Article

Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness: 2018

Analysis of children's and young people's views, experiences and suggestions to overcome loneliness, using in-depth interviews, the Community Life Survey 2016 to 2017 and Good Childhood Index Survey, 2018.

Table of contents

1 . Main points

Children (aged 10 to 15 years)

- 11.3% of children said that they were "often" lonely; this was more common among younger children aged 10 to 12 years (14.0%) than among those aged 13 to 15 years (8.6%).

- 27.5% of children who received free school meals said they were "often" lonely, compared with 5.5% of those who did not.

- 19.5% of children living in a city reported "often" feeling lonely, compared with just over 5% of those living in either towns or rural areas.

- Children who reported "low" satisfaction with their health said they "often" felt lonely (28.3%), compared with those who had "medium, high or very high" satisfaction (about 10%).

- Children who reported "low" satisfaction with their relationships with family and friends were also more likely to say they were "often" lonely (34.8% and 41.1%, respectively).

Young people (aged 16 to 24 years)

- 9.8% of young people said that they were "often" lonely.

- Nearly half of young men reported that they "hardly ever or never" felt lonely, compared with 32.4% of young women.

- Those reporting no long-term illness or disability were much more likely to say they "hardly ever or never" felt lonely (44.8%) than those with a long-term illness or disability (19.3%).

- Young people living in a household with other adults were more likely to say that they "hardly ever or never" felt lonely than those living in single-adult households (over 40% compared with 18.2%, respectively).

Qualitative research with children and young people found that:

- a range of predictable transitions linked to schooling and the move on from secondary education can trigger loneliness in children and young people

- children and young people described embarrassment about admitting to loneliness, seeing it as a possible "failing"

- practical, social and emotional or mental barriers to participating fully in social life and activities can also contribute to loneliness

- the intersection of multiple issues and triggers to loneliness, or more extreme and enduring life events such as bereavement, disability, being bullied or mental health challenges, may make it more difficult for children and young people to move out of loneliness without help

- their suggestions for tackling loneliness included: making it more acceptable to discuss loneliness at school and in society; preparing young people better to understand and address loneliness in themselves and others; creating opportunities for social connection; and encouraging positive uses of social media

2 . Statistician's comment

"This is our first ever report on children's loneliness, part of work we are doing to provide insight into this important social issue that can impact on people's health and well-being.

"We've looked at how often children and young people feel lonely and why. An important factor is going through transitional life stages such as the move from primary to secondary school and, later, leaving school or higher education and adapting to early adult life.

"This work supports the government's loneliness strategy, announced by the Prime Minister in October 2018."

Dawn Snape, Assistant Director, Sustainability and Inequalities Division, Office for National Statistics

3 . Things you need to know about this release

Why does loneliness matter?

Loneliness is a feeling that most people will experience at some point in their lives. However, when people feel lonely most or all of the time, it can have a serious impact on an individual's well-being, and their ability to function in society. As loneliness has been linked to poor physical health, mental health, and poor personal well-being, with potentially adverse effects on communities, it is an issue of increasing interest to policymakers at local and national levels as well as internationally.

National measurement of loneliness

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness published its manifesto in 2017, setting out a series of recommendations to central government, as well as local authorities and wider civil society. In January 2018, the Prime Minister set out the government's response, which included appointing a ministerial lead for loneliness and committing the government to:

- develop the evidence-base around the impact of different initiatives in tackling loneliness, across all ages and within all communities

- establish appropriate indicators of loneliness across all ages with Office for National Statistics (ONS) so these figures can be included in major research studies

ONS has worked with the cross-governmental Tackling Loneliness Team and a Loneliness Technical Advisory Group (TAG), comprised of experts in loneliness measurement and analysis, to agree a working definition of loneliness and recommendations for loneliness, which have been published today (5 December 2018) alongside this article. As part of this work, it became clear that there is currently much more extensive and robust data available on loneliness in older people, but comparatively little on how loneliness may affect children and young people.

Addressing the data gap for children and young people

ONS worked collaboratively with The Children's Society to begin to address the data gap on loneliness among children and young people. The project involved:

- cognitive testing of loneliness questions for use with children (aged 10 to 15 years) to investigate how well they would work for them

- in-depth interviews asking children and young people about their perceptions and experiences of loneliness

- including loneliness questions on an annual survey among young people aged 10 to 17 years conducted by The Children's Society (The Good Childhood Index Survey)

Additionally, ONS also conducted cognitive testing of loneliness questions and qualitative interviews with those aged 16 to 24 years to help understand more about lived experiences of loneliness among this age group. To set this in context, we have used data from the Community Life Survey (CLS) to provide a bigger picture perspective of the extent to which young people are affected by loneliness and the factors associated with this. Taken together, the project aimed to highlight how loneliness develops and how young people respond to it as they progress from childhood into early adulthood.

Detailed information on the survey data used can be found in the accompanying datasets. Information on the in-depth interviews with children and young people (recruitment process, breakdown of the sample, interview techniques, recording, transcription and approach to analysis) is available in the separately published National measurement of loneliness: 2018.

The statistical significance of differences noted within the release are based on non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals.

4 . How common is loneliness in children and young people?

Descriptive analysis was carried out to shed light on how personal characteristics and circumstances are associated with self-reported loneliness in children and young people. In this section, we have focused on the main factors that have a significant association with feeling lonely more often. Any differences stated, such as saying whether a group is more or less likely to report loneliness, are statistically significant unless otherwise stated. It should be noted that, as the data are from different data sources (the Good Childhood Index Survey for children aged 10 to 15 years and the Community Life Survey for young people aged 16 to 24 years), direct comparisons cannot be made for findings on children and young people.

For a full description of characteristics and circumstances considered for our analysis (including those that were not found to be significantly related to loneliness), please see the accompanying dataset and metadata provided with this release.

How often do children say they are lonely?

On the Good Childhood Index Survey, children and young people aged 10 to 15 years were asked about loneliness in two different ways. Firstly, children were asked three questions about feelings associated with loneliness: "How often do you feel that you have no one to talk to?", "How often do you feel left out?" and "How often do you feel alone?" (the response options were "hardly ever or never", "some of the time" and "often").

These three questions comprise an adapted version of the short University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) loneliness scale, which uses an indirect approach to assessing loneliness without actually using the word "loneliness". The response to each question is assigned a score, and a total loneliness score is calculated by adding up the scores for each respondent. Using this method, each respondent is assigned a loneliness score between 3 (least often lonely) and 9 (most often lonely).

Children were most likely to score 3 on the scale (34.1%), which means they answered, "hardly ever or never" when asked about each aspect of loneliness. This compares with about 13.7% of children with a score of 7 or more on the scale, suggesting more frequent loneliness.
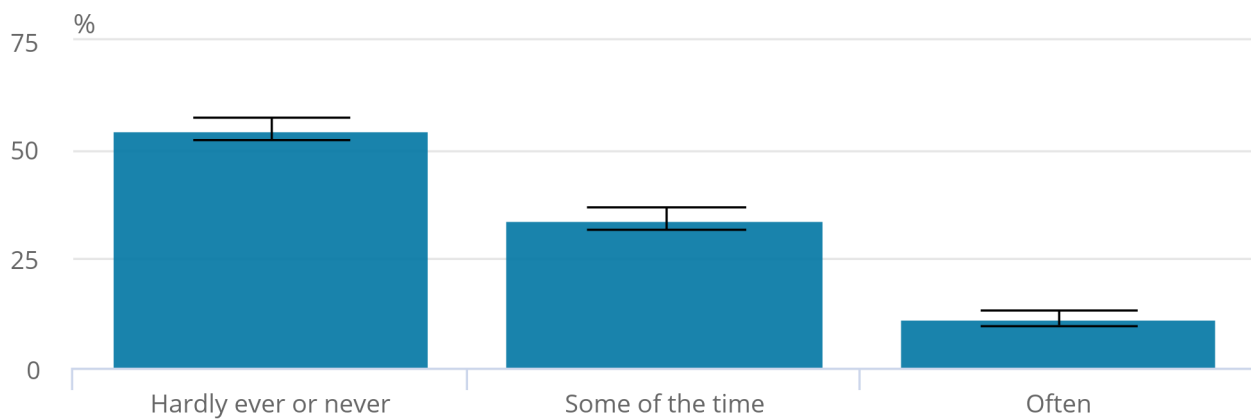
When asked the direct question, "How often do you feel lonely?", 11.3% of children aged 10 to 15 years reported that they often felt lonely. Conversely, 54.6% of children answered that they hardly ever or never felt lonely, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Reported frequency of loneliness among children

Great Britain

Figure 1: Reported frequency of loneliness among children

Great Britain

Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Young children report experiencing loneliness more often than older children

When comparing reported loneliness among children aged 10 to 12 years and 13 to 15 years, younger children were more likely to say they were often lonely than older children. Of those children aged 10 to 12 years, 14.0% reported that they often felt lonely, while only 8.6% of children aged 13 to 15 years reported the same (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reported frequency of loneliness by age group, among children

Great Britain

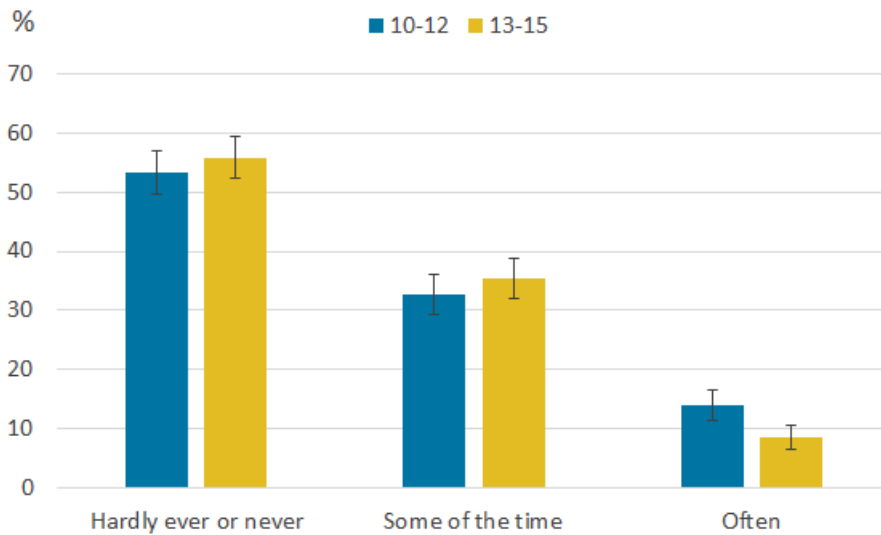Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

