dreary long weeks before supported accommodation became available, and I started to get to know the people at Action for Children.

Finally, I was able to speak about my emotional wellbeing. When I was feeling down there was always someone there. All through my childhood I had no one to talk to and this made it hard to cope. Knowing that there is someone there for you is such a massive help.

I still suffer with anxiety and when it flares up I do get low moods. But I think I’ve got a real handle on my issues and that’s thanks to the support I received.





3. The impact of loneliness

Arainn's story reveals the impact of loneliness. Through a person's life, long term loneliness can lead to stress, anxiety, paranoia, depression, coronary heart disease, substance misuse, eating issues, sleep disturbance, and cognitive deterioration.^{14/15} In young people, there are clear correlations between loneliness and poor mental and physical health, and between loneliness and lower academic attainment.¹⁶

Loneliness also affects a child's emotions, the way they understand and respond to others, and how well they cope with events which are beyond their control.¹⁷

"Loneliness feels like not being able to get along with others. missing out on things around you because you are different to them." Leanne

The Children Society's research found that children who say they do not have any friends have low levels of wellbeing, with over half reporting low life satisfaction and low happiness. That compares to less than a fifth of children with friends reporting similar concerns.¹⁸

Mothers' and fathers' loneliness has been shown to have negative effects on children, impacting on their social competence, motivation to learn, and academic skills. If a child is raised in a socially isolated family, the risk of the child becoming chronically lonely increases.¹⁹

"...the poster who said about people who don't have the social skills to make small talk, that's me!! I have no idea how to socialise, I never got the chance as a child and had a solitary teen/early adulthood; and get very anxious in crowds and talking to strangers and my way of dealing with my anxiety is to go quiet and introvert." Mumsnet User 2017

4. Loneliness throughout life

Though most people in the UK believe loneliness is more of a problem for older people, in reality the issue spans all ages.²⁰ It is a problem that can begin in childhood. Children and adolescents learn how to engage with others by observing their immediate family. This socialisation becomes the model for the way in which they form connections and behave in future relationships.²¹ If this doesn't happen, they can have problems with loneliness and attachment throughout life.

There is a lack of data on the scale of loneliness in people under 50, and this is something that needs to be addressed.²² However, there are many studies that show the devastating impact loneliness can have on children, young people and families.

4.1 Infancy and early childhood

It was once thought that young children did not experience loneliness, possibly because they use different words to describe it: 'I don't have anything to do', 'I'm sad' or 'I'm bored'. However, it is now generally accepted that children from around the age of five are capable of identifying feelings of loneliness.²³ Research with pre-school children found that more than one-in-ten say they are lonely and unhappy with their social relationships.²⁴

Pre-school and primary school age children want to be part of the group. Those who are left out say they have no one to play with, and that this makes them feel sad. All children notice loneliness in others, and can differentiate between shy and unsociable children. Although they express more sympathy for the former, they are clear that they like socially competent children more than the unsociable ones, including those who are shy.²⁵

4.2 Middle childhood

"I felt lonely when my friend started acting like I was invisible. :(" FIRST NEWS reader

One-in-five children aged seven to 12 say they are lonely sometimes or often.²⁶ The Children's Society's research with children aged eight to 15 found that 'seeing friends' made the biggest difference in how they connected to others. Children who 'never or hardly ever' saw their friends had significantly lower wellbeing than those who saw their friends 'most days or every day'.²⁷

Primary school age children are able to identify, understand and articulate their feelings of loneliness.²⁸ For example, when asked as part of a game to think about what it feels like to be lonely, they recognise the importance of being loved and the pain of being excluded from the shared world of others. This exclusion creates a space between themselves and the people they want to be with, and it is the space between that comprises their loneliness.²⁹

"You feel isolated and have no one to talk to about the situation you're in." Mia

Lonely children of this age say they do not like school, and may try to avoid going. They tend not to participate in class or get involved in extra-curricular activities. They spend most of their free time at school on their own. Because they are withdrawn or reserved, and cause no real trouble, teachers can fail to spot their distress.³⁰ Children who are persistently lonely come to believe they cannot connect with others.³¹

4.3 Adolescence

"It feels like you're the one nobody wants to speak to, you feel like you're not worth anybody's time" Pete





Data from a number of studies suggests levels of loneliness peak during adolescence, with up to four-out-of-five young people reporting feelings of loneliness at some time, and almost a third describing these feelings as persistent and painful.³²

During adolescence, a young person's social relationships shift, with their focal point moving from families to their peer group. It's also the period during which children experience major physical and emotional changes. They go through puberty, have increased self-consciousness and pressure to conform.^{33/34}

They also begin to explore romantic relationships, and those who have not experienced this by the time they leave school are more likely to report being lonely.³⁵

Charlie's story

Throughout my childhood I remember being desperate to have someone to talk to, but having nobody. My dad used to beat up my mum, who had mental health problems. I would sit there in school and think about what was going on at home. I never really used to socialise and was quite withdrawn.

