

Schools loneliness project

Presentation to Scottish Forum on Isolation & Loneliness -
October 2026



Prevalence (11-15 year)

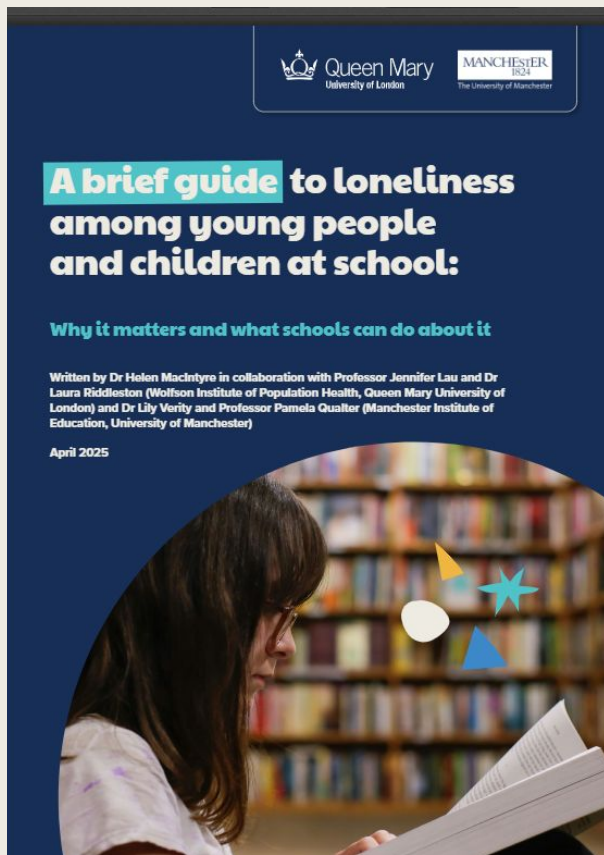
how often they had felt lonely during the last year.

Response options were never, rarely, sometimes, most of the time and always.

Findings presented here show the proportions who reported **feeling lonely most of the time or always**.

Nation	11-year-olds	13-year-olds	15-year-olds	Source	Year
Scotland	Girls 17% Boys 11%	Girls 26% Boys 10%	Girls 29% Boys 17%	HBSC data browser	2022
England	Girls 23% Boys 13%	Girls 34% Boys 14%	Girls 40% Boys 18%	HBSC data browser	2022
Wales	Girls 17% Boys 13%	Girls 25% Boys 13%	Girls 33% Boys 19%	HBSC data browser	2022

The current project builds on earlier work

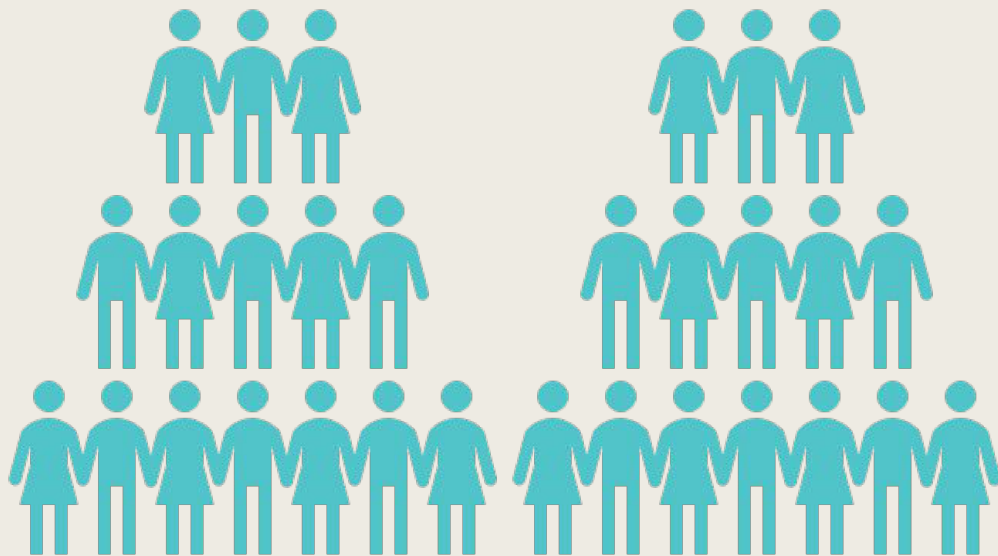


- An accessible summary of research on loneliness among young people at school
- A framework for thinking about how to address loneliness at school
- A set of resources to support work to address loneliness at school

Useful accessible summaries of research on loneliness in schools and what can be done to address it:

- Jefferson, R., Barreto, M., Qualter, P. & Verity, L. (2021) *Are we doing enough to address loneliness? Fit to Belong* (Erasmus+) [Are we doing enough to address loneliness in adolescence.pdf \(fit2belong.eu\)](#)
- Jefferson, R., Barreto, M., Verity, L., & Qualter, P. (2023). Loneliness During the School Years: How It Affects Learning and How Schools Can Help. *Journal of School Health*, 93(5), 428–435.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13306>
- Find the ‘*Brief guide to addressing loneliness among young people and children at school*’ here along with full references-
<https://osf.io/as8fq/files/osfstorage>

The scale of severe loneliness in schools



Lonely often or always

- About 6% of British adults
- 11% of 10 to 15-year-olds pre Covid-19 (no sig gender differences) ONS, 2018

Lonely at school

- 16% of 15-year-olds lonely at school in 2022 (PISA, 2022)

For younger children, closer to adult levels. But that's still problematic.

Current Project Aims

Aim 1: To work collaboratively with two secondary schools to understand and address loneliness in their context

Aim 2: To understand the effectiveness of this approach

Aim 3: To share findings and build a conversation on loneliness at school

Aim 4: To encourage further action and research on the issue

Schools' Loneliness Project co-design process

Where are we now?

Baseline research on loneliness and factors influencing it: interviews with 6 staff members and up to 15 Year 8 students; questionnaire with all consenting Year 8s. Fed back at Workshop 1.

Where do we want to be?

Outcomes for the short, medium and long term. Established at Workshop 1.

How will we get there?

Co-designing solutions to achieve solutions during 2x2 hr working group workshops + 1hr with student advisors; implementation with a budget

How did our plans work?

Reflections on progress so far at final workshops; interviews and questionnaire to evaluate impact

What is loneliness? (15 mins)

Loneliness is 'a **subjective, unwelcome** feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a **mismatch** between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want' (Perlman and Peplau, 1981)

(A lack of meaningful relationships to others, oneself, and the places/spaces we inhabit)

It is a normal, everyday human experience with an adaptive function.

Stigma around loneliness is a problem.

It is accompanied by negative emotions such as sadness, anger, emptiness, frustration and hopelessness.

Children and young people associate loneliness with

- Feeling left out or excluded by peers or family
- Feeling different from others.
- Cut off and alone

It is not the same as being alone.

Different types:

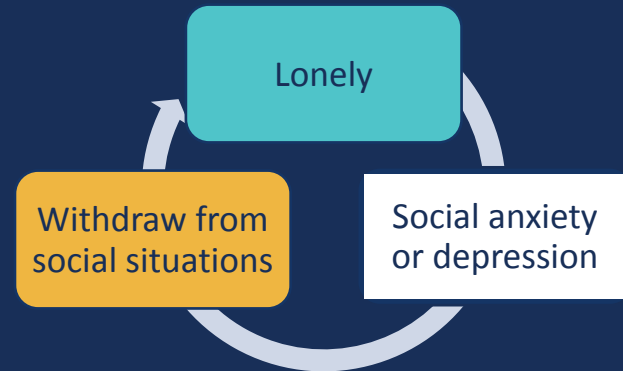
- Social
- Emotional
- Existential

Why does it matter?

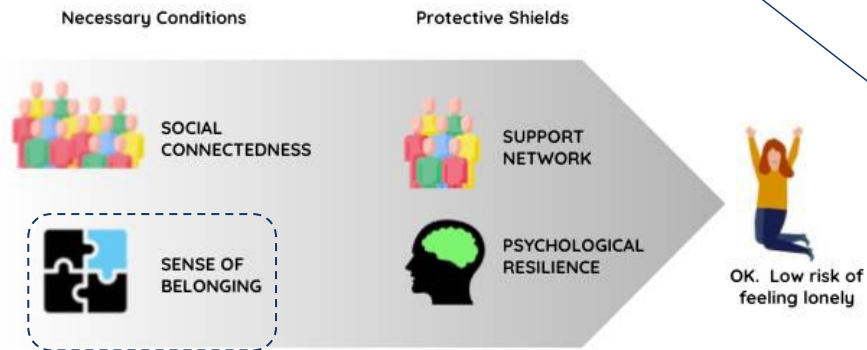
Loneliness is a normal everyday human experience but can be a problem if severe
(frequency, intensity, duration)