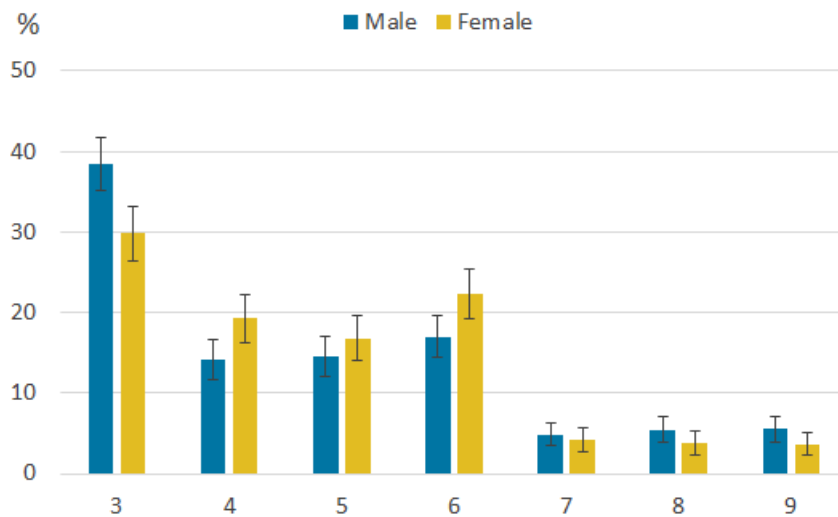1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

This difference is the result of a higher percentage of children aged 12 years saying they often felt lonely, compared with a smaller percentage of those aged 14 and 15 years reporting the same. This may be associated with the transition from primary to secondary school that occurs when children are aged 11 or 12 years. In fact, when looking at the differences between children of different ages in more detail, 12-year-olds (15.8%) were more likely than 14-year-olds (7.5%) and 15-year-olds (7.7%) to report that they felt lonely more often.

Girls report experiencing loneliness slightly more often than boys

On the UCLA loneliness scale, boys were more likely than girls to score 3 (the lowest score), with 38.5% and 29.9% scoring in this way, respectively. This means that boys were more likely than girls to say "hardly ever or never" to all three of the loneliness questions. In comparison, girls were more likely to score 4, 5 and 6 on the UCLA scale, suggesting that they were more likely than boys to choose the response, "some of the time". Figure 3 shows the distribution of UCLA scores by gender.

Figure 3: Reported UCLA scores by gender, among children

Great Britain

Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

2. UCLA refers to the University of California, Los Angeles measure of loneliness.

However, when asked directly how often they feel lonely, we found no significant differences between boys and girls. 12.6% of boys reported that they often felt lonely, compared with 10.1% of girls, while over half of boys and half of girls reported that they hardly ever or never felt lonely (56.1% and 53.1%, respectively).

Children who receive free school meals report experiencing loneliness more often

Children who received free school meals were more likely to report feeling lonely. Of those children receiving free school meals, 27.5% reported that they were often lonely, while 5.5% of children who did not receive free school meals reported the same.

There was also a noticeable difference in whether children received free school meals and reporting low levels of loneliness. Just over one-third of children who received free school meals reported that they were "hardly ever or never" lonely, compared with nearly two-thirds of children who did not receive free school meals, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Reported frequency of loneliness by free school meal receipt, among children

Great Britain
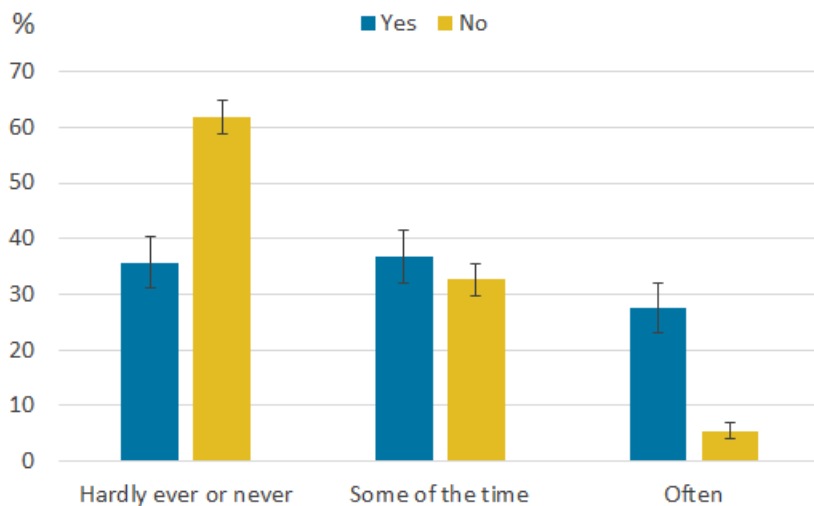
Source: Good Childhood Index Survey, Children's Society

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Free school meals are generally available to lower income families, although it is not clear whether these results just reflect deprivation. Our separate analysis showed that children's satisfaction with household income was not significantly related to loneliness. Other research has also suggested that receipt of free school meals may mark children as different in some way and could be a possible contributor to loneliness.

Additionally, not all children who are eligible actually claim free school meals; the take-up is around 80% (see The Children's Society). Previous research has also found that embarrassment and fear of being teased were reasons given by children and their parents for not accepting free school meals. These issues suggest that more frequent loneliness among those receiving free school meals may be multi-faceted, possibly involving both deprivation and social stigma. Further research in this area would be helpful.

Children who live in a city report often feeling lonely

Children who lived in a city were more likely than other children to report feeling lonely, with one-fifth (19.5%) of these children reporting that they were often lonely. This is in comparison with 5.4% of children who lived in a town, and 5.7% of children who lived in a village, hamlet, or an isolated rural location.

The inverse was true among children reporting that they hardly ever or never felt lonely. Of those children who lived in a city, 45.9% reported hardly ever or never feeling lonely, in comparison with 60.5% of children who lived in a town, and 61.8% of children who lived in a village, hamlet, or an isolated rural location, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Reported frequency of loneliness by rural and urban living, among children

Great Britain
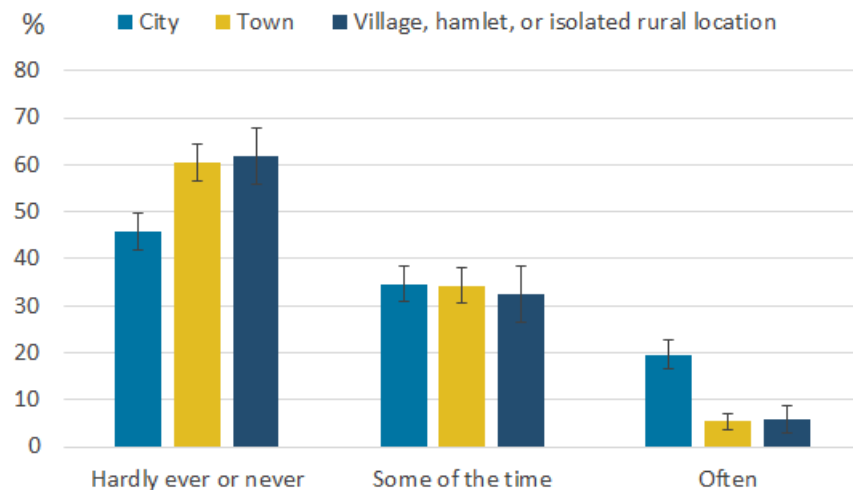
Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Children with low satisfaction with their health report experiencing loneliness more often

Children who reported low satisfaction with their health were more likely to report that they were often lonely than other children. Of those children who reported low satisfaction with their health, 28.3% reported that they often felt lonely.

Additionally, children who reported very high satisfaction with their health were more likely than other children to report that they hardly ever or never felt lonely (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Reported frequency of loneliness by satisfaction with health, among children

Great Britain

Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Children who are not satisfied with the relationships with their family and friends report experiencing loneliness more often

As shown in Figure 7, children who reported low satisfaction with the relationships with their family were more likely to report that they often felt lonely than any other group. Of those children who reported low satisfaction with their family, 34.8% reported that they often felt lonely, compared with those who reported medium (11.1%), high (11.3%) or very high satisfaction with their family (10.2%).

Figure 7: Reported frequency of loneliness by satisfaction with relationships with family members, among children

Great Britain

Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

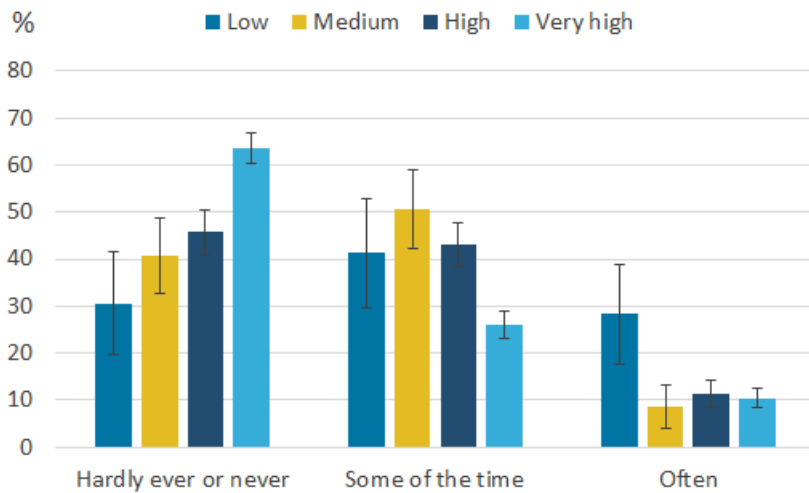1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Of those children who reported low satisfaction with their friendships, 41.1% reported that they often felt lonely. This was higher than children who reported medium (9.3%), high (7.9%) or very high (12.1%) satisfaction with their friends. By contrast, children who reported high or very high satisfaction with their friends were more likely to report that they hardly ever or never felt lonely (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Reported frequency of loneliness by satisfaction with friendships, among children

