

Loneliness & Isolation: What Families Can Do

Families can provide strong mental health support and help their child who is feeling lonely and/or isolated by:

Being Aware

For many children, actions speak louder than words, so it is important for parents to pay close attention to their behavior and look for significant changes or signs that they are not OK.

Knowing the signs and symptoms to look for; identifying any big changes in how you feel or how your child feels or behaves; and being aware of how current events or a specific situation may be impacting you or your child will help you determine if you or your child feels lonely or is isolated.

Talking It Out

Some children do not know how to identify their feelings, or they may feel embarrassed or afraid parents will find their worries silly or think expressing them is inappropriate due to their family's cultural beliefs and behaviors. Parents may avoid asking their child about their feelings because they do not want to pry or make them upset, it is not common to do in their culture, or they want to give their child space to be socially independent.

Talking about loneliness and isolation is the first step to helping your child feel better. It helps them understand that it is normal, that everyone experiences it, and that there are a lot of ways to cope and feel better. These conversations can also strengthen your bond with your child, build trust, help them understand their feelings do not make them flawed, and let them know they are not alone and that they are loved and supported.

Additionally, parents who have experienced loneliness or isolation should consider talking honestly to their kids about their experiences versus hiding it. This sharing lets them see first-hand from you that loneliness and isolation can be helped and shows your child that you are a relatable person who struggles sometimes too.

Getting Help

Early intervention may help prevent loneliness from becoming social isolation, social isolation also causing intense loneliness, or either/both leading to worsening physical and mental health and well-being. Taking steps to address these issues will also help your child feel better and thrive again.

If you go to a primary care physician, they may do an assessment of your child and, based on the results, refer them to a community or peer-to-peer support group or mental health professional for further evaluation and treatment. In addition to working with a primary care physician and mental health professionals, there's a lot your family can do to help increase connection and address loneliness and isolation at home.

Helping Them Cope

It is natural for parents to want to protect their children from negative experiences and emotions. Avoidance is unrealistic, reinforces feelings of inadequacy and negative self-worth, creates further isolation and/or loneliness, does not teach your child how to connect with others and makes it hard to live a happy, productive, engaged, successful, fulfilling life. A more effective approach is to teach your child how to meaningfully engage with the world around them.

Families can help their child meaningfully connect by:

Engaging in De-stressing Activities

- Doing activities your child enjoys together as a family.
- Suggesting relaxing activities that reduce stress. Ideas include:
 - Coloring, journaling, painting or other creative outlets.
 - Doing puzzles.
 - Listening to music.
 - Deep breathing, yoga or meditation.
- Getting outside together. Sunshine provides vitamin D, a natural mood booster.
- Adopting and caring for a pet, if that is financially possible and works with your lifestyle. Pets give people companionship, comfort and purpose.

Creating Connection Opportunities

- Encouraging your child to participate in a peer-to-peer club, team or group focused on a common interest.
- Maintaining social connections with people outside of the house using technology. Friends and family who cannot be together in person can still watch movies and TV shows together, play games, exercise, pray, celebrate, play or listen to music together, and eat dinner together online.

Establishing New At-Home Routines & Expectations

- Limiting the amount of time they spend on social media.
- Helping them establish a daily routine. This gives structure and purpose to every day.
- Encouraging them to get dressed every day, even if there is nowhere to go.
- Expressing realistic expectations. There is no guarantee that your child will connect with someone in every situation or never feel isolated or alone, despite their best efforts to prepare.
- Reminding them that you are there to help and support them every step of the way.

Skill-Building

- Helping them identify their feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy as well as things they like about themselves.
- Teaching them the difference between being alone and being lonely.

Being a Good Role Model

Children learn from watching their parents. Every day your child learns by watching you work to engage meaningfully in the world, be honest about how you are feeling (even when you are struggling), and practice healthy coping strategies. Modeling building and maintaining social connections sets a positive example for your children to follow.

Prioritizing Healthy Lifestyles

We must take care of our minds like we take care of our bodies. When we have a chronic physical condition like diabetes or obesity, we treat the condition, make lifestyle changes, and remain aware of any changes in how we feel. The same is true for our mental health. It is important to be proactive about good mental health, give it constant attention, and make changes to our lifestyle or behaviors to ensure our minds stay healthy and strong.