



Social Connection

Background

We are biologically wired to need social connection. Social connection includes spending time with family and friends; taking part in sports, dance, or arts activities with others; engaging in traditional cultural practices; and many other ways that people connect.

In our society, data shows that we are becoming less socially connected over time and that loneliness has become widespread.²⁹ Isolation can increase the risk of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, as well as other physical health conditions.

Among children, studies have shown that the increased risk of depression and anxiety associated with loneliness can remain high up to nine years later.³⁰ The social disconnection and isolation due to physical distancing, remote schooling, and cancellation of group activities during the COVID-19 pandemic had profound impacts on our youth. Interviews with youth-serving organizations found that some in-person youth activities have resumed, but we are still rebuilding infrastructure for many in-person activities across the region. COVID-19 also disrupted the lives of older teenagers transitioning into adulthood—a group that was already at risk, reporting the highest rates of loneliness among adults in our society.³¹

In addition to the importance and challenge of connecting overall, our interviews also revealed a disconnect between youth and adults when it comes to feeling supported. It was noted that adults report feeling they are being supportive to youth, while youth report not experiencing feeling supported. This finding resonated with the youth and adults who vetted our findings.

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Strategies to Foster Connection

Examples of strategies to foster connection that arose in our interviews and research process include:

- **“Meet youth where they are at”** by seeking to understand their perspectives and working from a place of nonjudgment. Interviewees noted the important balance of creating space for youth to be heard while providing supportive boundaries and rules.
 - Consider their multiple identities, cultures, customs, and traditions.
 - Recognize the dominant culture (for example, White, heteronormative, ableist) and how it may alienate and create a feeling of exclusion among students who are not part of it.
 - Intentionally shape a space to be inclusive.
- **Create and/or expand community spaces that youth see as their own** where they can connect with other youth. This is particularly important among those who are not involved with organized activities such as after-school activities. Some interviewees spoke to the need for more of these spaces and activities where youth can connect. Others commented that there are already a lot of activities for youth to be involved in, and the need is to help people understand what is available.
- **Expand peer and near-peer programs**, which were shown through the 2022 CHNA and our interviews as important ways to support connection and well-being. Although several peer and near-peer efforts exist, more are needed as well as more coordination among them. Efforts are underway to support more peer and near-peer programs, such as through the Springfield Youth Mental Health Coalition, MassMentoring Partnership, Project Coach, Out Now, Follow My Steps, and the Gándara Center’s Impact Center.

“They have to have at least one person that they’re connected to that they trust, you know, an adult... I think the students that are the young people that struggle the most are the ones that are disconnected from support. We see it time and time again... sometimes it is just that one connection that can make the world of difference.”

-faculty member, Western Massachusetts Higher Education Institution, Department of Social Work

Recommendations

- Make social connection a high priority in our local governments, organizations, schools, and health care.
 - Design programs, policies, and practices for connectivity,³² creating environments that foster and enhance meaningful social interactions between people.
 - Consider building youth opportunities for social connection in all domains: schools, community organizations, faith-based, health care, behavioral health care, and so on.
 - Consider opportunities for youth to connect with their peers and intergenerationally with adults.
- Create and support more programs that connect youth.
 - Provide more mentoring and peer-mentoring opportunities. Build on and expand existing effective local programs.
 - Involve youth in the design of programming and support to (1) ensure they are youth centered, and (2) foster youth leadership development.
- Provide information to parents/caregivers, youth, and communities about the importance of social connection.
- Keep equity in mind!
 - Acknowledge the harms of White and other dominant cultures on youth. Intentionally design spaces and programs that foster a sense of belonging by meeting youth “where they are at” and considering culture, customs, and traditions.
 - Consider the importance of having similar identities in fostering connections between peers, near peers, and adults who are working with youth.



Northampton's Youth for Equity and Action

Youth for Equity and Action (YEA), a group of Northampton High School students collaborating with the city's Department of Health and Human Services, recently completed a Youth Participatory Action Research Project about their own health. Their findings highlighted the **need for connection** through (1) restorative practices in school (such as youth-led community-building circles), and (2) creating intentional time and space during the day to casually connect with peers, friends, and supportive adults.

Some of the other needs identified in the project included expanded access for all students to a **mental health curriculum** and **mental health counseling**; greater **equity in decision-making** by inviting youth to the table and sharing power; **more diverse representation** in the school staff, curriculum, and art; **updated health education** in all grades PreK–12 that is **inclusive, queer- and trans-affirming, and body-positive**; and increased **safety at school**, such as implementing a trauma-informed response after school lockdowns.

Adopting the mantra "**Nothing About Us Without Us**" coined by the disability justice movement, YEA recognizes the necessity of involving youth in addressing the mental health crisis. They are now taking leadership roles to change their school culture, including growing restorative practices in their district, demanding more diverse representation in their curricula and faculty, and meeting with local and state leaders to demand **more health education**.