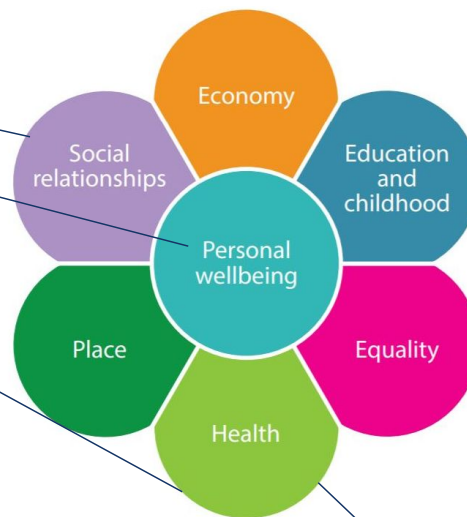
- More negative attitudes to school
- Lower educational attainment
- Poorer mental health
- Worse physical health and health damaging behaviours
- Downward spirals into severe loneliness, compounded by stigma:



Loneliness



[Neighbourly Lab. Campaign to End Loneliness. What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#)



Wellbeing encompasses mental health, physical health and social wellbeing - enables optimum functioning and flourishing

Mental health describes a spectrum from mental illness to mental health. Good mental health characterised by positive feelings, healthy responses to emotions, +ve connections with other people and community

Which young people are most at risk?

- Teenagers
- Those from lower socio-economic background (Look out for the UNITE project : <https://life-map-lab.com/2023/11/03/unite-project/>)
- Those from marginalised groups
- Those facing challenging life experiences or home circumstances (e.g. young carers, bereaved YP)



Schools make a difference!



Goodfellow et al., 2023 - analysis of HBSC data for Scotland

Experiences of different groups?

Acknowledging the existing wealth of knowledge



Understandings of school loneliness

- A cause for concern
- Discussed in a meaningful, insightful way by staff and students - but sometimes limited understanding
- Appreciation of different causes: lacking good quality friendships; not fitting in; peer exclusion and bullying, home circumstances etc
- Descriptions of negative emotions and social withdrawal
- Expressions of stigma 'Buddy bench would be demeaning'; it can take a long time to share
- Overemphasis on aloneness and observability

Possible solutions

Students taking the lead in explaining loneliness to and supporting peers



Peers as key support and a source of challenge

- Peers can be welcoming and a most valued source of support
- Prevailing peer culture can help and hinder - it can be excluding *'Maybe they don't like to be with you because something about you don't sit right with them'*
- Discriminatory/marginalising language can be embedded and relational aggression is an issue



Possible solutions

Building a sense of belonging by encouraging better understanding of one another & of the impact of marginalising behaviours

Opportunities to establish positive peer connections

- Careful seating plans and interaction during lessons
- Length of lunch and breaktimes
- Varied clubs and social spaces so that you can find a place where you are comfortable and belong
- Signposting?
- Off-curriculum activities and inclusive school trips can be powerful for connection



Possible solutions

An every day club room for breaktimes with low key adult support

Varied house competitions to foster a sense of belonging

Increasing opportunities for social interaction in the classroom & by creating more varied social clubs, activities and spaces at break/lunchtime

Staff support; behaviour systems and disengagement

- Access to supportive adults who listen and respond is valued by students
- But adult support on offer can be limited or unknown and not all staff are supportive
- Students want adults to address behaviour issues and staff work hard to do so
- But some students can't comply or can't cope and can be internally excluded on a repeated basis, and are separated from peers
- Physical/and social separation of those who are repeatedly absent or on the periphery



Possible solutions

A pastoral/peer support base for each year group

Proposal for changes to behaviour system to include a focus on language that marginalises & threatens

Review of the behaviour system & thinking about relational approaches for addressing poor behaviour and attendance

Next steps: Implementation & Evaluation

ENABLERS

- Commitment/support from senior leaders*
- Staff observing a positive impact on students' engagement and wellbeing
- Staff confidence in delivering and belief in value of the initiative*

BARRIERS

- Prioritising educational outcomes under time and resource constraints*
- Insufficient funding/resources*
- Staff turnover*
- Lack of ongoing training*

The sustainability of public health interventions in schools: a systematic review (Herlitz et al., 2020)

Next steps: Building a conversation about loneliness at school

Please help us to spread the word especially to education colleagues: public events on the Tackling Loneliness Hub

- **ADDRESSING LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AT SCHOOL** - an online event on Thursday 8th October 4-5pm on the [Tackling Loneliness Hub](https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/)
- For more details and to sign up, please use this link:
<https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/events/addressing-loneliness-among-young-people-at-school/>
- The second event will be held on the Tackling Loneliness Hub on Thursday November 12th, 4-5pm. It will include a chance to hear about work being done by the [Marmalade Trust](#) to address loneliness in schools. More information to follow soon.

**THANK
YOU!**

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