There was a point in my life where I thought there was no way out. Having to keep these things to myself as a child was unhealthy – it made me question what was right and wrong and I began to feel that even if I could, I shouldn't talk about it. I got the idea in my head growing up that nobody else would understand, so I kept it to myself.

When my dad went to prison I thought maybe things would get better, but they didn't. My mum was really ill and started picking fights with me every night. The Christmas I was 16 she told me I had to leave home. That's when Action for Children got involved.

Walking into Action for Children was like taking a step into the real world. Over time, I learned that I was in a space where I was able to express my views in an open and honest manner and feel safe within myself. I was accepted from the first day with no judgment of who I was or where I was from.

That for me was the first step in beating my loneliness and becoming the person I am today. I now have qualifications in health and social care and will become a young person's practitioner, to give back something to the charity that gave me so much.

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4.4 Young adulthood

Young people over 18 are susceptible to loneliness because of the many changes they are experiencing: leaving home, going on to further or higher education or training, seeking employment, moving on from familiar friends to different social and professional networks, and perhaps forming their own family.

Research conducted this year by Relate compared loneliness in different age groups (ranging from 16–24 to 65 plus).³⁶ They found that it was the youngest respondents, people aged between 16 and 24, who were most likely to experience loneliness. In their sample of this age group, almost two-thirds said they feel lonely at least some of the time compared to about a third of those aged 65 plus.³⁷

“Always being on my own and never having anyone to talk to” Faith

University students often say they feel lonely because of moving away from family and friends and the environment and community they have known.³⁸ In a survey on student mental health, loneliness was ranked as the fifth most important out of ten ‘grand challenges’ faced by university students in the UK. Continued overleaf.

Participants commented on how isolated some students feel, especially when they fail to conform to the 'partying every night and getting drunk' stereotype.³⁹ There are particular challenges for those who are, or are made to feel, 'different': students from low income families, BME groups, or LGBT young people.⁴⁰

4.5 Parenthood

"When I had my dd who is now three she had reflux and I gave up going out eventually because she was always sick over me and herself. I ended up spending months on the sofa with bra and knickers on alone as the endless washing of my clothes was awful. When my dh came home in the evening I'd run around and pretend I'd been dressed all day before he got through the door. I was painfully lonely. By the end of her first year I'd lost contact with most of my friends as I just avoided going anywhere and lost all of my child-free friends. I went back to work a wreck but hid it from everyone. Mumsnet User 2017

Becoming a parent is another stage when people are vulnerable to loneliness. The sudden change of routine, reduced resources and loss of time to socialise can mean that many parents feel isolated.

In Action for Children's recent poll of over 2000 parents, more than half had experienced a problem with loneliness, with a fifth feeling lonely in the last week.⁴¹ And findings from a 2017 Mumsnet survey found that more than half of parents said problems with low self confidence was a cause of loneliness, with well over half feeling lonely at the school gate (57%) or at playgroups (59%). Parents with a child under one, those not in full time work, single parents and those with a disability or caring for someone with a disability were more likely to have a problem with loneliness.⁴²

The changes that come with parenthood also impact on relationships within the family. A recent Relate study showed that people with children under five were more likely to report that they had poor relationships with their partner.⁴³

"My partner also has lots of friends who call him regularly and see him regularly. It highlights my situation of having no friends, and makes me a little embarrassed if I'm honest. I sometimes feel envious, and that's not a nice way to feel about your partner..." Mumsnet User 2017





There is some support available. Parenting classes, children centre and home visiting schemes can help people to make small changes that enhance people's sense of competence as parents and satisfaction in parenting.⁴⁴ Even though parents may not access the groups immediately, their feelings of isolation can be reduced simply by knowing the service is there for them to use when they choose to.

Rahela's story

When Rahela had her second child she felt overwhelmed by feelings of loneliness and isolation. She became severely depressed.

