Lonely Kids in a Connected World

What Teachers Can Do

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Foreword

Wᵉ have over 60 years combined experience in teaching. We have been general and special education teachers, and have taught children, adolescents, and young adults in a variety of settings. Our passion is to offer classroom teachers support by providing them with instructional and behavioral strategies so that they can better meet the unique needs of diverse learners. One topic that has been particularly important to us is children's mental health and wellness and what teachers can do to enhance it. In the mid-1990s, Kathy wrote a book titled *Reaching Out to Troubled Kids* (Fad, 1996), in which she provided ideas for how classroom teachers could better work with students who were experiencing turmoil in their lives. She explained how children and adolescents at the time faced significant and unprecedented challenges.

Nearly 25 years later, we find that students are still stressed over matters associated with school (e.g., meeting the expectations of the adults in their respective communities, dealing with bullying and peer pressures, worrying about fitting in). But the rise of mobile technology and social media in the last decade has compounded matters in ways we could never have imagined. Children and adolescents today have to deal with more complicated issues than generations past, such as dealing with cyberbullying, comparing self to others on social media, and staying continually connected (online). With all the demands on children and adolescents today, there is no doubt that they are burdened with overwhelming stress that leads to adverse emotional responses such as frustration, dread, restlessness, anxiety, and depression. We believe that this unparalleled stress also leads to loneliness, despite how connected they may seem in their technological social networks.

COVID-19

We started working on this book in early 2018 to specifically address what teachers, counselors, and other youth-serving professionals can do to help students they suspect are lonely. We could have never predicted how, within a few months after we finished the book, our world would drastically change when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of the United States. We immediately thought of our nation's students and how lockdowns, school closings, quarantines, and social distancing might further contribute to loneliness. Of course, students miss out on learning content and developing key academic skills when they are not in school, but their

psychosocial development is hit especially hard when they have limited opportunities to socially relate with their friends and teachers. We believe that this social disconnectedness can lead to a diminished sense of self, belonging, and purpose, which can contribute to feeling lonely.

We know that the COVID-19 pandemic will not last forever and that students' schooling will return to normal one day. In the meantime, however, researchers are finding that children's mental health *is* affected by COVID-19. One study revealed that nearly 40% of parents reported observing signs of distress in their children (Rosen et al., 2020). Another study published in *Pediatrics* found that 14% of parents reported worsening behavioral health in their children since the start of the pandemic (Patrick et al., 2020). The authors emphasized:

> Disruption in routines can be detrimental for children, especially those already with behavioral health diagnoses. For some children, this is complicated by challenges accessing traditional office-based services and the loss of mental health services that students may receive at school. In a recent poll, it was found that parents were worried about how school closure was affecting their children's mental and emotional health, and similar disruptions are evident in our study. (p. 4)

In the same *Pediatrics* issue, another study reported COVID-19's impact on parent-child psychological well-being:

> These results highlight the severe immediate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on vulnerable families. This crisis has harmed the psychological well-being of these families, suggesting the need for immediate increases in social support and for additional interventions aimed at addressing the economic and mental health needs of families. (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020, p. 7)

While we do not know what lasting impact COVID-19 will have on children's mental health, we are convinced that now more than ever teachers and youth-serving professionals need strategies aimed at helping children and adolescents navigate social and emotional hardships in a constantly changing world. This book presents you with one of those hardships and explains how teachers in grades 3 through 8 can help their students move from having unsettling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with the unpleasantness of loneliness toward building healthy interactions and friendships, developing social competence, and recognizing and replacing maladaptive thought patterns.

Evidence-Based Resources Related to the Action Strategies

We examined more than 100 articles on childhood loneliness to structure the two distinct aspects of this book: the theoretical underpinnings and the application blueprint for loneliness prevention and intervention, which we call Action Strategies. While some of the articles were practical and guiding in nature, the majority were research based and published in peer-reviewed journals. This was important to us as we created the Action Strategies because the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires educators to use "evidence-based practices." For us, the Action Strategies had to be research based and contribute to improved educational outcomes for students.