Great Britain

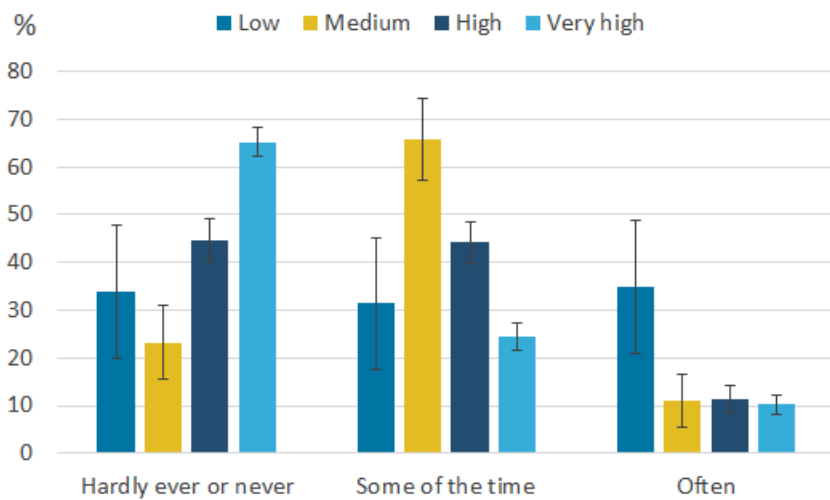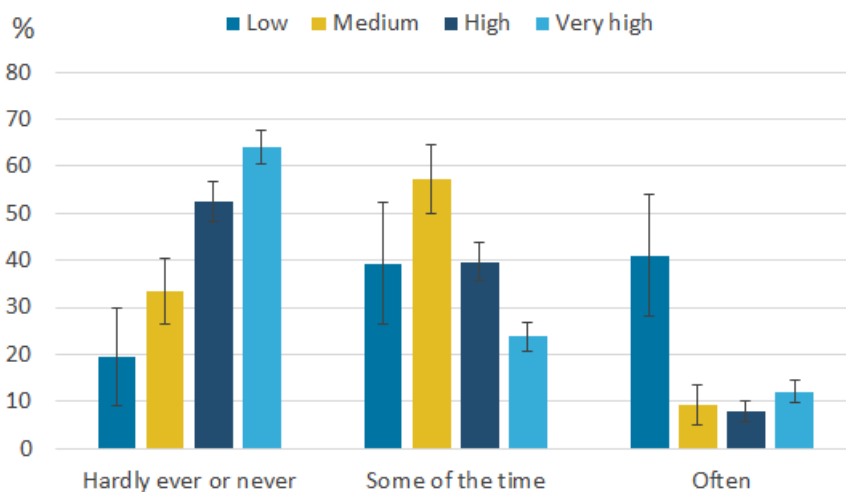Source: Good Childhood Index Survey (2018), Children's Society

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Other factors influencing children's loneliness

Other characteristics or circumstances that were found to have a significant effect on children's loneliness were:

- the number of children living in the household: children who lived in a household that contained three or more children were less likely to report often feeling lonely than children who lived in a household that contained one child or two children

- personal well-being: children who reported low life satisfaction, low happiness and low worthwhile scores were more likely to report often feeling lonely than other children

Variables that did not produce a significant result included:

- ethnicity

- the number of adults in the household

These results can be found in the [accompanying datasets](#).

How often do young people say they are lonely?

This section looks at how often young people aged 16 to 24 years say they are lonely. The findings are based on data from the [Community Life Survey](#) (2016 to 2017). Young people were asked a direct question, like the one that was used with children, but they were given five response options rather than three. For more robust analysis, the five categories have been collapsed into three. To this end, the responses "Some of the time" and "Occasionally" have been combined into one category, and "Hardly ever" and "Never" into another.

The proportion of young people giving each response to the question, "How often do you feel lonely?" is shown in Figure 9. This shows that 9.8% of young people said that they often or always felt lonely, while 40.7% of young people reported that they hardly ever or never felt lonely.

Figure 9: Reported frequency of loneliness among young people

England

Figure 9: Reported frequency of loneliness among young people
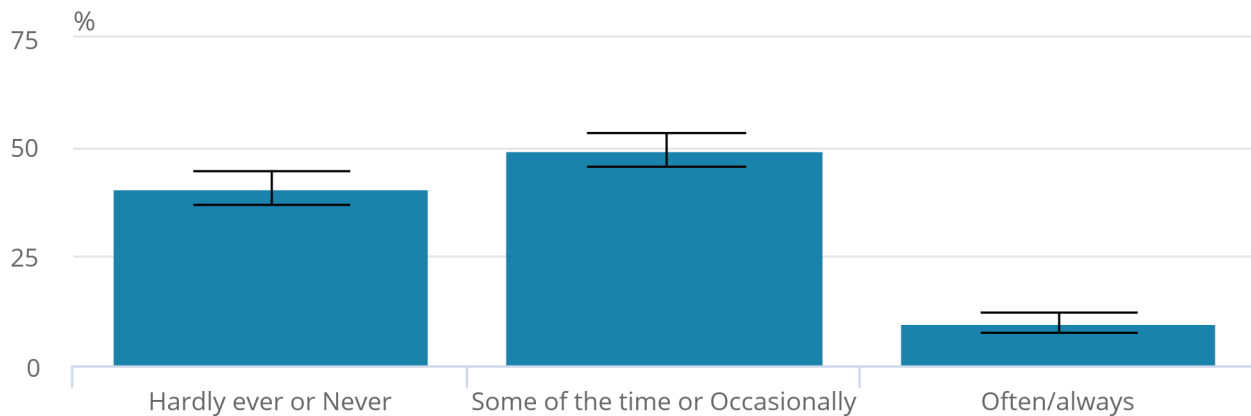
England

Source: Community Life Survey, 2016 to 2017

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Young men are more likely to report hardly ever or never feeling lonely than young women

Young men were more likely than young women to say that they hardly ever or never felt lonely, with nearly half of men reporting that they hardly ever or never felt lonely, compared with 32.4% of women who reported the same. By contrast, young women were more likely (57.2%) to say that they felt lonely some of the time or occasionally than young men (42.1%).

There was no significant difference in the percentage of young men and women reporting that they often or always felt lonely; 9.1% of men and 10.4% of women reported that they often or always felt lonely (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Reported frequency of loneliness by sex, among young people

England

Source: Community Life Survey, 2016 to 2017

Notes:

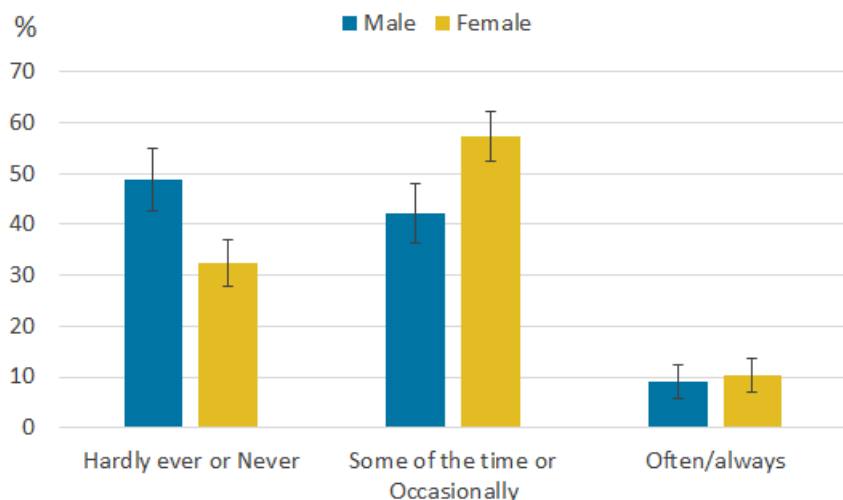1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Young people aged 16 years are less likely to report often feeling lonely than those who are aged 18 years or over

The effect of age on young people's loneliness was also analysed. The 16 to 24 age range may encompass several important educational, employment and household transitions for young people, which may be challenging for their personal and social well-being. Transitions to university, for example, may present particular challenges for students who can feel socially excluded. Those aged 16 years, who may have left school, were significantly less likely to report often feeling lonely than those aged over 18 years. The highest reported proportion of young people who "often or always" felt lonely was for 18- and 21-year-olds, those most likely to have transitioned into university, and then transitioned into work, which are both major life changes.

Young people aged 16 to 18 years were less likely (6.5%) to report that they often or always felt lonely than those aged 19 to 21 years (11.0%), or 22 to 24 years (11.5%). However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Young people who report long-term illness or disability experience loneliness more often

Young people who rated their general health as either good or very good were more likely to report that they hardly ever or never felt lonely. Further, those who reported no long-term illness or disability were more likely to report lower levels of loneliness, with 44.8% reporting that they hardly ever or never felt lonely. By comparison, only one-fifth (19.3%) of those with a long-term illness or disability reported hardly ever or never feeling lonely.

Young people who reported a long-term illness or disability were more likely (63.1%) to report sometimes or occasionally feeling lonely than those who did not (46.6%). These results are shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Reported frequency of loneliness by long-term illness or disability, among young people
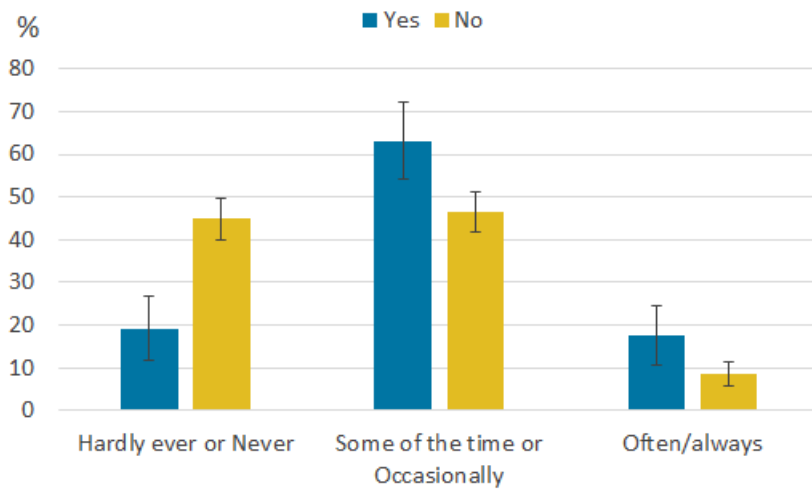
England

Source: Community Life Survey, 2016 to 2017

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Young people who live in single adult households are more likely to report experiencing loneliness more often

Young people who lived in single adult households were less likely to report low levels of loneliness than those who lived with others. Of those people in single adult households, 18.2% reported that they hardly ever or never felt lonely, compared with those who lived in a household with two (41.7%), three (40.2%) or four or more adults (40.9%). Young people in single adult households were also more likely to experience loneliness some of the time or occasionally than those in two or three adult households (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Reported frequency of loneliness by number of adults in the household, among young people
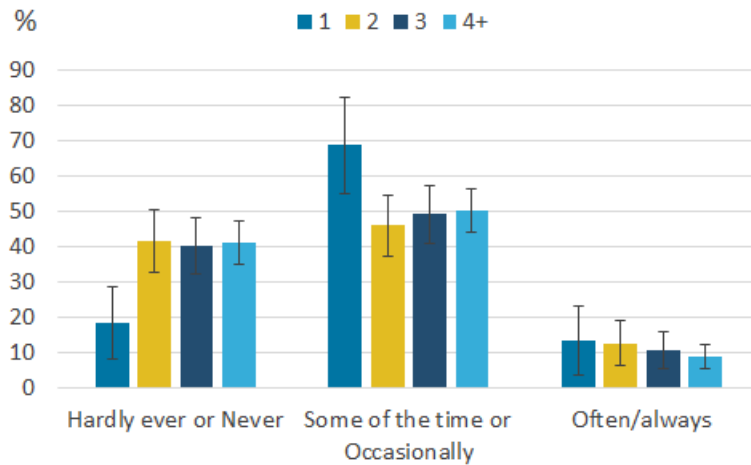
England

Source: Community Life Survey, 2016 to 2017

Notes:

1. 95% confidence intervals are displayed on the chart.

