

Consequences of social isolation for children and adolescents



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Humans are social beings. For most children and adolescents, school is the most important social arena. Unfortunately, many children and adolescents with long-term illness are unable to attend school for extended periods. For example, school absence for children and adolescents with ME and cancer can range from months to years and vary between periodical and total (Dowsett & Colby, 1997; Bell, 2016).

School absence for prolonged periods results in limited interaction with other children and adolescents. Some children may end up completely losing their social network. What kind of consequences can this kind of social isolation have for children and young adults?

Social isolation and mental health problems

In a quantitative study of 4,227 adolescents between 13 and 19 years, scientists at the Norwegian Social Research Institute (NOVA) examined the extent of mental health problems among adolescents. Within the study, they compared youths with and without close friends to confide in and found that a significantly greater proportion of those lacking a close friend reported having depressive symptoms than those with close friends. Significantly, more than 1 in 3 girls, without a close friend, reported experiencing depressive symptoms (Hartberg & Hegna, 2014).

Being unable to attend school due to illness is obviously not synonymous with having no friends to confide in. However, school absence leads to less social interaction and can result in some children completely losing touch with friends (Drachler et al., 2009).

In another quantitative study of 4,526 adolescents between 13 and 19 years, researchers from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health examined factors that affected young people's psychological health positively and negatively. Of the factors they chose to study, they saw that "social support from friends" and "spending spare time with friends" were the strongest protective factors against mental disorders among adolescents (Myklestad, Røysamb & Tambs, 2012).

The findings of both studies are consistent with previous national and international studies, which show that social support from friends and peers helps to protect adolescents from mental disorders. (Hirsch & DuBois, 1992; Ystgaard, 1997; Kapi, Veltsista, Kavadias, Lekea & Bakoula, 2007).

Social isolation and loneliness

Many associate social isolation with loneliness (<http://www.noisolation.com/global/research/what-is-social-isolation/>). When it comes to loneliness, Perlman and Peplau's (1981) definition is often referenced. They define loneliness as a negative feeling – a lonely person is experiencing a discrepancy between desired and actual social contact.

Being socially isolated is not synonymous with being lonely. However, there will often be a correlation between social isolation and loneliness. People with few contacts are more often lonelier than people with many contacts (Meeuwesen, Hortulanus and Machielse, 2001; Halvorsen, 2005). It is regrettable that some children and adolescents feel lonely. Regardless of research, most people are aware that loneliness is a painful feeling.



In addition to it being unfortunate that some children and young people feel lonely, studies have also found connections between loneliness and mental health problems (<http://www.noisolation.com/global/research/how-does-social-isolation-affect-a-childs-mental-health-and-development/>). Much empirical research on adults and adolescents shows a link between loneliness and depression (see for example Qualter, Brown, Munn & Rotenberg, 2010). Interestingly, studies have found that friendship-related loneliness is more explanatory for depressive symptoms among adolescents than parent-related loneliness. One possible explanation is that friends are the preferred source of social support during adolescence (Lau, Chan & Lau, 1999).

Scientists have long known that loneliness in adults can predispose depressive symptoms later in life. Lately, they have also seen that lonely children are more susceptible to depressive symptoms in youth. In one study, researchers conclude that prevention of loneliness in childhood may be a protective factor against depression in adulthood (Qualter et al., 2010).

Summary

Many children with long-term illness are away from school for prolonged periods of time. This results in limited opportunities to spend time with other children and young people, and some end up losing their social network. This is both sad and alarming. Research shows that social isolation and loneliness often correlates with mental disorders, including depressive disorders.



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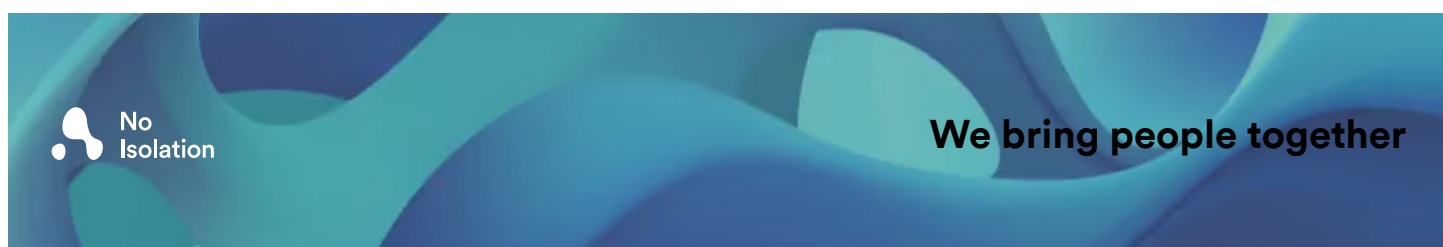
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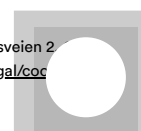
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