

## Not in isolation

Children can overcome loneliness if they learn more about how friendships work and are given opportunities to develop their social skills, reports Márianna Csóti

Many children with special educational needs have difficulties with social interactions and hence find it hard to make, and keep, friends. Two recent government initiatives: Every Child Matters and Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), emphasise the need for children to develop socially so it is important for children to understand why relationships might fail - and what they can do to make them a success. Also, through increasing their understanding of loneliness, children can help one another avoid being lonely – as well as helping themselves.

### Loneliness and social networks

Children need to feel part of a group or couple for a sense of belonging and to be seen to fit in. They also need friends to help them learn how to get on with people and for support that cannot be got from the family.

However, not having friends and feeling lonely are two different things. A child might have many friends yet still feel lonely.

Loneliness does not kick in automatically when

children don't have a certain number of friends. It's far more variable and complex than that and can depend on the individual.

The emotional state of loneliness is often related to children's attitude about what constitutes a satisfying social network. They might feel that they just never have enough friends or they might fear that everyone else has more than they have. However, the quality of friendships is more important than numbers of friends a child has.

Friendships that have high levels of intimacy – where children share their secrets, dreams and fears – tend to be far more satisfying than friendships where minimal conversation takes place and the subject of the conversations are on practical things or on discussion of sport or games. Since girls tend to operate on the more intimate level in friendships than boys do, they often find their friendships extremely satisfying – although they can also go very wrong if friends fall out. Relational bullying is a major problem in schools, particularly among girls.

Ask the children to consider all the people they know who either are, or could be, their friend and *mentally* place them into three columns (to avoid embarrassment of actually doing this in school for those children who have few or no friends at all). The children could later carry out the exercise at home, in private.

The *intimate* column contains people they know very well such as their closest friends either in school or out of school. The *comfortable* column contains people they don't know as well – such as people they regularly sit next to in class but only socialise with during lessons. The *distance* column contains people they barely know through, for example, being in the same class or travelling on the same route to school.

As well as making friends with people in their distance column or completely new people, if children are lonely, they can improve their social skills to move one or more of the people from their comfortable column to their intimate column.

Some aspects of children's social performance helps perpetuate loneliness. So through learning more about friendships and how they work and the common pitfalls in relationships they will be given the skills they

need to shift more children into their intimate column.

### **Loneliness discussions**

Read the following paragraphs describing fictional characters to the class and use the questions after each to promote class discussion.

*Kwesi has lived most of his life in Ghana, Africa, but has recently moved to England. He finds the weather cold and miserable and the school unfriendly. People only speak to him to answer his questions: most of the time he is ignored. Sometimes, a group of girls mimic his accent and if he has to talk to them they never understand him first time. They often giggle behind his back.*

*He is the only black student in the year and feels he doesn't belong. He's tried to join in and make friends but it hasn't worked. Once he went up to a group that were listening to a joke but no one started again for him or explained what it was about. He felt stupid.*

*Kwesi also hears jokes made about the sandwiches his mother makes him. They try to guess what he's eating. And when they talk about music, someone always brings up the subject of drums whenever he is within earshot.*

**1. In what ways is Kwesi made to feel left out?**

- Through private jokes - laughing behind his back.
- By not filling him in when he arrived half way through the joke.
- By being ignored.
- By having jokes made about his food and frequent reference to drums.

**2. How could the children at school make him feel welcome?**

They could:

- ask about his home and customs.
- ask about the food he eats and to describe what it tastes like or ask to taste some.
- ask him what music he likes - not assume because he is from Africa he only knows and likes the drums.
- try to understand his accent without making it obvious – they could ask him to speak more slowly.
- explain any jokes he overhears or fill him in on any conversation he's missed if he arrives half-way through.

*Wendy's father is rich and their family live in a big house just out of town. Most of the girls at Wendy's school have never been there because*

*Wendy rarely invites anyone home. There's no one at school who's really good enough to be her friend so she imagines friends instead.*

*Polly goes to Wendy's school and has lots of friends. She was very happy until six months ago when her mother died. Since then, she's been very quiet and hardly ever smiles. She wants to talk to someone about what happened but all her friends have both parents alive and wouldn't understand. She misses her mum dreadfully - and so does her Dad. He hardly talks either. Wendy and Polly are both lonely.*

**3. Why is Wendy lonely?**

Wendy is lonely because she has no friends. Wendy has too high expectations of her potential friends and thinks that there is no one good enough for her. She is too snooty and proud.

**4. Why is Polly lonely?**

Polly is lonely because she has no one with whom to share her feelings. She feels no one could understand what she's going through, even though she has many friends. Even her father doesn't talk to her about how she feels.

## **5. How would you describe their different types of loneliness?**

- Wendy's loneliness is social - she doesn't have friends to do things with or to be with. Social loneliness is when we feel bored, without an aim and on the outside or edge of things.
- Polly's loneliness is emotional - it is her feelings that are not shared even though she has plenty of friends. Emotional loneliness is when we feel abandoned, empty, worried and frightened.

## **6. Are there other reasons for being lonely?**

- Being socially rejected and ignored.
- Experiencing divorce of parents or of being abandoned, if one parent leaves.
- By moving to a new area and having to make new friends.