Other factors influencing young people's loneliness

Other characteristics or circumstances found to have a significant effect on young people's loneliness were:

- ethnicity: young people who did not identify as black or minority ethnic were more likely to report low levels of loneliness than those who did

- housing tenure: young people who were living rent free were more likely to report hardly ever or never feeling lonely than those who rented their home

- the belief that you have someone to call on if you need help: young people who did not feel that they had someone to call on for help were significantly more likely to report that they often felt lonely

- the belief that you have someone to call on if you want company, or to socialise: those who agreed that they had people that they could call on if they wanted company were more likely to report that they hardly ever or never felt lonely than those who disagreed

- personal well-being: young people who reported low life satisfaction, happiness and worthwhile scores and high anxiety scores were more likely to report higher levels of loneliness

Factors that previous research has found to have a significant effect on adult loneliness, but which here did not produce significant results:

- employment status

- deprivation

- acting as a carer

- living as part of a couple

- urban or rural living

- satisfaction with local area

These results can be found in the [accompanying datasets](#).

5 . What does loneliness mean to children and young people?

Drawing on qualitative interview data, we asked children and young people to say in their own words what "loneliness" means to them and how it is similar or different to other terms sometimes used in connection with loneliness, such as feeling or being alone, or isolation.

Children's and young people's conceptions of being alone, lonely or isolated

Perspectives on being alone and feeling alone

Children and young people felt that "being alone" is not the same as "being lonely". Being alone was understood as:

- a physical circumstance

- a sometimes positive choice, and beneficial

"It's OK to a certain extent [being alone], […] Because sometimes you need time to think, time to be by yourself. Time to like, […] I wouldn't say adjust but understand what's going on. […] if you're going through a situation sometimes you need time to be alone to understand I can do this now. Or here's what I done. I can do better. Or like just to better yourself in a way." (Female, aged 15 years)

"I think that sometimes it's good to be alone. You don't want to constantly be surrounded by people. But I think it should be a choice. You don't want to be alone without wanting to be. It's not a very nice feeling." (Female, aged 13 years)

"Being alone could be more just like physical separation." (Male, aged 19 years)

Being alone only becomes problematic when it is not chosen and continues longer than is desired. "Being alone" may also be understood differently to "feeling alone". Whereas "being alone" relates to physical separation, "feeling alone" reflects a sense of emotional separation, which may also involve being alone physically.

"Feeling alone, you feel like you have nobody or you're kind of like shut away out from the world." (Female, aged 14 years)

Perspectives on feeling lonely

Loneliness was understood as a state of mind that could involve:

- a sense of exclusion

- disconnection from others

- unhappiness with relationships

Both children and young people noted that loneliness can happen when people are with others as well as when they are on their own.

"With loneliness, there's no one able to relate." (Male, aged 16 years)

"Alone is being by yourself and lonely is never having anyone to talk to." (Female, aged 11 years)

"How many times you're alone could be you're at your house and there's no one there. How many times you're lonely could mean there's people there but they're ignoring you." (Male, aged 11 years)

"Loneliness is not having anybody to confide in, not having anybody to share anything with, wishing there was somebody there maybe when there isn't." (Female, aged 23 years)

Loneliness could also be understood as a more enduring, negative emotional state than feeling alone. The idea that loneliness is a longer-term state was discussed both by children and young people. Loneliness was not seen as a positive choice in the same way that being alone could be.

"[It's] constantly being alone by yourself." (Female, aged 18 years)

"Alone is like a short period of time you can feel alone, but then lonely is like a long period of time." (Female, aged 14 years)

"I think alone to me and lonely are different even though they literally stem from the same word. Alone is more of a physical and more of a temporary thing and lonely is like built up over a while. Like lonely is what you feel when you're on the road to isolation." (Male, aged 16 years)

We also asked about interpretations of the word "isolation". This was described as more "severe" than loneliness. It could involve both an emotional state and physical separation. Isolation was perceived as the result either of being excluded by others (not of one's choosing) or actively withdrawing from others, or both. It was also seen as an entrenched, long-lasting condition.

"To me, if you're isolated, it means that you're not only being like left out, you've also got to the point where you're pushing people away or isolating yourself." (Female, aged 13 years)

"Because if you feel alone that might just be for one night while other people are doing something. But if you feel isolated then that's like a permanent relationship or permanent feeling that you have between a group of people or lots of people. So, you would say that if you're isolated from other people, then you feel like there's no way of bridging the gap, and you're permanently alone, because alone is like a temporary feeling." (Male, aged 19 years)

Among children particularly, "isolation" was also associated with punishment and various forms of externally imposed social exile for bad behaviour – such as being "grounded", "excluded from school", "in detention" or imprisoned.

"That's when you're alone and you can't see other people so maybe if you're grounded or something that you have to stay in your room that's kind of isolation. Or maybe you have to be isolated from other people, because in our school if you're very, very naughty and maybe get into a fight with someone and maybe injure someone you have to go into this thing called isolation and it's where you can't see anyone for a day or two. It's a bit like a detention but a bit worse." (Male, aged 13 years)

"The difference is, isolated is a very much more aggressive word and it usually, I would say, when someone keeps you alone. Alone is you're in bad circumstances, your friends are away, they're not, but isolated would be someone separating you." (Male, aged 13 years)

Table 1 summarises important differences in the way children and young people defined being alone, feeling alone, loneliness and isolation. This highlights differences in relation to:

- physical compared with emotional states

- perceived element of choice (and whether the individual may play a part)

- assumed duration

- feelings and circumstances typically associated with that state

Table 1: Important elements defining being and feeling alone, loneliness and isolation

Contributor	Being Alone	Feeling Alone	Loneliness	Isolation
Physical or mental state	A physical state	An emotional state	An emotional and physical state	May be both a state of mind and a physical state
Choice	Can be a positive choice (but may not be), 'you can choose to be alone'	Not chosen, 'not being able to change your situation'	Not chosen, 'it happens to you'	May be chosen as a form of protection, 'You don't share the same interests'; May be imposed by others, 'no one wants to talk to you'
Pathways	Being alone more than one would choose may lead to feeling alone/ loneliness, 'Constantly being alone', 'being alone could be more just like physical separation'	Feeling alone caused by being alone may lead to loneliness, 'Constantly being alone by yourself'	A possible stepping stone to isolation (or mental health condition), 'you feel like you have nobody'	May involve pushing others away' or intentionally withdrawing from others as well as lacking opportunities to connect socially, 'Don't have connections'
Time period and reoccurrence	Short term/ transient, 'Alone is like a short period of time'	Short term but can occur frequently, 'lonely is like a long period of time'	Longer term than 'feeling alone'	Long term / entrenched though could be shorter term when associated with punishment)
Associated feelings	Being by yourself, empowerment (if chosen to be alone)	Feeling of having 'no one', feeling of having 'no one to talk to'	Wishing there was someone there for you, no one who can relate to you	Can't let people in emotionally, not wanted by other people, worthless
Associated circumstances	Physical separation, on your own at home, school holidays (away from friends)	Being on your own, no one to talk to, no one to share experiences with	Lacking confidantes, being ignored	Pushing people away, mental health condition, having no support

Source: Office for National Statistics

Children's and young people's images of loneliness and isolation

As feeling alone, loneliness and isolation are states associated with negative emotions, the images children and young people have of people experiencing these states are understandably also characterised by negativity. Although we did not ask young people about their own mental images of loneliness, these emerged spontaneously throughout the interviews and included ideas about how lonely people behave, what they feel or think, how they look, and circumstances typically associated with loneliness. These mental images are important not only because they help shed further light on how children and young people understand loneliness, but also because they may shape how they identify loneliness in themselves or others and the implications this may have for taking action to address it.

Amongst children and young people, isolation was described as "more extreme" than loneliness, with children's images of isolation particularly focused on isolation as punishment. Examples of isolation included being in prison, school detention, and being grounded.

The main aspects of children's and young people's images of isolation involved people who appear:

- physically alone and beyond reach

- sad, crying, not talking

- wanting to be alone and pushing others away

- feeling separate and disconnected from others

- focused on their own thoughts and emotions

Table 2: Images of isolation

Children (10 to 15 years)	Young people (16 to 24 years)
"Crying" (bereavement, missing someone)	"Feeling very alone"
Someone who "pushes others away", isolates themselves	"Consumed by your own thoughts"
"Not wanting to talk to anyone"/ "wanting to be alone with their own thoughts"	"Living on your own"
"Just being sad on your own"	"Not feeling connections to things and the people around you"
"No one else can get to you" (prison, detention)	"Not being able to change your situation"
"Someone separating you"	"You're away from home"
"You feel alone even when there's other people around you"	"If you're new to school"

Source: Office for National Statistics

Children and young people also have strong mental images of loneliness, very similar to those for isolation. In both cases, these relate to people who are separate, both physically and emotionally, and who may not welcome intrusions from others. Some examples have been provided to illustrate the way that children and young people described the behaviour of lonely people, and their ideas of what lonely people may think and feel.

Their mental images are of people who:

- may be around others, but are separate and on their own

- feel a sense of disconnection from others

- do not "fit in" and feel different

- prefer not to be with others and "cocoon themselves" away

- frown, talk to no one and have a hard time "opening up" and seem "strange"

- are lost in their own thoughts

- have difficulty coping and may not sleep well, self-harm, drop out of education, or consider suicide

Older people were also a group identified as lonely, so images also included older people.