As most school personnel can attest, selecting appropriate evidence-based practices should be done within a well-organized, clear, consistent process. While we recognize that all schools and districts are required to make their own decisions about which practices are evidence-based and the level of rigor supporting evidence must meet, we provide below a list of resources that might prove useful in considering the implementation of the Action Strategies. (The full citation for each can be found in the References, starting on p. 181.)

For evidence associated with screening and defining the three domains of intervention, we considered the seminal work of:

- Asher and Paquette (2003)
- Cassidy and Asher (1992)
- Galanaki (2004)
- Lasgaard et al. (2016)
- Martin et al. (2014)
- Masi et al. (2011)
- Qualter (2003)
- Qualter et al. (2010)

As we designed the Action Strategies for Increasing Opportunities for Students to Form Peer Relationships, we considered:

- Cassidy and Asher (1992)
- Fontaine et al. (2009)
- Galanaki (2004)
- Martin et al. (2014)
- Masi et al. (2011)

- Qualter (2003)
- Russell and McRae (2012)
- Zysberg (2012)

For the Action Strategies for Improving Students' Social Competencies, we considered the research of:

- Besevegis and Galanaki (2010)
- Cassidy and Asher (1992)
- Edery (2016)
- Fontaine et al. (2009)
- Galanaki (2004)
- Masi et al. (2011)
- Russell and McRae (2012)
- Qualter (2003)
- Zysberg (2012)

Finally, the Action Strategies for Teaching Students to Self-Regulate and Replace Maladaptive Thought Patterns were based on the work of:

- Asher and Paquette (2003)
- Besevegis and Galanaki (2010)
- Caputi et al. (2017)
- Edery (2016)
- Fontaine et al. (2009)
- Martin et al. (2014)
- Masi et al. (2011)
- Russell and McRae (2012)

Learning about childhood loneliness and acting to prevent it or reduce its harmful effects can make a lasting difference in the life of a lonely child. In this book, we expect that you will learn more about childhood loneliness through chapters that reflect research-based definitions, known risk factors, and acknowledged effects. Remaining chapters focus on recognizing loneliness in students and intervention strategies.

Introduction

For the last 20 years or so, we have met regularly to collaborate as we jointly provided professional development to schools and program evaluation to school districts. At one of our meetings, we began talking about a 2018 news article that caught our attention. It was a report on a Cigna survey of 20,000 Americans. In it, the researchers shared their surprising results that young people are more likely than senior citizens to report feeling lonely (O'Donnell & Rudavsky, 2018). Using two loneliness scales, which we discuss later, Generation Z participants (18- to 22-year-olds) had loneliness scores of about 48, as compared with their 72-year-old and older counterparts, who scored around 39. Moreover, nearly half of the younger participants identified with 10 of the 11 feelings associated with loneliness.

This got us thinking about the students we have taught over the years, and we began sharing one story after another of those we believed were lonely. One story stood out. She was Kathy's sixth-grade student. We'll call her Jamie. She was painfully isolated and alone all the time—even at home, it seems. Her mother had a host of mental health issues and had physically abused and neglected her. With no home life to speak of, Jamie was eventually removed from her mother's custody and placed in a therapeutic residential facility for children. In Kathy's special education classroom, Jamie was withdrawn and depressed, and never communicated with any of the other students. As you can imagine, she was awkward, almost as if she didn't know how to behave around others. To compound matters, Jamie didn't want to leave Kathy's classroom

and socialize with the other students. Instead, she preferred to stay at her desk and focus her attention on every inanimate object in the room, contort into herself, or fuss over her nails and cuticles.

We recognize today that Jamie was not just traumatized, she was also lonely and experiencing extreme distress related to her loneliness. Of course, Kathy and her general education teachers did as much as they could for Jamie—they followed her IEP, they adapted general education lessons, they taught her social skills, they ensured that she received counseling services, and so forth. But we wondered, could her teachers have done more? And, if they suspected (or knew) that Jamie was lonely, could they have used specific strategies to help improve her social competence and interpersonal skills?