"I felt really, really, lonely," she remembers. "I had all these overwhelming thoughts. I just thought 'I have no one in this world that cares about me.'"

Although her family lived in the same town, Rahela didn't feel she could ask for help.

"I felt as though I was being judged. Although I had my lovely husband who has always supported me, I still felt as though I was lonely. I could only see darkness."

When Rahela was referred to her local Home-Start she was matched with her volunteer, Norma. Rahela is from one of 30,000 families supported by Home-Start's 16,000 volunteers each year. They provide practical and emotional support for parents experiencing isolation, bereavement, mental and physical ill-health, and many other challenges. 44% of families supported by Home-Start are referred to them because they are lonely and isolated.

"Norma is just brilliant," Rahela says. "It goes to show that regardless of age, race and culture, friendship has no boundaries."

"She helped me to go out and meet other families. I have massively improved and I feel so much happier," she says. "I am not a lonely person anymore."

5. Children, young people and families at greater risk of loneliness

While loneliness can affect any child, young person or parent, there are some groups which we know to be more at risk.

5.1 Child victims of abuse and neglect.

“From my point of view having abusive parents is loneliness because you think there’s something wrong with you as your parents ...find you unloveable. You feel ashamed and hide away. This makes it harder when you are a new parent and to expose your parenting to others. It is very isolating. I was so afraid someone would see me parenting and take my baby away from me.” Mumsnet User 2017

Our 2010 survey of 3,000 8 -12 year olds, found that a third said they had seen children who didn’t seem to have any friends at school or at home. Nearly half said they thought children showing signs of neglect – being dirty, smelly, or hungry – were likely to be bullied or ignored, both examples of what often happens to a lonely child.⁴⁵

Physical and emotional neglect measured when children are between three and five years old can predict rejection by their peers in adolescence. It is unclear why this is the case. Has the neglect compromised the child’s social or communication skills or blunted their belief that their peers will want to spend time with them?⁴⁶ Social withdrawal and social isolation can be a medium and longer term impact of neglect in childhood.⁴⁷

Victimisation outside the family is also a factor in social isolation. Chronically lonely children are at greater risk of becoming victims of child sexual exploitation.⁴⁸ Perpetrators target vulnerable children, and child victims of neglect may be vulnerable because of their social isolation – unable to discriminate between genuine interest and friendship, and behaviour that is manipulative, coercive or abusive.⁴⁹

5.2 Children in care and care leavers

“Sometimes.. it happens.. when you’re in a house/room full of people and you feel completely different.. that’s why I hate telling people I’m in care.. because I want to feel normal and not feel that loneliness.” Richie

Children in care, and those leaving care, rate trusting relationships with adults, friends and family members as their top priority. However, the services which are supposed to be supporting these children and young people can sometimes fail in helping them to form and maintain these relationships.⁵⁰



Children are often separated from siblings, and experience several care placements and schools, making it more difficult to make new friends and maintain these friendships. 10 per cent of children in care experienced three or more placements in the last year.⁵¹ Trying to cope with their personal histories, and having to build and rebuild trusting relationships with their carers, social workers, teachers and others can be unsettling, intensifying their feelings of social isolation.⁵²

“I spent a lot of time on my own. I had friends but I didn’t want to talk to them about the stuff that was happening in my life. I didn’t think they would understand the situation I was in. I tried telling my social worker why I wasn’t happy, but she didn’t listen. There didn’t seem much point in speaking to anyone, so I just stopped talking.” Brad

Once they leave their foster or residential care placement, moving on to independent living can increase their sense of loneliness and lack of support. They worry about being lonely, not being able to cope, not having enough money, having to live in unsafe and badly maintained places, or becoming homeless.⁵³ In a Centre for Social Justice study, three-quarters of care leavers surveyed said that feeling lonely or isolated was difficult when leaving care.⁵⁴

The policy Staying Put enables young people to remain with their former foster carers up to the age of 21, extending the transition into independence and maintaining the supportive relationship a young person might have with their foster carers. However, funding levels are low, and this needs to be addressed if we want as many care leavers as possible to benefit.

