- Loneliness / Child care

HELP YOUR CHILD WITH *loneliness*

It's usually associated with the elderly – but loneliness is a huge concern for many children too, writes Lisa Salmon



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When you cast your mind back to your childhood, what do you remember? Sun-drenched days playing on the beach with a bucket and spade? Hours hanging out with your friends at the park? Or endless days playing out on your street with the kids from your neighbourhood? The likelihood is, today's generation of children won't have the same memories to look back on.

Whether it's due to fears over their safety, our increasing reliance on technology to communicate instead of face to face, or myriad other reasons, children today spend far more time alone than they did in previous years — and that can often lead to them feeling lonely.

The NSPCC Childline service delivered almost 5,000 loneliness-related counselling sessions to children last year, with Childline director Shaun Friel describing the fact that so many children are feeling lonely and isolated as 'heartbreaking'.

Psychotherapist Alicia Eaton, an expert in children's behaviour change and emotional wellbeing, says studies show loneliness is on the rise among today's children, heightened by them having fewer opportunities to make natural, spontaneous connections with other children.

'Loneliness in children is often misunderstood,' she says. 'It's not just about being on their own or physically isolated — it's a deep sense of emotional disconnection, a feeling that they don't belong or aren't being valued.'

But there are ways to tackle loneliness – here are Friel and Eaton's suggestions for how parents can help children feel less lonely...

1. Communicate openly

Friel says parents should encourage children to talk about their feelings and listen without judgement, and explains: 'For many children, these feelings can be overwhelming, making them withdraw from social situations and, in turn, struggle to reach out for support. That's why it's so important for parents and carers to create an environment where children feel safe to talk about their emotions.

'This means listening without judgement and validating their feelings.'

2. Discover what's causing the problem

Try to find out why they might be feeling lonely, and validate their emotions. Eaton points out: 'When children feel that no-one really "gets" them, this can be described as emotional loneliness. Even with people around them, they might feel isolated because they lack a close bond with someone they trust — be it a parent, a sibling, or a best friend.'

And Friel says that as there are many reasons why a child may be lonely. 'It's important to gently explore what might be making a child feel this way. Whether they're struggling to make friends, feeling excluded, or going through a big change, validating their emotions and understanding the root cause can help you support them in the right way.'

3. Encourage socialising

Obviously, helping children find opportunities to connect with peers is a good way to help them feel less lonely. 'Connecting with others through joining a club, starting a new hobby or simply spending more quality time together as a family, can often help with loneliness,' says Friel.

4. Help them build confidence

Celebrate your child's strengths and achievements, and remind them of the positive relationships in their lives, suggests Friel, who points out the NSPCC offers the online service Building Connections, which matches young people with a trained befriender to help them build confidence and better manage their loneliness.

'Loneliness can often make children doubt themselves,' he says, 'but reminding them of their strengths and celebrating their achievements can help rebuild their confidence.'

And Eaton explains that building their confidence may help lessen any feelings they have of being left out. She says: 'When children feel left out, excluded, or unable to connect with their peers, this is more of a social loneliness. It's the sense of standing on the sidelines while everyone else seems to belong.'

5. Build a supportive environment

Loneliness can't just be resolved with one conversation, so it's important to create an environment of openness where a child can talk to you about their feelings and any struggles they may be facing, says Friel. 'Loneliness isn't something that disappears overnight, which is why creating an ongoing atmosphere of support is so important,' he explains.

'Regular check-ins, showing interest in their feelings, and letting them know they're never alone can help children feel valued and connected.'

Eaton stresses: 'We should never underestimate the impact that loneliness can have on a child's wellbeing. When children feel disconnected, it can lower their self-esteem and leave them more vulnerable to anxiety, sadness, or even depression.

'Ultimately, children need to feel they matter, that they're loved, and that they belong. By addressing loneliness early on, we can give them the emotional first-aid they need to grow into confident, happy individuals who feel connected to the world around them.'

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