> **" I like to be alone, but I hate being lonely."**
>
> —Unknown

The more we talked about our students, we began to think about childhood loneliness. First, we questioned whether childhood loneliness is even a thing. Immediately, we said it has to be because we have real-life students to prove it! Then we wondered how pervasive childhood loneliness is and whether it is increasing due to the facets of our modern times (e.g., more people using social media and other forms of technology, both parents working, etc.). We did a quick Internet search on childhood loneliness, and one of the first articles to appear was a *New York Times* (Yginsu, 2018) story titled "U.K. Appoints a Minister for Loneliness." We were stunned. Nearly nine million British people, including children, reported they were often or always lonely. Apparently, the problem is serious enough that a government official was appointed to effectively deal with it. Then we read how Dr. Vivek Murthy, the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, is working on setting up an institute aimed at studying loneliness in this country. After reading a few more news articles, we came to a realization: Because teachers are such central figures in children's lives and play such a critical role in their adaptations at school (Galanaki, 2004), it makes sense for them to learn strategies to help their students overcome loneliness.

Jamie is an adult now, but we can certainly help students currently in our classrooms who are struggling with loneliness. As we explain later, feeling lonely for sustained periods of time can have devastating mental health outcomes for children and adolescents. Let's aim to do something now—to use strategies designed to help students develop their abilities to form relationships where they can function effectively with peers.

Some news sources have described loneliness as one of the top mental health issues of our modern times. A few headlines even call it an epidemic. But these references to loneliness are about adults, not children. As a teacher, you have probably worked with children who spend a lot of time alone, are isolated, have few friends,

or seem lonely. What are your own thoughts about loneliness? When have you suspected that one of your students was lonely?

THINK ABOUT IT

+ When you think about loneliness, what does the term mean for the children you teach?

+ How do you identify children who are lonely?

+ What are your priorities for these students, and what actions can you take to support them?

We want to emphasize three points that are fundamental to understanding childhood loneliness in schools and the content in this book:

Social Connections Are Essential

Most people agree that relationships with others are not just desirable, they are essential for well-being. Neuroscientists and psychologists recognize that people's primal need to belong provokes an intense desire to socially interact with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Twenge et al., 2019). It goes without saying that meaningful social connections are the basis for a sense of belonging and relationships with others. A sense of belonging and closeness to others is a secure foundation upon which people build their accomplishments in life, such as careers, marital relationships, and contributions to society. When people have close relationships with others, they can experience positive physical and mental health (Blakemore, 2012; Shor et al., 2013). Those who do not may find themselves socially isolated, ostracized, and lonely, which are emotions linked to negative outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Twenge et al., 2019; Wesselmann & Williams, 2017).

While many people spend time alone and do not experience loneliness, others, including children, face circumstances (e.g., peer rejection) and emotional factors (e.g., isolation) that result in chronic and painful feelings of loneliness that can disrupt healthy development. In other words, without close relationships with peers in school for prolonged periods of time, the likelihood exists that a child will experience personal and social obstacles that stand in the way of his or her achievements.

To draw a parallel model, consider the work of Abraham Maslow, most widely known for describing a "hierarchy of needs" commonly represented by a pyramid. Basic physiological needs form the foundation on the bottom. The layer above is safety needs, and on top of that is the need for love and belonging, and then the need for esteem. At the top of the pyramid, self-actualization includes achieving our full potential with activities related to creativity, problem-solving, and other high-level pursuits (McLeod, 2020). Generally speaking, Maslow asserts that the most basic needs must be met before people can attend to and meet their higher-level needs. For example, if basic physiological needs for food, water, and shelter are not met, a person is unlikely to be able to achieve at a high level in their profession or spend time and efforts on creative or spontaneous pursuits.