5.3 Homeless young people

Homelessness among young people is often triggered by the breakdown of relationships with parents or step-parents. In a recent survey, two fifths of homeless 16-to-24 year olds said they sometimes or often felt lonely.⁵⁵

However, being rehoused does not automatically end isolation and loneliness. Young people can be allocated accommodation far from familiar neighbourhoods and known social networks. Many also lack the skills they need to live independently: both the practical skills required to manage limited finances, their tenancy and feed and clothe themselves; and the social skills they need to manage their relationships and meet new people.⁵⁶

5.4 Disabled children and young people

Disabled children and children with long-term health conditions are at greater risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness. They can face barriers to meeting and playing with other children. In a 2015 survey, more than nine-out-of-ten parents said their child did not have the same opportunities to play as their non-disabled peers, and more than eight-out-of-ten said it was difficult to attend mainstream play groups.⁵⁷

“Reena realises other children her age can talk and she can’t. She tries really hard to talk but cannot get the sounds out. It’s difficult to take her out in public because she has tantrums” Reena’s mum, Iman



The goal of inclusive education is to ensure that disabled children can learn and are able to develop friendships alongside their peer group. However, research indicates that they have fewer friends and participate less frequently in school activities.^{58/59} Children with learning disabilities or those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are more likely to say that they have difficulties getting on with their peers and are less likely to be able to find a way of overcoming these difficulties. They say how sad it makes them feel.⁶⁰

Disabled children living away from home in residential special schools are by definition isolated from many of their peers and apart from their families, many for the majority of the year. Although the schools try to create a homely environment and involve children in school and local community life, many of these children can feel lonely and unable to initiate their own social activities.⁶¹

5.5 Young carers

Social isolation and loneliness is a common feeling for young carers. Children without siblings or those caring for lone parents are particularly isolated. With little access to wider support networks – caring not only impacts on their friendships, but also their ability to spend time on social activities outside the home.⁶²

The children of parents with mental health problems can have additional challenges: unpredictable and disordered patterns of thought, a loss of emotional closeness and having to cope with the public stigma of mental illness.⁶³ Even when the child is clearly the main carer, few mental health staff speak to them directly – and this failure to explain what is happening can add to the child's sense of loneliness and isolation.⁶⁴

Hannah's story

Before being supported by Barnardo's, I felt that I was stuck in the house isolated and lonely. I had no friends that understood why I had to look after my Mam all the time. The only people I had any regular contact with was Mam and brother.

When I got referred to Barnardo's, I had nearly dropped out of college because it was too stressful balancing college with caring for my Mam. They supported me to reduce my caring role so I could complete my course and have time for myself.

They helped me to see myself as a priority and have a future outside of caring. In doing this they supported me to be a better role model for my brother who I am also the primary carer for. This support has allowed me to develop my career as a teaching assistant at my brother's school.

To help me feel less isolated they got me involved in the structured groups so I could meet other young carers. Recently my Mam passed away and the service supported me practically and with the grieving process.

If I hadn't been supported by Barnardo's, I wouldn't have seen my own potential or had the motivation to achieve what I have. I would still have been a young carer – isolated and alone.

5.6 Parents of disabled children and young people

Parents of disabled children can experience persistent loneliness, and many report feeling exhausted all the time.⁶⁵ This can be for a range of factors from battling with schools and social services, struggling with a lack of support from family members, to challenging the sometimes ill-informed and negative attitudes of members of the public.⁶⁶





“When you have a disabled child, you find out who your true friends are. Many of the people in our life simply don’t understand the challenges that we face caring for Henry, whose behaviour can be difficult at times. Day-to-day activities become an event in themselves. We no longer get invited to birthday parties and heading to the shop is a negotiation to rival the UN or Brexit. You truly start to question whether you need milk in your tea after all” Mumsnet User 2017

In a recent survey by Together for Short Lives, 84% of families caring for a child with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition say they have felt isolated and alone since their child’s diagnosis. And 90% said their relationships, social life and interactions with friends had been adversely impacted.⁶⁷

Loneliness and isolation is one of the key issues raised by parents and carers that call YoungMinds Parents Helpline. In their 2017 evaluation of their helpline service, they found that almost half of parents who phoned cited feeling isolated as a reason for the call (47%).⁶⁸

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Barbara

When your child is experiencing mental health problems, your most vulnerable parental feelings and fears can all come crowding in on you – worry, uncertainty, confusion, sadness, frustration, and even hopelessness. Underneath this clamour of emotions you can also feel a deep sense of isolation and loneliness.

This is less about how many friends, relatives or agencies you might be able to turn to, and more about the stigma of mental health problems that many people experience, as well as the shame and guilt you put on yourself.