*Gary goes to school alone, sits in class alone and comes home from school alone. He's got used to being ignored but doesn't like it. If he ever thinks he is being stared at, he'll turn round and growl, 'What're you looking at?' He'll also pull a really nasty face. He isn't going to let anyone mess around with him.*

*One day, a boy laughs at Gary when he trips up the step when going into class. Gary spins*

*round and stamps on the other boy's foot. Now it is his turn to laugh. No one is going to get one over on him. Anyway, soon he'll be out of here. He is going to leave school the moment he turns sixteen.*

## **7. How does being unpopular affect Gary?**

- Gary has become aggressive (angry in an uncontrolled way) and hostile (unfriendly) towards other people.
- He is probably leaving school early because he has no rewarding relationships there and doesn't feel part of the school.
- He is lonely.
- He lacks social skills. (Growling at people is not a positive way of communicating.)
- He behaves as though he dislikes other people. He doesn't look for nice things about them.
- He has a low opinion of himself - he expects to be made fun of.
- He is very much on his own - he probably lacks cooperative skills.
- Because he has had bad experiences, he probably doesn't trust people.

## **8. What does it feel like to be left out?**

Here are some suggestions:

- Wary of meeting people

- Frightened of life
- Dread of social situations
- Frightened of being alone
- Self-conscious
- On the outside looking in
- Worthless
- Depressed
- A joke
- Unlovable
- Suicidal
- An outcast
- Not likeable
- Angry
- Isolated
- Miserable
- Bitter
- Embarrassed

*Christine is 19 years old. She had few friends in school and even less now. But she's joined a dating agency. Her husband, when she's found him, will fill her lonely hours. She doesn't need anyone else.*

*Christine's studying hard to get a better job. She's already done well for herself but she has ambition to do better. And on weekends, Christine reads all those classics she meant to when she was younger and never had the time. And when she isn't reading she writes her diary.*

*It's useful to write down her thoughts and feelings. Her diary is rather like a close friend - except it's better at keeping secrets.*

### **9. How has Christine tried to make up for a lack of friends?**

- She is trying to find a sexual partner to fill the gaps of friendship instead of working at improving her relationships in general.
- She is putting most of her time and energy into work to fill the gaps from not socialising which actually helps to perpetuate loneliness.
- She is filling her time with other non-social activities – reading and writing her diary. (Friendship substitutes.)

### **10. What are risks of being lonely?**

- Loneliness can lead to depression and then to suicide. People who feel that they have no one to turn to can be very vulnerable in times of crises. (Suicide is greatest in the 15-24 age group.)
- There is nothing to balance conflict and lack of emotional reward if living within an unsupportive family.
- Lonely people tend not to live as long and can be harder hit by illness.

## Rewarding behaviour and loneliness

Below is a short description showing how Nimisha operates socially. Read it out to the class and then use the questions below to formulate a discussion. Note that for a relationship to work there has to be a *reward*: both people involved must get something good out of the relationship.

*Every time Alice meets Nimisha, Nimisha complains. About her brothers, her mother, her bad health, the school meals, the teachers, the weather, the late buses, everything. Alice finds some things inconvenient, such as a bus being cancelled, but it is part of life and has to be accepted. But Nimisha always makes such a big deal over it. Being with Nimisha makes Alice feel gloomy and depressed.*

### 11. Is Alice's relationship with Nimisha rewarding?

No, as Nimisha is always demanding support and sympathy from Alice and does not give anything in return. She does not allow Alice to talk about her problems - she is only interested in herself. The relationship is unbalanced.

### 12. What might happen between them?

Alice might become very distant towards Nimisha and might avoid her. The friendship

will not survive as people do not tend to stay in an unrewarding relationship. (If the costs of the relationship outweigh the benefits then the relationship is likely to break down).

### 13. What can you do to make sure the cost of someone being friendly with you isn't too high?

You can limit the costs to others by reciprocating help given, listening to other people when they show they wish to speak, supporting them when they need help, paying back borrowed money quickly, returning things borrowed, trying to make them happy (as long as the costs aren't too high), remembering that one good turn deserves another. Friends also need to try not to be jealous, should keep confidences and should stand up for their friend when their friend is not around.

## Moving forwards

Children need pointers as to how to move people from their distance column to their comfortable column and to move people from their comfortable column to their intimate column as well as help in combating loneliness. Here are some tips to give to them:

- Concentrate on having more satisfying friendships as well as increasing the number of friends you have.
- Be rewarding to spend time with.
- Develop interests you can do on your own so that you occupy your spare time doing something you enjoy – it also gives you something to talk about with other children, making you more interesting.
- Remember how it feels to be left out – help other children who look like they need someone.
- Don't be too picky about who can be your friend.
- Chat to other people to break down prejudices. You'll have more in common than you think.
- Look for the good in people rather than the bad.
- Believe that you are a worthwhile person to know. Make yourself more obviously worthwhile to know by showing your positive sides.
- Let new friendships develop slowly to give yourself time to build trust if this is a problem for you.
- Making friends requires effort – and both sides need to work at it. Try to work through any difficulties you have with friends and

only write them off if there is good reason to such as a massive break in trust.

- Be prepared to compromise on some things – your friend should also try to meet you half way.
- Be aware of friendship rules (such as allowing friends to have other friends, keeping confidences etc).

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