Applying Maslow's theory to the classroom means that at the most basic level, students must feel emotionally and physically safe and secure if they are to succeed. For students who have serious emotional issues like chronic, debilitating loneliness, achieving academic achievement, high self-esteem, and acceptance of others will be a challenge. Of course, teachers do not bear the full responsibility for supporting children who are lonely. Their families and communities have important roles to play. However, teachers can take specific actions that will support students in the school environment. We believe that helping students feel a sense of support and belonging (e.g., even something as simple as having someone to talk to) is a preventive step to take to reduce isolation and loneliness (Australian Red Cross, n.d.; McLeod, 2020).

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

To help a student who is often alone build social connections, consider changing your seating arrangement. Partner the isolated student with a supportive and friendly peer. Before you structure partner work for instructional activities, guided practice, or discussions, give the pairs a few minutes to socialize. Make sure they know each other's name, then present social questions they can ask each other, such as:

+ What is your favorite song? Why?
+ What is the funniest thing you've seen on TikTok?

We would like to emphasize that children spend most of their waking hours in school. While family and home factors influence children's overall emotional adjustment, relationships with peers and teachers, group membership and participation, and children's satisfaction with their socialization have a direct impact on whether they feel lonely. In qualitative studies of childhood loneliness, students have validated the importance of relationships in the school environment and the pain of feeling lonely. For this reason, we offer practical ideas throughout this book to help teachers connect with students, especially those they suspect are lonely. The ideas, which are presented in boxes we call *Classroom Connections,* are inclusive in nature and designed to strengthen teacher-student relationships. We believe that teachers who incorporate these ideas into their teaching practices will foster positive learning communities that help students develop a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom and school.

Loneliness as a Continuum

It is useful to consider loneliness as a continuum, much as we you might think of some disabilities or mental health issues, varying from mild and temporary to severe and chronic. On one end of the continuum is minor loneliness. For instance, a child might feel lonely for a day or two because her grandmother has left after a 3-week visit. In the middle might be common circumstances that are likely to result in bouts of loneliness. For example, a child may feel lonely when he moves to a new apartment complex away from his friends, when his father is deployed, or when he is assigned to a different middle school than his peers. The loneliness may gradually dissipate if he makes new friends, he has daily FaceTime with his father, or he meets a buddy who shares his interests. However, if he has unrelenting and long-term alone time, his loneliness can become a serious emotional condition that can affect his physical and mental well-being. That form of loneliness might be on the other end of the continuum and is likely to lead to serious emotional, mental health, and adjustment issues.
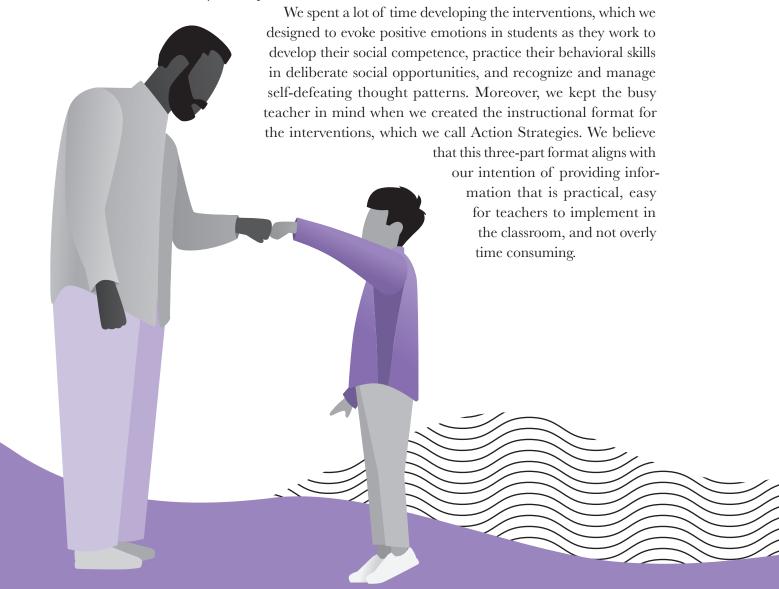
No matter where students are on the loneliness continuum, teachers can act to prevent or reduce its harmful effects.

