

Social Isolation in Children and Young People

My Voice Matters

A Young Healthwatch Volunteer investigation.

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My Voice Matters is ensuring the voice of people with diverse lived experiences and backgrounds are heard.

We are proud to be able to give the opportunity for seldom heard voices to be heard by providers and wider organisations in their own words.

This report has been researched and written by Abigail Williams, a Young Healthwatch student placement who is studying Health and Social Care at New College and is in her words.

What is Social Isolation?

Social isolation can be defined as a state of stress or discomfort that results when we perceive a gap between our desires of social connection and actual experiences of it.

11.3% of children said that they were “often” lonely, this was more common among younger children aged 10 to 12 years old.

Young people living in a household with other adults were more likely to say that they “hardly ever or never” felt lonely than those living in a single adult house.

Children who receive free school meals were more likely to report feeling lonely. The children receiving free school meals, 27.5% reported that they were feeling lonely whereas 5.5% children who did not receive free schools’ meals reported the same.

Social isolation tends to be heightened when children go into the transitional periods like starting secondary for example. Then going from secondary to college.

When comparing loneliness among children aged 10 to 11 and 13 to 15 years the younger children were more likely to say they feel lonely compared to the older children.

Girls’ report being lonelier than boys according to the UCLA loneliness scale.

Loneliness is a feeling we all experience at least once in our lives maybe due to an unfortunate event.

It is reported that Children who lived in more deprived areas didn’t have the greatest health, they often report feeling lonelier compared to someone living in as less deprived area.

Children who lived in a city stated feeling lonelier than children living in a town.

Disability, mental health issues or being bullied can have a big impact on feeling lonely and you can feel like you have no support and that you are all alone, this is why it is important to have family and friends around for support.

If children are living in a household with their siblings, they will feel less lonely as they have others to talk to or play with, they won't feel as alone as someone else living in a household as an only child.

Young people aged 16 to 24 may experience loneliness in education, for example if they go off to university. For 16-year-olds leaving school and going on to college with lots of different people from a whole wide range of different secondary schools may feel isolated and lonely when they start.

Moving and being independent can cause social isolation as you are in a new town or city and don't know anyone so you can feel alone.

For young people the pressure of exams can put a lot of pressure on their mental health as it is a huge thing and takes a lot of brain energy.

COVID Pandemic and the impact on Young People

Covid 19 with the restrictions put in place had a big impact on adolescents more than anyone would think. Especially with being inside for that amount of time and not being able to socialise properly with friends unless it was over a call.

Covid 19 affected social isolation through lockdown when the government put tight restrictions in place.

As the first lockdown approached in April/May 2020, 35% of young people said they feel lonely often even though they spent time on social media. In a YouGov poll in Nov 2020, 69% of adolescents aged 13-19 said they felt alone "often" or "sometimes" in the last fortnight and 59% feel they have no one to talk to "often" or "sometimes".

Social isolation tends to become more of an impact when children aren't able to interact with others outside of their educational setting, for example going to the park and letting off some energy.

Friendships are a big part of development for children and young people as it helps them to find their identity.

There is a stereotypical imagine that you have to be elderly to be lonely, this isn't the true. Socialising for young people is part of their life as it is where they are discovering who they are, finding a stable support network, without this you can be lonely as young person.

Before the pandemic the mental health of children and young people survey found that one in nine children and young people were affected by a mental health condition. Then 8 months after the virus the figure rose and there were high levels of loneliness as well as disrupted sleep (links to the research are at the end of the report).

The pandemic also associated emotional issues with social isolation like psychological disorders. Due to schools being closed that meant there was a lack of help and support, when children were in schools at least they knew they had somewhere to go, a safe space to talk if anything was going on.

During the pandemic lots of children and teenagers relied on their friends for help and support rather than parents, carers or guardians, at that age it is often who they feel most comfortable to talk to.

In the pandemic feelings of boredom and frustration played a big part in a child and young person's health.

