



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

TRENDS

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Social Isolation and Loneliness

Prevalence rates of adolescent mental health difficulties have risen in the last two decades, with further exacerbation following the COVID-19 pandemic. This exacerbation has been explained, in part, by increased social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation is lack of social support and meaningful relationships (which can occur even when a person is not lonely), whereas loneliness is feeling alone or disconnected from others (which can occur even when not isolated). Social isolation and loneliness are key risk factors for mental and physical health, including increased risk for suicidality and self-injury, Type 2 diabetes, depression, and anxiety. What's more, these poor mental and physical health outcomes can also promote increased social isolation and loneliness, initiating a toxic cycle.

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness – having a sense of belonging, support, being loved, and cared for, meaningful social exchanges, and number of relationships – can reduce both loneliness and social isolation. Strong connections with other people can act as a buffer against damaging effects of stressors and trauma, and help individuals recover from stress, anxiety and depression. As an example, interpersonal connectedness is amongst the most critical protective factors for suicide risk.

Peer and School Connectedness

In adolescents, peer connectedness is particularly influential. Teens most frequently endorse going to friends for social support over other providers such as parents and guidance counselors. School stakeholders may have the greatest power to influence peer connectedness via school connectedness. School connectedness is the belief that others in the school (including peers) care about their wellbeing and academic progress. Increased school connectedness is associated with reduced risky behaviors (e.g. substance use), better academic performance, and lower emotional distress and suicidal thoughts. These positive effects

are even observed long after school is over, as it may start a domino effect of positive mental health and prosocial behavior.

The Center for Disease Control has highlighted factors that can help increase school connectedness with peers with classroom management that build strong, supportive, and safe environments, e.g. by:

- providing opportunities for students to interact with one another in fun ways and learn about each other.
- providing opportunities for students to learn more about each other.
- providing opportunities for students to work together on assignments.
- promoting expectations that students help each other if a peer does not understand something.
- promoting expectations that students respect and listen to one another.

In addition, schools may create opportunities for adolescents to connect with each other and with adults in positive and prosocial ways. Creating 'youth advisory councils' is one such way. These are formal groups that make plans and take actions to improve their school or community. For instance, a YAC may choose to focus on mental health, creating safe spaces for students with disabilities, or other issues students care about. Adults are involved to work together with youth to decide on goals and manage access to resources (e.g. meeting spaces and money). Research groups such as the AIM Youth Mental Health Ideas Lab have taken this approach in youth-led participatory action

research (YPAR), in which young people identify major concerns in their communities, conduct research to understand them, and then influence policies to address them. Other interventions for positive youth development may involve student-led clubs and family/community mentoring programs.

Psychological Interventions

In addition, social skills training groups and conflict resolution groups can improve interpersonal communication skills to support the building of strong, healthy, and meaningful relationships. Adolescents that lack skills to increase quality social connections or whose skills are impaired by mental health symptoms, e.g. depression or social anxiety, referral to a mental health provider for psychological interventions to target these skills may be beneficial for both their symptoms and their social connectedness.

A Note Regarding Social Media

Social media can have both a beneficial and detrimental impact on social connectedness. It can allow powerful reconnection needed in context of a crisis, particularly when that crisis prevents physical proximity. It can help facilitate connection even when low mood or other mental health symptoms impair face-to-face contact. However, if social media usage replaces face-to-face contact, it can be problematic, and many adolescents report that social media can make them feel less connected. Psychoeducation around social media use may be beneficial to increase the prosocial benefits of social media.



"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."