Teachers Are Critical

Teachers are often overwhelmed by the needs of so many students with a wide range of diverse, interesting, or challenging situations. Teaching social-emotional skills; responding sensitively to students who have suffered adverse experiences; and establishing positive personal relationships with students while still focusing on essential academic skills can be daunting. We recognize that these and other responsibilities challenge teachers' time and resources. Clearly, teachers already have a lot on their plates. The same is true of counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and administrators who are often overwhelmed with a wide range of duties and responsibilities.

Our suggestion that busy teachers consider and focus attention and efforts on one more issue, in this case childhood loneliness, may be met with frustration or resignation. Teachers should rightly require us to have a good reason for suggesting coordinated interventions for lonely students. We believe that such identification and intervention is not only needed but is likely to prevent more serious problems that may develop.

We spent a lot of time developing the interventions, which we designed to evoke positive emotions in students as they work to develop their social competence, practice their behavioral skills in deliberate social opportunities, and recognize and manage self-defeating thought patterns. Moreover, we kept the busy teacher in mind when we created the instructional format for the interventions, which we call Action Strategies. We believe that this three-part format aligns with our intention of providing information that is practical, easy for teachers to implement in the classroom, and not overly time consuming.

Book Organization

We organized this book into the following six chapters:

Chapter 1   *Childhood Loneliness— Background and Definitions*

Our aim in this chapter is to provide basic information about childhood loneliness before we discuss intervention with students who are considered lonely. We believe that when teachers, school psychologists, social workers, and counselors understand key concepts associated with loneliness, including its prevalence in children, they are better able to identify the signs and characteristics of loneliness in their own students.

Chapter 2   *A Framework for Childhood Loneliness— Dimensions and Metrics*

In this chapter, we present the three dimensions of loneliness to explain our own understanding of childhood loneliness. We follow with a discussion on instruments traditionally used to measure loneliness, including rating scales, questionnaires, and sociometrics.

Chapter 3   *What the Risk Factors Are for Loneliness— Known Associations*

We divide the content into two broad categories. In the first, Predisposing Factors, we discuss inherent traits that can make it difficult for children to make and keep mutual interactive friendships. Some examples include self-consciousness, introversion, and a lack of assertiveness, which are known to make children vulnerable to loneliness. In the second category, Precipitating Factors, we explain how loneliness can be triggered by events and situations such as loss of friendships, frequent moves, and the death of a loved one. We also discuss the impact of digital and social media on children's loneliness.

Chapter 4   *Why It Is So Important to Act—The Negative Impact of Childhood Loneliness*

Prior to our discussion of the negative impact of loneliness in children and adolescents, we address mental health in general terms, drawing attention to a 2016 National Survey of Children's Health study and data and statistics on children's mental health from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). We address psychosocial adjustment before contrasting the internal and external effects of loneliness (i.e., those that are not readily seen vs. signs that are more visible), including serious adverse outcomes.

Chapter 5
Recognizing Loneliness in Your Students— Relationships Matter

In this chapter, we underscore the importance of having positive relationships with students with an aim of preventing loneliness. We outline a number of practical ideas that teachers can use in their classroom to strengthen their relationships with students and discuss how to identify loneliness in students. We also look at how to match Action Strategies to the needs of individual students.

Chapter 6
Action Strategies to Prevent and Reduce the Impact of Loneliness—What You Can Do

These strategies are tools that can be used to intervene, support, and teach children who are lonely. They are designed for large groups, small groups, and individual students and can be implemented by teachers and specialized personnel alike, such as counselors, behavior specialists, and school psychologists. We focus on practical interventions that are most likely to have a positive impact on students by providing increased opportunities for socialization, teaching critical peer relationship skills, and supporting students as they learn to identify loneliness, constructively cope with it, and reframe their outlook toward social events and settings.

In addition, you will find relevant quotations about loneliness, the Classroom Connection boxes, tables, and other helpful figures.

NOTE: To download the reproducible forms provided to help you implement the Action Strategies presented in Chapter 6, go to **download.ancorapublishing.com** and in the Search box enter access code: 978-1-59909-111-2