You feel that your child is different; that you will be judged as a bad parent; and you will harm their future life chances if people find out about their difficulties. Isolation leads you to withdraw, keep your worries to yourself and takes you to a lonely place that is harmful to your own physical and mental wellbeing. It can also prevent you getting the help that your child may desperately need.

Every year about 15,000 parents contact the YoungMinds helpline about a child, teen or young adult (up to age 25) who is struggling to deal with emotions, behaviour or mental health. Parents need advice, guidance, information and support but they also want to stop feeling lonely and isolated, they want to make a connection with someone, to explain their child’s difficulties and to be listened to. We often remind parents that it is vital to take care of themselves in order to be able to take care of their child and encourage parents to accept that it isn’t their fault, that they matter too and to seek the support of trusted people – friends, family and community.

5.7 Young parents

All parents can feel lonely at some point. Young parents are particularly at risk. For some their support networks can seem to vanish once their child has been born, and many find it hard to go out to socialise because they cannot find or afford childcare. Analysis of Next Steps data⁶⁹ for Action for Children found that nearly one-in-five young parents rarely or never see friends, compared to one in ten non-parents of the same age.⁷⁰

Young parents can feel lonely and isolated as they face barriers to accessing wider parent support networks: they fear being judged by other mothers or members of the community.⁷¹ A survey this year by the Young Women's Trust found that over half of young mothers said they had become lonelier since becoming a mother, with a quarter leaving the house once a week or less. Two thirds said they had fewer friends since becoming a mother, and that the nature of these friendships had changed.⁷²

Sarah's story

I was 15 when I went to the doctor with tummy pains. I was told I had irritable bowel syndrome, and was sent off to sort out my diet and to try to worry less (I have anxiety issues sometimes). I was seven months gone before I found out I was pregnant.

Mum and dad said they'd help, so I decided not to go for adoption. After that, I felt immediately isolated from my friends, as people were gossiping about me. I didn't have a lot of friends but even they were talking about me. Apart from one close friend, I was completely alone at my school.

I then had to change schools and go somewhere specifically for teenage mothers, making me even more isolated. At home I felt that my sisters and brother disapproved. Once Sasha was born, my parents started taking over and wouldn't let me be a mum. They constantly commented on how to do things and what I was doing wrong.

There were so many arguments and I didn't know what to do. I didn't feel like anyone was helping me and couldn't see anything changing and after a really big argument one night I didn't know what to do - I thought Sasha would be better off without me because mum and dad were taking over anyway and I felt useless. I took an overdose.

I really regret this - but one good thing did come out from all of it - I told my Health Visitor, and I was allocated a Family Support Worker from Action for Children. She helped me to look at what was working well, when all I could see were negatives. Because Sasha was so young, my worker couldn't ask her what she wanted, so she observed the two of us. She said me and my daughter had a lovely bond, and helped me talk to my parents about them overstepping their role. It finally felt like there was someone to listen to me.

5.8 Parents with depression

Around 10 - 15% of women develop postnatal depression. Fathers can also develop depression following the birth of a child, but there are no reliable figures to indicate how prevalent this is.⁷³ Studies examining mothers' depression detail their sadness, anxiety and fatigue, as well as social and emotional withdrawal. These mothers feel chronic loneliness and can be socially isolated. Their depression can have a negative impact on both their own quality of life and their child's development.⁷⁴ The mental health problems of a parent are an important predictor of their children's mental health and wellbeing. There are links between parental mental health problems and a child's loneliness and social isolation.⁷⁵ For this reason it is vital that parents can access support.





Camilla's story

Before Sonny was born I felt so positive – full of hope about the future, looking forward to our new life as a family. I had a really bad delivery though, and ended up staying in hospital for ages. When I finally got home I felt really detached from my baby – I just didn't know what to do with him. I felt so anxious and panicky, and the fact that my husband was working all day meant I just didn't speak to anyone. I knew my feelings weren't "right", but I didn't tell anyone because I felt I wasn't supposed to feel this way. I didn't want anyone around. This just made the loneliness worse – I felt so ashamed.

Eventually, my health visitor put me in touch with a Children's Centre, run by Action for Children. People there were so patient, and, slowly over the following months, helped me build up a bond with Sonny and managed to convince me to take him to baby massage and socialise with other mums. Bit by bit I started to feel better and it was just amazing to have someone to call every time I started feeling lonely or low again.