Table 3: Images of loneliness

Children (10 to 15 years)	Young people (16 to 24 years)
"Hanging around on your own" or reading books by yourself	"Surrounded by people who don't like you"
"Don't feel like they fit in"	"Cocoon themselves"
"Don't want to be associated with other people"	"Cooking in your own introspection"
"In the dark", new situations where you don't know anyone	"Constantly by yourself"
"Talking to no one"	"Older people"
"You can see it on people's faces- they frown"	"Not sleeping well"
"They feel different"	"Dropped out of university"
"Can't move around that much, get tired very easily" - said about an older person they know who is lonely	"Felt like she had no one even when she did" -feel like they have no one even if they do
"You have lost someone close to you"	"Not knowing how to bring things up"
"You feel like nobody cares"	"Have a hard time opening up"
"Nobody wants to hear what they've got to say"	"Have no way to get around"
"Taking their own life and self-harming"	"Not admitting feeling lonely"
"You're left to one side"	"Feel raw all the time"
"Spend a lot of time at home"	
"People find her strange"	

Source: Office for National Statistics

The negative perceptions of what lonely and isolated people are like highlights a perceived stigma associated with loneliness among young people. Children and young people described it as embarrassing to admit to loneliness, as it suggests a kind of "failing":

"[…] It's not a good thing to be, like you wouldn't want to be it, you try not to be lonely. Being lonely is kind of failing […]." (Male, aged 15 years)

The embarrassment associated with loneliness may also make it hard to discuss:

"I think they could feel quite embarrassed, because some people might find it embarrassing because they're not as popular as anyone else. They're just all the time by themselves and they've got no friends or anything." (Female, aged 14 years)

There was also a sense that loneliness could be caused by a person's own actions and that people who feel lonely may have themselves to blame. This is similar to the idea of loneliness reflecting a personal failing:

"It depends on the person. If they're a horrible person and their attitude is terrible they won't have many friends because they'll realise that they're doing bad things. Their family might not appreciate them because they're being horrible […] If they're a nice person they'll have a lot of friends, a lot of family to help them […] You attract good people if you're a good person but then you attract bad people if you're a bad person." (Male, aged 12 years)

"One of the reasons that people feel lonely is quite related to laziness. I feel that people who are lazy and have no passions and don't care about anything spend a lot less time with the people around them and develop loneliness." (Male, aged 14 years)

"Maybe it's the way, maybe the way they act, maybe some people don't really like the way they act or maybe they're not very nice sometimes." (Male, aged 13 years)

This element of blame was more apparent among children and young people (aged 10 to 15 years), while young people did not articulate it as openly. Instead, they focused on perceived deficiencies that meant lonely people perhaps were not capable of successful social integration.

"Some of the people in our school they're like, I don't want to be mean to them but they do seem kind of quite weird, like how they want, they just don't want to be around people." (Female, aged 14 years)

"Someone who might have a mental disability or not even that sometimes, some people might just be incapable of really expressing themselves." (Male, aged 16 years)

The images associated with loneliness may get in the way of seeking support or offering it, a subject explored in further detail later in the report.

"You don't expect someone of 16 or 17 or 18 to [feel alone] well, I'm alone, or people at university, they're lonely. People are just going to turn around well no, you're just homesick, that's all; you'll get over it. Or you'll deal with it; you'll find somebody to talk to […] I know people that have just dropped out of university because they just couldn't deal with everything and they had to go back home […] You don't have to be 72 to be lonely." (Female, aged 23 years)

6 . What makes children and young people feel lonely?

In this section, we look at the range of circumstances in which children and young people said that they felt lonely. This involved both predictable transition points related to school and education when their social relationships could become disrupted, as well as other life events and personal circumstances that could add to a sense of social disconnection and loneliness.

Transitions through childhood and young adulthood

Children's and young people's lives in the UK are punctuated by a series of predictable transitions relating to primary and secondary education, moving on to further or higher education, training or the world of work, and living independently. At each stage, children and young people described how these transitions could be challenging to personal and social well-being, disrupting friendships and social support and potentially causing loneliness. For some while after these transitions, both the quantity of young people's social relationships and their perceived quality may be impacted.

The move from primary to secondary school

As children move from primary to secondary school, they may leave old friends behind and have to form new friendships in a more challenging environment. This can be a fraught time when they lack a sense of belonging and social support and the quality of their relationships may be more tenuous. The survey data from young people also showed an increase in more frequent loneliness at around 12 years old, coinciding with the move to secondary school for many.

"I feel like when you don't have friends within school you're most likely to feel alone. Or like any relationship within school you're bound to feel alone. And at that time, I don't really have friends so I just felt out of place. There was no one for me to talk to about it. No one really, I don't think anyone understood. And then, yeah, I just felt lonely […] [Loneliness] starts in year 7 and it gets better over time because you find people that have the same interests and stuff that you do as well." (Female, aged 15 years)

"In the beginning of the school senior 7, I think it happens more, because no one really has their friendship groups. I think as you get further up the school and everyone kind of has their defined friendship groups, it's easier. But I think with year 7s and 8s, because obviously there's more arguments that goes on and people haven't found their solid friendship groups, there's more likely of people being left on their own." (Female, aged 14 years)

"Probably I think it was like year 7, but I didn't, I only had one proper friend and then, but she wasn't in my tutor group, so I guess I was just trying to be friends with most people, but I wasn't in their group. So, when it came to like groups they went together and I was sometimes in their group if they had extra space, but most of the time it was their group and I'd just be lingering on another group." (Female, aged 14 years)

"I felt for the first couple of weeks, I didn't feel really lonely, but I felt a bit lonely because my other two friends […] were making a lot of friends quite quickly and it took a bit of time for me to adjust to know people and stuff like that because I was really shy at the time because it was my first year at a proper big school […] I was like, should I go and play this, would they like me? Should I go and play that? So often I would just wander round the field doing my own thing. But like […] mid-year […] I started playing a lot of games with people and getting involved, so yeah it just takes a bit of time." (Male, aged 13 years)

The move from school to college or university

Young people negotiate multiple transitions from the age of 16 years into their early 20s. As with the move from primary to secondary school, moving to a new college or university may present opportunities for expanding friendships, but may also strain existing social networks and sources of social support, potentially giving rise to loneliness.

"In my first year of university I moved to a different city and obviously I was in a new place with new people. There was none of my friends there. I was away from my family and I'm quite a home bird. So, for the first two or three weeks I absolutely hated it and I literally felt like so alone, I literally felt, I was on the phone every night saying I want to come home." (Female, aged 22 years)

"I do know people who were lonely and are lonely and are probably right now. But it's like a lot of people I know who, everyone went to university, a lot of my friends last year. So, some of my friends who went to university I know that they didn't enjoy the first year, and they felt a little bit isolated […] And it's like when they come home they feel like they can be more comfortable […] you may make friends but you don't feel like you're as, you don't have as many companions as they would at home." (Male, aged 19 years)

This transition may be particularly challenging for young people with disabilities who face the same emotional hurdles as other young people, as well as the further challenges associated with disability.

"I think being the first wheelchair user in my uni as well was a really surreal situation. I felt incredibly lonely at times in terms of how I had to deal with things. How, when barriers arrived in terms of access to education and things, having to go at it alone because my peers could sympathise but they couldn't understand what I was going through. I think I found it quite lonely being away from my support network for such a long period of time because it was pretty much three years." (Female, aged 21 years)

The disruption at this point in life is felt not just by those leaving to start a new course or training, but also impacts those left behind whose friends and social support may have dispersed and moved on.

"You lose your friends because some go off to college, some go off to sixth form, some decide to move away and get an apprenticeship or don't do anything […]. You've just kind of got yourself over that barrier and it hits you again. And then two years after college you've got uni or you've got another college course or something, you know, everyone tapers off again." (Female, aged 21 years)

"[…] then friends also who didn't go to university and stayed at home or got a job, like you could see that that would, they're probably more alone or maybe have a worse or stronger feeling of isolation when then most of your friends have moved on to go to university […]. You can see them feeling maybe a bit jealous or a bit left out. And so you don't really have that same companionship 24/7." (Male, aged 19 years)

As with young people starting secondary school, the period after a move to college or university may also involve a sense of pressure to re-establish social networks quickly, which may not be very emotionally satisfying or stable. Not having the quality of relationships that we want is an important aspect of loneliness and young people noted that it takes time to develop more lasting and satisfying relationships.

"When you join it's like a sink or swim situation. I think those sort of relationships can be a bit dangerous, because there's a lot of weight on them, but there isn't that much to them […] or you might not form connections that you want to." (Male, aged 18 years)

"A lot of people from my primary school went to the same secondary school; however, only two people in my friendship group now actually went to my old school, so I made a lot of friends. But obviously that's taken three years to happen. So, it was like, because I automatically thought it was going to be, you know, like quick getting your friends, but actually it's like a longer process and there's a lot you have to go through to get to having a solid friendship group." (Female, aged 14 years)

Moving on to live independently

Moving to a new area or city for work can also be a time when young people experience loneliness. As well as upheaval to social connections, they may also lose a sense of belonging and connection to community.

"[…] when I moved to London 10 months ago like it was quite lonely for me because I moved from [city] where I feel like it's a lot more like community feel and even though I have a lot of friends here, like university friends and different friends, I think it's so easy to feel isolated because it's so big and so busy and it's not like in [city] where you might be able to just like chat to someone on public transport like I felt like when I was on my way to work it's a lot more like isolating and unfriendly." (Female, aged 24 years)

Moving back home

Returning back to the family home after moving away can also make young people feel cut off from their peers and lonely.

"I felt quite lonely last year. I had been at uni […] for three years and I moved back home, I moved back in with my parents and I worked in the city and I was commuting an hour and a half each way every day, which didn't give me enough time to kind of socialise outside of work. I found that being at home was kind of a bit of a culture shock going from being around people who were friends who you had similar interests with back to kind of feeling like you were a child and kind of dictate, not dictated to but you had lived by someone else's rules and it ends up leaving you feeling kind of with less freedom, with less contacts, less chance to kind of get out and talk to people." (Female, aged 24 years)

Educational environments and loneliness

Apart from the series of educational transitions that may strain young people's social networks, children and young people also discussed aspects of life at school, college or university which had contributed to loneliness in their own experiences.

This included:

- sifting children and young people on the basis of ability

- pressure of exams

- approaches to supporting people with disabilities

- punishment practices

Sifting on the basis of ability

Children and young people described themselves or others being left out and excluded because of sporting or academic ability. In relation to sports, this happened both around the informal selection of teams and in more formal ways when young people are placed into separate groups for physical education.