The impact of social media

Social media plays a part in social isolation, it can be surprising how much it does. Most individuals scroll through social media when we are waiting for something, bored or use it to contact friends and family so they are positive aspects to it, but there is negative aspects, these are heightened especially in children and young people.

As a child you probably won't use social media as you are still quite young but when you get to adolescent age you may use apps such as Snapchat or Instagram where you can contact your friends and family as well as seeing what your friends are up to.

The negative is not every photo on social media is the real photo as they have been edited to look like that for a promotion of a product for example.

If you are about 12/13 years old or are at the tween age and using social media you may look at a photo and get jealous because they are wearing the latest trainers or a really expensive bag. Looking at post's friends have posted and seeing what a good time they are having while you're stuck at home can make you feel a bit sad and lonely.

The positive of social media is you can find useful and supportive resources for studying.

Some research states that social media causes a lot of mental health issues which is mainly depression and anxiety which all leads to loneliness. The lonelier you feel and the longer it goes on, you can start to feel emotions you didn't think existed as the brain is very clever and surprising place.

Loneliness and mental health

There is a clear link between these two, if you feel isolated from your friends then you are going to feel low and the longer that feeling goes on for it could develop into depression. That is a feeling that is difficult to describe and can be very difficult to manage it as when you feel that low finding activities to make you happy seem almost impossible.

In a recent review of the scientific literature, loneliness was associated with future mental health problems up to 9 years later with the strongest association being depression.

Social isolation increased the risk of depression and most likely anxiety as well.

If you have a long-term illness where you can't attend school and are in the hospital a lot then they won't have a great social aspect of their life and won't be able to make a lot of friends as they won't be able to attend school like everyone else.

Children are often surrounded by people like teachers and other children so the idea of being lonely isn't something that they would normally think about.

If you don't have many friends or you have friends, but you only hang out with them in education like school or college because you can't afford to go out and do activities with them it can make you feel left out and worthless.

All the emotions to do with feeling lonely and anxiety are in relation to mental health. Mental health these days covers a whole range of emotions. We all have mental health just some of us have higher levels or have it worse off than someone else. When it starts taking over your life that's when it becomes a big problem or if it is nonstop, an ongoing feeling that won't improve no matter what you try.

A Quote from a Doctor in relation to loneliness.



“Loneliness in children is really interesting because they are often constantly surrounded by other children and the idea of being alone or isolated is challenging as they themselves recognise loneliness doesn't mean that there's no people around. It just means that you don't feel you're connecting with them and not having a good relationship with them.” Richard Crellin, Policy Manager at The Children's Society.



Loneliness in Teenagers

Teenagers, when they are going through different life stages can experience social barriers so feel left out, not being invited to events and be excluded from joining in with others. This can have an impact on self-esteem by making you feel like you're not good enough.

Being home alone, often happens mainly after school with no one to come home to and ask you about your day or what you have been up to at school. It can feel lonely as they have no one to socialise with.

Experiences of being bullied can make teenagers feel worthless and have low self-esteem. It can also cause psychological disorders later in life.

Joining in with clubs and activities, this is a way of doing something fun and exciting, it is a way of socialising and making new friends. It can help individuals with their depression and anxiety.

When life feels like it's getting too much just going on a walk can help to clear your head or writing down how you feel as you are letting your emotions out, but they are still private.

Personal stories: By Abigail Williams



"There was a time in my life I felt lonely, this was when my Nan was sick and going through treatment and I had people around me to support me and my family but even so I still felt alone because I couldn't focus on anything else.