I ended up volunteering at the centre, which helped me get back into work. The comfort Action for Children gave me really helped me overcome what was a very difficult time.

6. The impact of modern life on loneliness

Some researchers have linked loneliness to the way we live now.⁷⁶ Changes in society have altered both the way and amount of time we have to form relationships. But modern life also brings opportunities to connect in new ways. Changes have occurred to the family in terms of its structure and size. Parents are having fewer children and many parents are working longer hours so have less time to spend with children and to socialise.⁷⁷ At the same time, parental concern means that fewer UK children play outside: a third do not play outside after school at all.⁷⁸ This underlines the importance of online and mobile communications for some children in sharing information and maintaining friendships.

Nearly half of 11-16 year olds find it easier to be themselves online than face-to-face⁷⁹ and three-in-five said they would be lonely if they couldn't talk to friends via technology.⁸⁰ Children and young people who are socially anxious can find online communication appealing because of its relative anonymity. It also allows them to experiment with their identity, and provides a sense of being in control. One study found that the point of online games is not to win, but to connect and experience a sense of virtual community.⁸¹

What is unclear is whether any social skills acquired online are integrated into children's real lives. One small survey identified a risk that online activity allows lonely children and young people to further isolate themselves.⁸² And for some, online activity can add to feelings of loneliness, as Lucy's story shows.

Lucy's story

Lucy contacted Childline as she was very lonely and needed to share how she was feeling with someone but felt that she didn't have anyone else she could talk to.

"I've just been on Facebook and seen that the only two friends I have in the world have gone out together without me. I wasn't even invited and they must have been planning it in secret behind my back. This isn't the first time this has happened. I look at my classmates having loads of fun together and I wish I could be involved, but I'm not. I know I am making it worse for myself by looking at other people's posts online. I just feel so isolated".

The counsellor asked Lucy how she felt about reducing her time on social media. Lucy was reluctant at first but chatting with the counsellor helped her to identify other activities she enjoyed doing which she could do instead. The counsellor then went on to discuss with Lucy whether she thought her friends knew how she was feeling. Lucy wasn't sure. Lucy did talk about the possibility of telling her friends how she was feeling but didn't feel completely sure she was ready to. However Lucy felt better that there was a chance they did like her, and hadn't done this deliberately to upset her. Lucy finished the chat on a much more positive note.

"I'm glad I'm not alone. I will definitely stop myself from looking at Facebook all the time and try to think about how I might talk to my friends. Thank you for making me realise I am not so alone and that someone is there."

There is evidence that young people are primarily using new communication tools in the same way communication tools have always been used – to combat loneliness by communicating with friends, finding out more about themselves, and connecting with a wider pool of people.⁸³ Whilst this can have many benefits, there need to be appropriate safeguards to ensure people have the support and knowledge to do this safely. This is important. In a recent YoungMinds and Children's Society survey, 14% of 11-25 year olds said they had been bullied online in the last month.⁸⁴

Steps are now being taken to make sure such safeguards are in place. For example the Children's Commissioner work with Government and industry providers to promote digital citizenship in schools from age four to 14, equipping children to use the internet and social media in a safe and positive way.⁸⁵





What
can be
done?



This report has shown that loneliness affects children, young people and families, with some groups more vulnerable than others. Although more research is needed to look at the causes, scale and impact of loneliness on people under 50, it is clear that this is a real problem. And it must be solved. If unaddressed, loneliness can become chronic, which can lead to longer-term mental and physical health problems for children and young people as they move into adulthood. The question now is what can be done.

The research on effective interventions for loneliness and social isolation is still in its infancy, particularly when looking at children, young people and families. There is, however, agreement that both support to develop stronger social skills and steps to increase social interaction could have a role to play.⁸⁶ Half of respondents to Mumsnet's recent survey on loneliness, said they would value support to overcome social awkwardness and develop self-esteem to help alleviate loneliness. And nearly a third said they would like 'open house' groups with a focus on those who are facing social difficulties.⁸⁷

"Initiatives which focus on general self-efficacy and competence, self-esteem, and on building social skills and positive relationships would seem to have some potential for ...protection against chronic loneliness." Jopling and Sserwanja⁸⁸

18

The British Red Cross and Coop have identified some principles for delivering effective loneliness support.⁸⁹