"Games. When people are left out from playing games. People just get really lonely because they've got, because in football if you're left out and it keeps happening you sort of just feel like they don't want you." (Male, aged 11 years)

"It's like institutionalised, so like school and stuff like that […] In schools you always have, it's like natural to have like different groups whether in sports in PE, people will be into like the more academic side would be left out. That's just kind of what I meant by it. So, in certain activities there's always going to be a few people left out." (Male, aged 16 years)

Pressure of exams

For young people the pressures of exams and coursework deadlines at university were a time when they or their friends became lonely. Their response to the pressure may involve separating themselves from others and withdrawing from activities which may in turn lead to loneliness and isolation.

"It was more deadline times. So, beginning of December and then January with the exams and that May with the exams and essay times, coursework hand-ins, that I would say […] the people that I lived with, there were three of us and we just, you know. […] I wouldn't come out my room, they wouldn't come out their rooms, it was just a very lonely." (Female, aged 20 years)

"Well I know that sometimes at university my flatmates […] if they'd had quite a stressful week at university they might feel lonely if they can't be going out because they've got deadlines, they can't be seeing people, so that's probably the instance when I've noticed if my friends are feeling lonely." (Female, aged 24 years)

Young people also reflected that the period around exams at school or college could feel very competitive, again causing some people to withdraw from their social networks.

"[…] I distanced myself from a lot of my friends […] I frequently feel some of that, or the remnants of that [even though] yeah it was a pretty long time ago." (Male, aged 18 years)

"I think the start is GCSEs. They are, no matter whether you're in a year group of 200 or 5,000 that is a very competitive time, which leads to a lot of kind of isolation in the sense that everyone is competing to get the best grades." (Female, aged 21 years)

Approaches to supporting people with disabilities in educational settings

Young people with disabilities described how policies intending to improve accessibility had the unintended consequence of inhibiting them from developing friendships with peers. For example, a policy of allocating a personal assistant to support disabled people at all times can make it very difficult to form relationships with other students.

"My college decided that people with disabilities should have a strict regime, which was a basic package that everyone had to have […] and I had to have a personal assistant at all times. And I had to have someone following me around at all times, even though I didn't need that. And that was made on my behalf, as a disabled person and that made me feel completely left out of the situation because I didn't have the right to have my own decision. I was just kind of put under a bracket of kind of disabled. That was it." (Female, aged 21 years)

Punishment practices involving isolation and exclusion

As highlighted in Section 5, children's mental images of isolation were closely linked to punishments involving enforced separation from others for bad behaviour. This included detention, "isolation" and "exclusion" in the school environment, being "grounded" at home and imprisoned in wider society. The fact that people are "punished" by isolating them may unhelpfully contribute to the sense that people who are lonely and isolated may be to blame for their situation.

Other circumstances and events contributing to loneliness

Apart from the transitions that most young people face relating to education and increasing independence, there are also specific circumstances and events that some young people described as particular periods of loneliness in their lives. These included:

- the loss of significant relationships

- coping with mental health challenges

- living with severe, long-term illness or disability

- the experience of being bullied

Loss of significant relationships

The loss of significant relationships can have significant implications for children and young people. Bereavement and the loss of important relationships in other ways involves both missing a special person, as well as affecting how well young people are able to sustain their other relationships.

"It's just been a very difficult thing to recover from […] things changed basically as soon as [name] died. And I started like saying no to my friends hanging out. Like I would do that sometimes. I liked to be by myself sometimes." (Male, aged 18 years)

"A friend of mine who lost her dad and was very poorly supported by the university and ultimately ended up spending quite a bit of time off." (Female, aged 21 years)

Coping with mental health challenges

Young people living with mental health challenges described both loneliness and isolation associated with an emotional and physical withdrawal from the wider world.

"I try to stay in bed as long as I can so I don't have so long to wait for my partner to get back if that makes sense […] I think I'm lonely as soon as I get up […] it's just all day really." (Female, aged 23 years)

"Around December time it gets cold, it starts snowing, no one wants to go out, so you're shut in your room a lot and that aggravates that kind of thing […] I kind of developed a bit of anxiety and stuff because of that, just social anxiety just from the loneliness." (Male aged 19 years)

Living with long-term illness, disability or impairments

Young people who require extensive support from carers to be mobile, get out of the house or interact with others virtually may be particularly at risk of loneliness and isolation. This is consistent with the survey findings reported earlier showing that children and young people who reported lower satisfaction with their health or reported long-term illness or disability were significantly more likely to experience more frequent loneliness.

"Quite often there are long periods of time when I'm not with the carers, where people aren't talking to me. I mean when [Name] goes at five o'clock I'll see mother and father periodically probably, but I won't see anybody to sit down and talk to until he comes in at eight o'clock the next morning and does it all over again with a sense of déjà vu." (Male, aged 22 years)

Young people with sensory impairments also noted that they found it difficult to make friends.

"When I was younger I couldn't really hear well so that made it hard to make friends then, so I was quite lonely then I think." (Male, aged 12 years)

Experiences of being bullied

Experience of having been bullied was associated with a sense of loneliness and exclusion while it was happening and may potentially also affect young people's relationships afterwards.

"Just since I was four I was bullied continuously and I never had any friends. I had people that would come in and out of my life and I'd latch on to that. They wouldn't be friends. They'd be not very nice people but I'd latch onto them and then they'd end up, I'd find out they were just being my friend because they thought it was funny, you know. So that was until I was 17 that happened, just continuously never really having friends, people just using me, which was horrible. So, it wasn't nice at the time and made me feel, and it was a horrible, horrible, horrible time." (Female, aged 20 years)

Other young people may also be reluctant to engage with someone who's being bullied, potentially further undermining their social support and increasing a sense of isolation.

"Cyber bullying is a big problem in my school at the moment. […] There's been a boy who's just had it all thrown at him. And he just is alone all the time […] He's been by himself all the time, just constantly. And you feel so bad for him. But then a lot of people would feel embarrassed to play, like you know, do stuff with him because he's the one getting bullied. So, then everybody will start making fun of you for playing with the one who they don't like. You kind of don't know what to do. It's like being bad and good at the same time. It's really confusing." (Male, aged 12 years)

The context of fear and isolation surrounding bullying was also identified as something that enables bullying to happen in the first place, with people who are already alone and lonely more likely to be targets.

"And they're often somebody that's on their own they target. It's never – usually a group of people, they isolate somebody on purpose and then they go after them. And I mean obviously you've got to make them feel left out in the first place to make sure they've got nobody else to rely on and then they pick on them." (Female, aged 23 years)

Practical barriers to joining in socially

As well as the challenges to creating sustaining relationships already highlighted, there were a range of practical issues that could make it difficult for young people to join in fully with social life, including:

- transport

- mobility impairments

- distance from friends

- costs of participation

- work commitments

Transport and distance from friends

Lack of access to transport and living some distance from friends were described as important issues preventing some children and young people from meeting with friends and leaving them feeling alone.

"And so, I was younger, I'm talking primary school […] probably eight or nine, […] my friends lived […], closer to the primary school, they were able to meet up at weekends and go out. And they were on the streets together, you know, just like how little kids play and all of that. And I was very much out of that. I was isolated from that because I lived here and it took my parents having to drive me there or my friends came to visit me and I did feel like I missed out on that. So, I was very much alone then." (Female, aged 18 years)

"I have friends and they live quite a bit away from me and I don't get to go out with them a lot because they don't really live that close and I do get frustrated by that. And with the fact that I'm quite busy, I do a lot of stuff that does contribute to it. That does get frustrating sometimes but I've just learnt to deal with that. I think that's all right." (Male, aged 14 years)

"When you're a bit younger your parents drop you off everywhere don't they? But now that you move out and you're on your own basically" (Female, aged 23 years)

Mobility impairments and adaptations

For children and young people with mobility impairments, having suitable equipment to enable them to be as independent as possible is an important enabler to forming friendships and joining in with social activities.

"A lot of my friends would go off into the local cities and things and have days out and I kind of knew that that was always going to be an impact that I wouldn't be able to access that as freely. And no 14-year-old wants to be pushing around their friend in a wheelchair all day […] So it was a massive impact on my friendships and it then became more of a burden." (Female, aged 21 years)

Costs of participation

As well as simply not being able to afford to join in social activities, children and young people who cannot afford to keep up with the latest trends may also find it difficult to 'fit in' socially and may become marginalised and lonely as a result.

"When they don't have the stuff that other kids may have. Like for example a new pair of trainers might come out, people might want to get it, they can't get it, they'll feel alone; like why can't I get this, why can't I get that? Or if it's in school like people have already made their groups. And they feel like they can't fit in any of those groups. They're not […] worthy enough, […] they don't have what the people in other groups have to fit in. So, they can't fit in within school." (Female, aged 15 years)

"Because if […] they feel different from others […] they'll isolate themselves […] Anything that's different. If they feel they're in a different living situation, for example. If they feel like a friend's got more money than them or things like that. Or if someone's got the latest iPhone and you don't. Or it could be something like they all act a certain way and you don't act like that, or they all dress a certain way and you don't dress like that. If someone feels different to the people they're constantly surrounded by, I feel like that could cause loneliness." (Female, aged 13 years)

Additionally, as young people become increasingly financially independent, they may struggle to participate in social activities that they must fund themselves.

"Yeah, when I was younger I used to do loads of stuff. You have to pay for stuff, I'm a lot more stingy now. My mum would buy stuff but now I have to buy stuff myself so it's a lot different now." (Male, aged 19 years)

Work commitments

Work commitments also prevented some young people from participating fully in social life with their friends. This was mentioned both by those who were still in school and those who had completed their education.

"Often kind of work and commitments obviously always get in the way of seeing friends that you might not see otherwise but I think yeah, it's mostly work, money, time." (Female, aged 18 years)

"You see most of the time with me it's because if I'm working and people are like we'll make arrangements and go here, I'm like I wish I could go. Like a group of my friends – I'd just had leave actually – were going paintballing and I just couldn't get the day off and yeah, I did feel a bit left out but it was a different sense of being left out […] you still feel left out, but I can't say it's going to be nowhere near the same as somebody who knows they're intentionally being left out." (Female, aged 23 years)

Social barriers to joining in

The sense of being intentionally left out or excluded from a social group was also an important contributor to feeling lonely and young people described a variety of circumstances in which they had experienced this, including:

- being forgotten

- not being invited

- being excluded from joining in by others or rejected

These all represented circumstances in which young people perceived themselves to be unable to join in a group or activity, not through their own choice.

The negative feelings associated with being left out or excluded were similar in young people and arose from their interpretations of what this meant both in terms of acceptance by the group and to their own self-esteem. As well as the quotes in this section, further examples of the words young people used to describe how being left out felt and what they thought it meant can be found in Table 4.