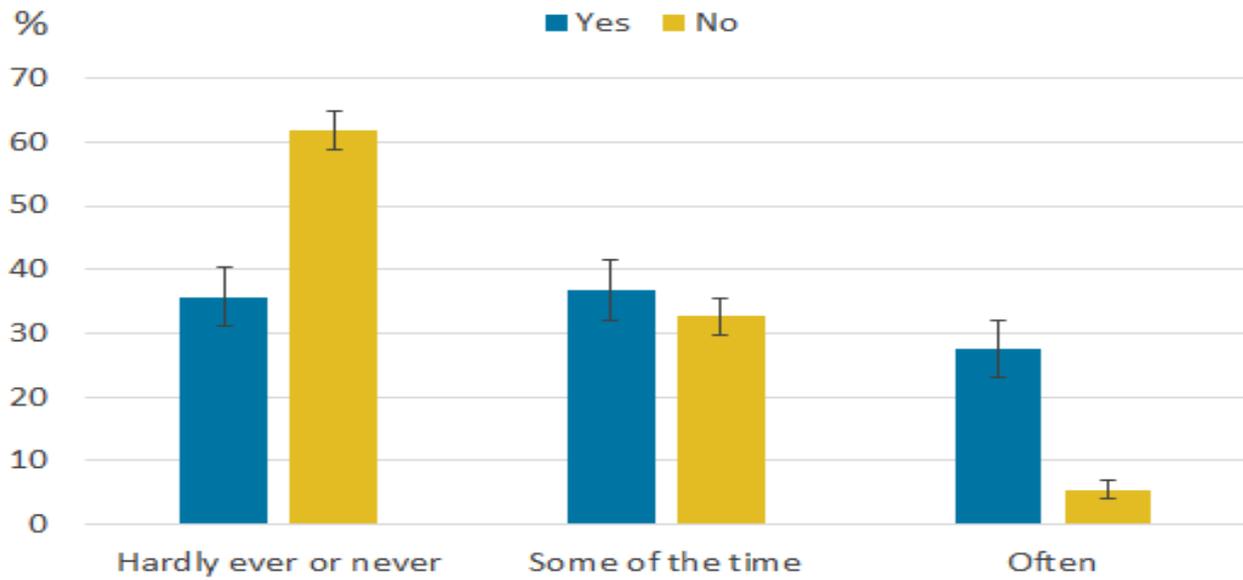
I remember running out of maths class as it was consuming me, and I couldn't take it anymore and I sat on the floor and had a melt down because I had built up everything inside of me and it needed to be let out."

A reminder to anyone who is struggling, talk to someone because it's worth it in the end and the emotions don't deserve to be bottled up."



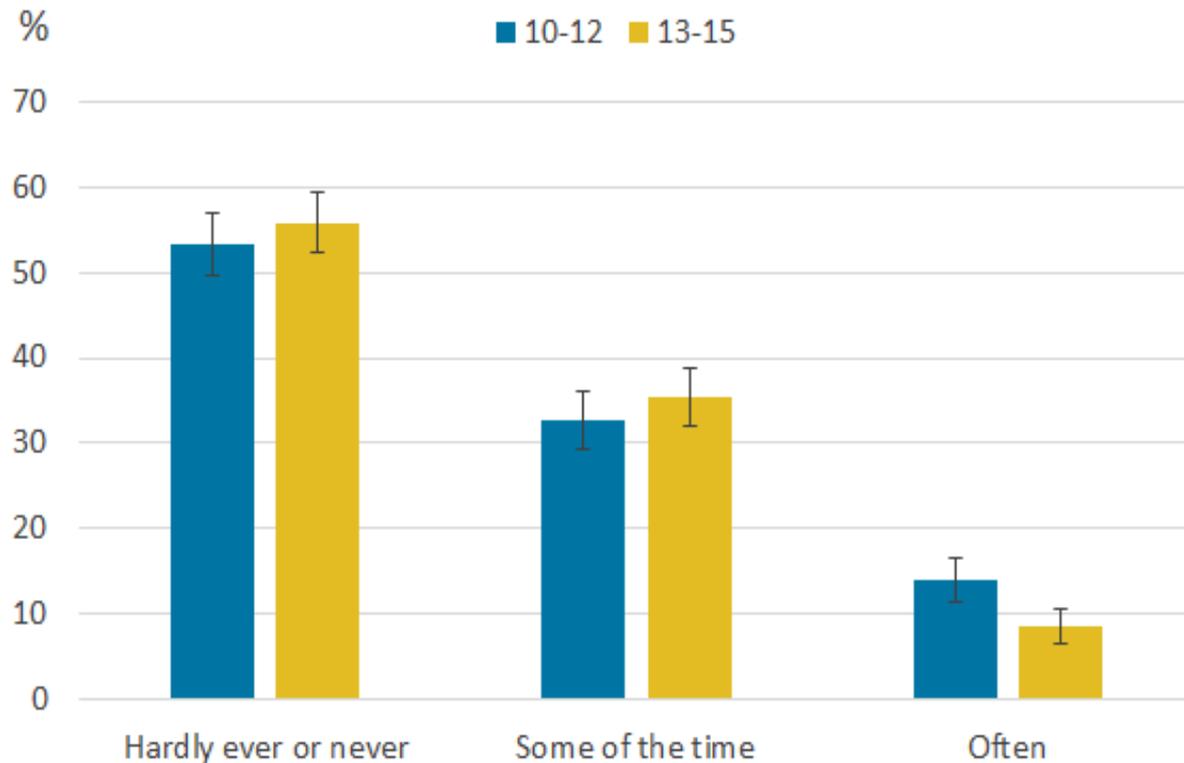
Reported frequency of loneliness by free school meal receipt (Great Britain)

Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society



Reported frequency of loneliness by age group, among children (Great Britain)

Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society



Examples of clubs available for Young People

There are clubs such as youth clubs which give children and young people a chance to socialise with other and perhaps understand how they feel as they are talking to someone their age and are in the same stage of life to them and dealing with either the same or similar emotions.

There are also national organisations that operate across the UK.

Scouts

Scouts is an organisation for all young people with groups from age 4 upwards. You do group work as well as individual and get to mix with new people and make new friends and do different activities and learn life skills. For example, like going camping or team activities.

Extract from the Scout website - [Scouts](#)

“Scouts are do-ers and give-it-a-go-ers. Yes, we go camping, hiking, swimming, abseiling, cycling and canoeing. But we also get to hang out with our friends every week – having fun, playing games, working in a team and taking on new challenges”.

3. Personal Experiences of Scouts and Girl Guiding: By Emily Scott and Abigail Williams



Emily Age 12 is a Scout, she said

“I love being a Scout, I was a Cub before that. I get to do lots of fun things with other people my age. I have recently become a Patrol Leader and they gave me training on how to do it and lots of support.

Last month went to London and played live monopoly with 8000 other children it was great. My sister has now joined Scouts with me and she enjoys it too. I want to be a young Leader with the Beavers when I am older. ”

Abigail said "I am a Girl Guide; I have been since I was about 10 and I have loved every minute of it. I am currently a ranger and looking at becoming a young leader for my unit. One day I would like to open up my own group."



Girl Guides

Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers are an all-girls club. Rainbows and brownies are for younger girls and guides is more for the teenager years and then rangers are after the age of 14 and 15. You do similar activities and it is a lot of fun.

You learn a lot of different skills like how to survive in a certain situation or the items you would need to take when going to a certain destination. For example, if you were going to a desert island what are three things you would take.

If you want to mix with others and have fun doing activities then there are many of these clubs available just search them up. "I am so glad I joined and who I met while being there, some of my closest friends."

Extract from the Girl Guide website - **Girlguiding | We help all girls know they can do anything | Girlguiding**

"With guiding, girls have fun, adventure and the space to discover their potential.

They go to their first ever sleepover, canoe on rivers, learn about body confidence, and lead their own camp. Or sometimes they simply have fun and try new things with friends."

References used in writing this report

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- <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensandyoungpeoplesexperiencesofloneliness/2018> where some of the stats came from in the bit about social isolation.
- [The Children's Society](#)
- [National measurement of loneliness: 2018.](#)
- [Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness](#)
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- <https://www.ourwatch.org.uk/crime-prevention/reducing-risk-toolkits/youth-isolation> youth isolation
- <https://www.educare.co.uk/Media/Supporting%20children%20and%20young%20people%20with%20loneliness.pdf> supporting children and young people with loneliness.
- <https://www.toddlersense.com/socialisolationunderfives> effect on toddlers with social isolation.

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