1. Support that gives a sense of purpose
– e.g. volunteering



2. Peer-led support



3. Local, easy to access support



4. Free or affordable support



5. Support that instils a sense of identity



6. Support which provides clear goals



7. Shared interest support

The family is where children and young people learn and practise their social skills, so supporting a parent or carer in their parenting may reduce the likelihood of them or their children becoming chronically lonely.⁹⁰ Alongside this, providing children, young people and families with opportunities for social interaction, particularly those that face significant barriers (disabled children, young carers, young parents) can help reduce isolation and loneliness.^{91/92}

Action for Children's survey of parents highlighted the importance of having a support network to rely on, with more than half of the parents surveyed saying it is particularly important to have friends who are also parents.⁹³

Some examples of current schemes which provide support to develop social skills, promote resilience and reduce isolation include:^{94/95}

- ➡ Pre-school programmes on school readiness, communication, social and emotional skills
- ➡ Anti-bullying programmes in schools and colleges, youth clubs, sports clubs and online
- ➡ Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) at all levels of schooling, including Life Skills for older children
- ➡ Mental health support on site in all educational settings
- ➡ Peer counselling, local befriending or mentoring services
- ➡ Opportunities to help others through volunteering or working in the community
- ➡ Parenting classes
- ➡ Home visiting schemes
- ➡ Children's centres

If we are to begin to tackle the issue of loneliness in children, young people and families, we need such services to be available. But these services are increasingly at risk. For example, children centres have faced significant cuts in recent years. Local authority spending has decreased by 48 per cent since 2010 and central Government funding in this area has fallen by 55 per cent across the same period.⁹⁶

We also need these services to help build the evidence for what works. Services should be supported to measure the impact they have on reducing isolation and loneliness amongst the children, young people and families that rely on their support.

If you notice someone is lonely – don't ignore it, go up to them and just have a conversation.” Tom

There is also a role for each and every one of us. We need to consider what we can do to build and maintain our own families/relationships and ask how we can support initiatives that address loneliness in the wider community.



Worried that your child is lonely?

Top Tips: Developed by Action for Children and YoungMinds

- ➡ Talk to your child. Show an interest in their friends and relationships. Talk to them about what healthy friendships are and ask them how they feel about their friendships
- ➡ Organise play dates at home or in a local activity centre
- ➡ Find out about the Local Offer in your area for disabled children
- ➡ Show by example. If you were a lonely child, or are a lonely adult, your child might be mirroring this. Make more friends of your own, for example through groups, activities, other parents
- ➡ Make sure that your children are using the internet safely and help them find good chat rooms
- ➡ Encourage older young people to notice how their social media usage affects their mood
- ➡ Try not to be dismissive or discouraging when your child wants to fit in with the culture of their peers, as long as this doesn't carry any kind of risk.
- ➡ See if there are groups or activities in your local area that your child would be interested in
- ➡ Remember that loneliness is a feeling, not a measure of number of friends or time spent interacting socially
- ➡ Support your child in building their resilience, such as celebrating achievements, taking on responsibilities, understanding other people's feelings, and facing fears.
- ➡ Speak to a teacher or other member of staff at your child's school – they may be able to help but also look out for signs once they are aware
- ➡ Find ways of increasing communications and confidence with all sorts of people in all sorts of ways e.g. texts to friends and relatives; chatting to neighbours; telling jokes; learning magic tricks
- ➡ Everyone feels lonely sometimes, but if your concerns are going on for a long time, you may want to step in and help. Seek advice if you suspect there might be underlying concerns.
- ➡ Encourage your child to watch out for other children who seem to be lonely e.g. in the playground and to go and chat to them.



We need to see wider recognition of the problem and further steps to measure its impact and research solutions

For this reason Action for Children recommends:

1 

Central and local government recognise that loneliness is a problem that affects children, young people and families as well as older people; new and existing measures to address loneliness must not be restricted to provision for the older generation.

2 

Central and local government support and extend the provision of services that reduce isolation for children, young people and families, particularly for those most at risk. For example the continued funding of young carer support services, services for disabled children, children centres and young parents support groups is essential.

3 

Further research is undertaken to measure loneliness and its impact on children, young people and families, and to understand what is effective in reducing loneliness. As a first step loneliness should be included in the Understanding Society longitudinal study and the Good Childhood Survey.

4 

Organisations providing social support services to children, young people and families should **develop an understanding of loneliness and evaluate the impact of their services in reducing loneliness.**

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