"I felt sad and I guess I felt a bit angry. And I guess I felt that kind of desperation and kind of worry that I was falling out of the friendship group and I wasn't wanted because I hadn't been invited." (Male, aged 19 years)

"[…] I felt really let down because everyone was acting like I was this person who was weird and stupid and obviously didn't deserve to be there." (Male, aged 14 years)

"If they've taken the time to look at all our shifts and say we're all off, could they not have added me into that? Yes, they know who I am, I've been there years, they know me and it's just like well, and it's more annoying when you tell them you're lonely and you've had enough and you're on own and bored and they still don't think to invite you out." (Female, aged 23 years)

Table 4: Examples of children's and young people's responses to being "left out"

	Children (10 to 15 years)	Young people (16 to 24 years)
Examples of young people's interpretations of what being left out means	"Weird", "stupid", "didn't deserve it", "bad at this", "out of place", "not understood", "they don't want me", "no one likes me", "no one thinks I'm good at stuff", "no one will talk to me"	"I would ruin it", "I'm not wanted", "I'm annoying", "I've done something"
Feelings associated with being left out	"Hurtful", "sad", "left out", "let down", "really lonely", "really upset", "annoyed"	"Very difficult", "jealous", "desperate", "anxiety", "shut in", "isolated", "selfish", "pushed away", "bad", "worried", "sad", "angry", "loss", "really crappy"

Source: Office for National Statistics

Home alone

For children, the after-school period could be a particular time when they felt alone if they were on their own. For younger children, this may involve feeling alone and a bit uncomfortable, whereas for older children, there may be a more positive feeling associated with being on their own.

"Well I felt alone when I, everyone was out the house and just like when I'm home alone. It's just so boring because I have no one to socialise. And then I have to be calling my mum to ask if [name] can play over. That's my next-door neighbour." (Female, aged 10 years)

"I feel alone like, not on a high level, but when I get home from school. Because we're quite a busy family, like they'll all be at work until 5:30pm […]. So, I feel quite alone when I come back. And I've got no one to talk about my day with until they come back at the evening. But I quite like being by myself sometimes. It gives me the, like I can think by myself and review things and change how maybe I feel in a way. And it just gives me that time to be alone and peaceful in the house." (Female, aged 14 years)

Important points made in this section are summarised as follows.

Predictable transition points that challenge social networks

- Moving on from primary school (roughly aged 11 to 12 years).

- GCSE exam pressures (roughly aged 16 years).

- Transitions to A level courses, Further Education college, apprenticeships (roughly aged 16 to 17 years).

- A level or BTEC exam pressures (roughly aged 18 years).

- Leaving school or college (roughly aged 18 years).

- Moving away from home (leaving care, family or friends) or possibly to university.

- Leaving university or apprenticeships (roughly aged 21 years).

- Starting work or searching for work.

- Returning to the family home.

Other education-related challenges that may trigger loneliness

- Sifting into academic or sporting ability groups or choosing teams.

- Possible stigma of free school meals.

- Prescribed approaches to supporting people with disabilities (not consulting on individual needs or preferences).

- Exam pressures.

- Punishment practices involving separation, isolation or exclusion.

Other circumstances or events that contribute to loneliness

- Experience of being bullied.

- Loss of significant relationships (bereavement, moving house or school, relationship breakdown).

- Specific challenges to developing or maintaining social connections, for example, disability, sensory impairment, mental health problems.

- Practical barriers to social participation (for example, competing time commitments, money, distance from friends, transportation, lack of effective mobility adaptations).

- Social barriers to joining in (for example, being forgotten, left out or excluded or rejected).

Wider social environment contributing to loneliness

- Perceived lack of friendliness of the area.

- Stigma associated with loneliness contributes to fear of discussing it.

- Fear of intervening to help someone who is lonely.

7 . How do children and young people avoid loneliness, manage it and re-connect?

In this section, we look at how children and young people try to avoid loneliness, how they cope with it when it's here and approaches they use to move on and re-connect with others. As discussed in Section 5, loneliness involves a sense of emotional separation from others and may also involve physical separation. The approaches they described for dealing with loneliness focused on dealing with the emotional side, practical steps to connect with others or both.

Approaches to avoiding loneliness

Children and young people were clear that avoiding loneliness is important to them, but they differ in the amount of time they want to spend with others and in their expectations of what "good" relationships with others look like. Approaches to avoiding loneliness reflected these individual differences.

Additionally, we start from different places in the ease with which we form friendships and make connections with others. This may involve overcoming:

- individual emotional or mental hurdles: such as shyness, introversion, or mental health challenges

- practical hurdles: such as accessibility issues linked to mobility or sensory impairments, transport and money for joining in activities

- social hurdles: linked to acceptance by others and "fitting in", which may relate to perceived differences from others (such as social, cultural, ethnic and other visible or presumed differences as well as the issues noted previously as emotional or mental hurdles and practical hurdles)

These different starting points meant that young people shaped their individual approaches to avoiding loneliness, based on their own current situation, past experiences of relationships and loneliness, and their ideas of what "good" or "good enough" relationships entail. They also varied in the amount of time it may take them to form relationships.

Given these differences, it is not necessarily helpful to draw comparisons with others in terms of how quickly they established relationships or the number and nature of relationships they have, but this happened among those we spoke to and may also be part of developing a sense of how well and where they "fit in".

Specific approaches to avoid becoming lonely involve familiar methods of making and sustaining social connections, including:

- use of social media to maintain connections and develop new ones

- joining in sports, clubs and activities

- purposefully reaching out, talking to people and nurturing relationships

- finding ways to overcome hurdles to connecting (for example, offering lifts to people who otherwise could not join in, hanging around with a group to try to make new connections)

Using social media to connect with others

As a strategy for avoiding loneliness, social media was viewed as helpful in:

- bridging physical gaps or enabling ongoing connections over time and distance

- easing introductions and enabling friendships to develop during transitions

- checking in with friends in a casual way

"I talk to my friends on social media quite a lot because some of them live in [place] or obviously, it's summer so they'll all be on holiday and then I'll be on holiday while they're not and things like that. It's nice to have that communication. You can stay in touch with people that you don't see very often. If someone lives really far away, with things like that it's easier to keep in touch." (Female, aged 13 years)

"[…] with the internet and text messaging and stuff, it's quite hard to feel like there's no one around you at any given time." (Male, aged 17 years)

"I mean, talking about university, I know when it comes to results day, having known people in the years above, you meet people on social media before you even start it now, so I think that's definitely a way of making friends and maybe bypassing that feeling of being lonely when you first start, because you've already made those connections before. So that's definitely a way I think you can make friends." (Female, aged 18 years)

Social media could also be viewed as unhelpful, potentially increasing loneliness by:

- highlighting that someone has been left out (possibly in real time)

- encouraging comparisons to be drawn between people

- promoting a shallow form of communication, potentially replacing deeper connections

"You feel like maybe you're not as a good friend, like you're not one of their closest friends or important to them. And therefore like, obviously they can share what they want on Instagram and it just makes you feel worse about it." (Female, aged 14 years)

"Facebook and all that is stupidly important, it's horrible isn't it really? […] it's all oh we've gone and done this and it's like well I could have come too." (Female, aged 23 years)

"So, for me it's been, I spend so much time trying to re-connect and actually not feeling any more connected. And people think that kind of social media will suffice of bringing someone out of loneliness. Kind of messaging every month saying, 'are you OK?' is very different to picking up the phone and having a 10-minute conversation about how life has been. But I think people now think that a quick message suffices for contact and that then makes sure that someone is OK but I think you can lie a lot on social media. I think you can hide a lot on social media and people don't want to hear it via message." (Female, aged 21 years)

Joining in with clubs and activities

Joining in with clubs and activities was mentioned as a way of doing something fun and interesting in the company of others. It was not always easy or comfortable for young people to join in something new and could take courage to overcome the anxiety of engaging with new people.

"[…] putting yourself in social situations where if you went along for a new hobby, everyone would be new pretty much, so everyone's in the same boat and everyone wants to make friends […] You feel anxious at the start, but I think once you get out there, it's good. And eventually your brain will learn that, actually, I like it when I go and then that changes your perspective." (Male, aged 19 years)

Participation in organised activities and sports teams could involve a shared activity and sense of accomplishment with others. It could provide a catalyst for developing further connections, but did not necessarily lead to relationships extending beyond the activity.

"Yeah, I've played rugby for five-odd years […] sports team especially helps you make friends. Again, I would still consider them rugby friends. I'm not going to see them every day but I think being part of something definitely pushes you to make friends, especially with things like rugby […] we've been pushing and fighting to get to the top of the league and it's like a struggle you share with everyone, so you form a bond type of thing. Then because we've been a really successful team we're all obviously really happy with each other, all good mates." (Male, aged 16 years)

Interest in engaging in organised activities may wane for some young people as they develop social connections and greater independence. Other reasons given for no longer attending organised activities included the cost associated with it and a sense that it would be embarrassing.

"[…] the first few years of school, like after-school netball and different, like I did some like some English thing after school and, yeah, there were things that I got involved with. But I think as I got a bit older I kind of just drifted out of that. I would prefer to just go and meet up with my friends after school or something like that, rather than taking part in organised sort of things." (Female, aged 18 years)

Reaching out to others

Both children and young people indicated that talking to friends or family could help allay feelings of loneliness and keep in perspective that someone was there for them.

"I think it's quite important, just because without, even if it's just someone to vent to or someone to talk to, it's important that if you're alone or you don't have someone just to speak your mind to, or speak your worries to, then you can kind of not only just get lonely but just feel like you don't really have anyone in the real world who can understand that. And often just someone to talk to is more important than anything else, even it doesn't really matter how close you are." (Male, aged 19 years)

"I just know that they would like to listen no matter how silly the issue may seem, if it's just really trivial they'll still say that but then they're also be honest with me and give me like a different way of thinking about it, so they'll probably help me. (Female, aged 24 years)

"Probably my mum or my dad. And if it was quite bad and I was worried to go to them, I might go to one of my really close friends and ask them what I should do. And then I'd probably go to my mum and dad next, but most of the time it would be my mum and dad first." (Female, aged 11 years)

Coping strategies for dealing with loneliness

As well as trying to avoid loneliness, children and young people described a range of things they do to cope when they do feel lonely. These included:

- reframing the situation and looking for a new perspective
- talking it over
- forgiving and forgetting
- waiting for the feeling to pass or remembering it's temporary
- finding things to distract them from the thoughts or feelings
- reaching out and seeking a connection
- covering it up

Reframing the situation and putting it "in perspective"

Reframing the situation was a strategy adopted particularly by children and young people who felt they'd been left out of social gatherings with friends. It was a way to put the issue in perspective and deal with the emotional sting for those who felt excluded by others or otherwise unable to join in.

"Everyone was talking about this party that this girl was having and I wasn't invited. At first, I felt really let down […] And then I was like stuff them. I mean it was probably going to be lame anyway." (Male, aged 14 years)

"[…] it just made me feel like well even if I wasn't allowed out [by parents] it's still the thought that counts. [I was] partly upset, partly annoyed but then partly glad I wasn't there […] because they're not very nice girls." (Female, aged 11 years)

"I think being able to kind of step back from situations and like remembering that people are there for you and not isolating yourself, not taking it as a personal slight means that you then isolate yourself from having that situation happen over and over again." (Female, aged 24 years)

Talking it over

After having been excluded, some young people felt it was important to actively address the situation, talk about why it happened, and move on. Talking it through was an important part of understanding, feeling better about it and preserving the social connection.

"I think when I found out that my friends had gone on holiday, I think I went downstairs and I just sat with my family and we watched a film or something. And then I just left it a bit and cooled down and then just sort of messaged them saying like hey, I know you guys went on holiday, and just talked to them about it. And I was honest and yeah, I didn't want to bottle anything up. I like to sort of get things out." (Male, aged 19 years)

"Forgiving and forgetting"

Another approach some young people used to move on with friendships after having been excluded was just to forgive and forget. They downplayed it as not worth the energy of worrying about or that it may be a character building experience.

"Oh, I just feel like oh that's the past and it's in the past and it doesn't matter as long as you like make up, like if it's a bad thing that you did that you make it up through time and you get to be a better person." (Female, aged 12 years)

"I always just think there's nothing that can be done about something like that. It's not like if you see someone, I don't know if you're on social media and you see oh all my mates were at this party but I wasn't invited, it's not like that's suddenly going to get you invited so I just, I will always just think just suck it up and I don't know, forget about it because it's not happened, you weren't there so why would you really be bothered by it?" (Male, aged 16 years)

Remembering it's temporary

Another coping mechanism for dealing with loneliness is remembering that it's temporary and will be over soon.

"I just sort of accepted it [the loneliness]. I knew that I would be OK because […] I knew that I would go to work the next day and feel better." (Female, aged 24 years)

"Probably a bit different to how other people do, it doesn't bother me because I know it's just, eventually it's going to end. So, I know being lonely at school is only temporary […] If there's any of my friends of people nearby just go with them, if not just wait it out." (Male, aged 16 years)

Finding distractions

Keeping busy is another way young people suggested that they distract themselves from feeling lonely and thinking too deeply about their situation. It is a way to avoid becoming lost in their own thoughts and feeling worse.

"[…] sometimes I would prefer just to stay home or to stay in and do nothing, but often it just lets you sit alone and think to yourself. And that can make it worse sometimes – if you distract yourself with other friends or something else to do. So even if it's productive, like doing work or exercising. It's much better than just alone I think." (Male, aged 19 years)

"I'll go on a walk. I know it sounds weird, but I'll put my headphones on […] and just like obviously letting off some actual energy. And then it's like listening to music because I quite like noise, background noise, and that's nice. And then like just going for a walk or I'll read or I'll write or I'll just like, it's normally something creative, like I'll read or write." (Male, aged 16 years)

"[…] I'd try and look forward to meeting my friends for you know dinner after work, make sure that I would have plans so that I wouldn't feel lonely often, so mainly making an effort to make sure that I was meeting people regularly." (Female, aged 24 years)

Reaching out and seeking connection

Young people emphasised the importance of trying to reach out and stay connected to someone when they feel lonely. Although reaching out may not necessarily improve the loneliness, it's better than dwelling too much on one's own thoughts, withdrawing and possibly becoming isolated.

"I'd say that because I was physically on my own it emphasised how lonely I felt if that makes sense, and I think that I tried to ring my friends just to have a catch up who didn't necessarily live in [Place], which was nice in distracting me but at the same time it can make you feel sort of, it doesn't necessarily help because it can make you feel lonely, so yeah." (Female, aged 24 years)

"I think it's very important because when you sometimes want to talk to someone, if you don't have anyone you might start talking to yourself and just get in the mindset that everything's bad, you have no one with you. When you get in that it's just a really dark place to be in. It can escalate to things." (Male, aged 19 years)

"I've got quite a few close friends who I can talk to […] if you don't deal with a lot of the things that you're going through it kind of bubbles up and makes your life quite difficult to live. So, I think having someone you can really talk to about things and they won't see you as peculiar or strange or shun you is quite important." (Male, aged 18 years)

Covering it up

Some young people also discussed how they covered up loneliness and other negative emotions, presenting themselves as they wanted to be seen. This seemed to be a way to disguise vulnerability, and also to preserve social connections by presenting oneself as someone who "fits in".

"I felt incredibly lonely at times in terms of how I had to deal with things […]. Having to go at it alone because my peers could sympathise but they couldn't understand what I was going through. I think I found it quite lonely being away from my support network for such a long period of time because it was pretty much three years. I think I've grown used to, at university hiding how I felt. Kind of being quite an extrovert in terms of faking my emotions but in terms of becoming quite introverted in terms of hiding loneliness because it just became the norm, and so I've kind of learnt to just keep it to myself quite a lot." (Female, aged 21 years)

"It's a cover, isn't it? [On social media] you pretend to be someone else. So, my boyfriend always has a go at me for it. He's like oh on social media you look like you're a really happy person. […] going out and doing all these things but you're not, like that's not you, and he's like why do you it? It's a cover, it's a front, sort of so people don't know you, then people who you want to know you like your family and your boyfriend and your really close friends, they know, they know what you're like and the problems you have but everyone else they haven't got a clue. And it's quite nice to have that. It's a complete opposite." (Female, aged 20 years)

Talking about loneliness

Many of the strategies used by children and young people to deal with loneliness aimed to help them cope with their difficult feelings, preserve existing social connections, and move on. Although they discussed reaching out when they felt lonely, usually to someone close and trusted, it was not clear that they wanted to discuss loneliness as such. It may be that talking about the reasons for loneliness (such as feeling left out, moving to a new school, feeling homesick at university, feeling uncomfortable in a new city) may be a way in to help people process the feelings, feel better and more connected, and less lonely. It may also help them to know that others are going through the same thing (for example, at important educational transitions) and share those feelings too.

Focusing on the reasons for loneliness may also help those who see loneliness as embarrassing or a failing to be able to share their experiences and find new ways of approaching the situation.

It's also important to remember that some reasons why children and young people experience loneliness are more complex and enduring and may require specialist support to re-connect effectively with others. These may include:

- bereavement

- living with severe disability with limited opportunities for social interaction

- living with long-term illness

- living with mental health challenges

- moving on from prolonged experience of being bullied

8 . Children's and young people's suggestions for tackling loneliness

Building on the findings in the previous section on children's and young people's coping strategies, it's important to note that there are different elements of loneliness that may need to be addressed for young people to move on effectively and form or re-establish social connections. These include:

- the emotions associated with loneliness

- the reasons for loneliness (which may include a range of practical, social and emotional or mental health issues)

- the actions required to connect with others

There is also the wider cultural climate and conversation about loneliness, which may encourage or inhibit individual actions, both in seeking help and in offering it.

Children's and young people's own suggestions for tackling loneliness included elements of most of these, focusing on:

- things we can do as individuals for ourselves and others

- what schools, colleges and universities can do

- what we can do as a society to change the way we approach loneliness

From an individual perspective, suggestions for what children and young people can do to help themselves when they feel lonely were similar to the coping strategies described previously and included:

- reaching out to others for emotional support and advice (family, friends, teachers, pastoral support staff at schools, helplines like [Childline](#))

- being proactive in resolving issues with friends by talking it over directly (such as discussing reasons for being "left out")

- participating in activities, clubs and sports to help make social connections with people with similar interests

- going to community spaces where you might meet new people (for example, go to the park to walk the dog)

- volunteering

- reaching out to others to provide support (at school as well as suggestions for taking part in inter-generational initiatives that help both generations simultaneously)

Although these are familiar approaches for helping young people to address their emotions and (re-)connect with others, young people themselves said it's important for each person to find the methods that work best for them. These will be different for different people and will evolve as children and young people grow up, mature, and have different interests, abilities, opportunities and challenges. There is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work for everyone, but providing easily accessible support and making a wide range of opportunities for social connection available are both important.

Beyond this, they discussed what can be done more widely to change the way we think about loneliness and how that could support children and young people experiencing it in their own lives. Their suggestions focused on:

- preparing children and young people for life transitions and equipping them to address loneliness in themselves and others as they encounter these milestones

- highlighting or augmenting support available in schools, colleges and universities for those experiencing loneliness (for example, pastoral care managers, counsellors)

- sharing of good ideas for promoting inclusiveness in educational settings (for example, more inclusive ways to select teams, ways of helping students with specific challenges like mobility or sensory impairments to make social connections, listening to children's and young people's own ideas for promoting inclusiveness, encouraging young people to reach out to their peers to offer support)

- making loneliness a standard feature of the school curriculum (now being taken forward as part of the loneliness strategy)

- opening a wider conversation about loneliness to make it easier to discuss, acknowledge and address; this was compared with the openness with which mental health issues are now discussed in schools and more widely

Children's and young people's suggestions for tackling loneliness

Create a culture of openness about loneliness

- Talk about loneliness more openly as we do with mental health.

- Include loneliness on the school curriculum.

- Encourage young people to talk to someone about it or ask for help.

- Discuss it in schools and universities and make support available.

Create opportunities to make social connections

- Organised activities and clubs.

- Community activities.

- Volunteering.

- Inter-generational initiatives.

Encourage positive uses of social media to alleviate loneliness

- To meet new people or ease transitions.

- Find others with common interests.

Prepare young people to understand loneliness and equip them to deal with it

- Prepare young people for life transitions and what to expect.

- Provide support to young people in developing connections, especially at important transition points.

- Share and try out good ideas for encouraging inclusiveness at schools in friendship groups, on the playground, in the selection of teams.

9 . Next steps

This article provides a first look at a range of issues associated with loneliness in children and young people. We also hope to have provided greater insights into why children and young people become lonely and their strategies for dealing with it.

As next steps, we plan further analysis to understand which factors have the greatest effects on loneliness and for whom after taking other possible influences on loneliness into account. As part of this, we will also re-visit children's and young people's own accounts to explore why some factors may matter more to loneliness than others.

10 . Authors

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