



Child Mind
Institute

2026 STUDY REPORT

Building Bridges: Teen Loneliness and Connection

Teens show us the importance of
connection and its association
with mental health and well-being.



**Child Mind
Institute**

ABOUT THE CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

The Child Mind Institute is the leading nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families experiencing mental health and learning disorders. Since its founding in 2009, the Child Mind Institute has become a global institution reaching millions of families each year through excellence in evidence-based clinical care, renowned educational resources and training, and science to advance the next generation of treatment.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In prior Child Mind Institute research, both parents and teens agree that one of the most urgent threats to youth mental well-being is loneliness (Child Mind Institute, 2025). Understanding how to help teens feel connected, supported, and that they belong has become a critical public health priority. The current study — Building Bridges: Teen Loneliness and Connection — surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,000 U.S. teens aged 14–17 and found that feeling connected was associated with better adolescent mental health and well-being.

Research has generally examined the impact on teens of family relationships, peer support, and school belonging independently. But a teen's sense of well-being may be shaped by an interconnected network of relationships — with families, friends, schools, online communities, and themselves. Determining how this network collectively shapes teens' mental health and feelings of isolation is essential to identifying opportunities for impact.

The current study also centered the voices of young people. In addition to surveys measuring loneliness, anxiety, depression, and connectedness, teens were asked open-ended questions about what connectedness means to them, where they feel most connected, and who they turn to when they need support.

The work focused on five domains: family, peer, school, self, and digital connectedness. This approach identified the areas that afford the most protection and showed how strengths and vulnerabilities across domains interact with each other.

HIGHLIGHTS

Baseline: Nearly half the teens surveyed reported moderate to severe feelings of loneliness, while one in five screened positive for anxiety or depression.

Connectedness is a core developmental need and is more than social interaction. It is not peripheral: 80% indicated that being connected is “very” or “extremely” important to them. About 60% described connectedness in broad relational terms, such as “having friends,” “spending time with people,” or “not being alone.” Others considered a sense of belonging, emotional closeness, and mutual understanding as the core components.

Teens feel high levels of connectedness across all five domains. On average, teens reported the strongest connectedness with family, followed by peers, self, school, and digital spaces.

Higher connectedness is associated with lower loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Compared with highly connected youth, those with low connectedness reported 3.2 times higher loneliness, 3.5 times higher anxiety, and 4.1 times higher depression.

Family connectedness is most strongly associated with lower loneliness, anxiety, and depression. It also had the highest average connectedness score; 88% of teens feel genuinely cared for by their family and 88% reported having at least one family member they could turn to when stressed.

School represents an essential opportunity to create connections. Although family was most strongly associated with higher connectedness, school connectedness showed the largest difference between lonely and less lonely teens.

In-person peer relationships remain essential. While 88% reported that spending time with peers in person helps them to feel connected, over 85% have at least one peer they can talk to about important issues.

Digital connectedness has less of a buffering effect than other domains. While 76% reported using technology to maintain relationships, digital connectedness showed only a minimal relationship with loneliness, anxiety, and depression compared with family, peer, school, and self-connectedness. However, teens who spent 4+ hours per day passively scrolling reported mean loneliness scores nearly twice as high as those who spent less than one hour per day doing so.

Emerging reliance on AI companions warrants attention. Of those surveyed, 29% reported using AI as a source of connection or support. Teens who reported using AI in this way had a higher rate of screening positive for depression than those who did not: 44% compared with 25%.

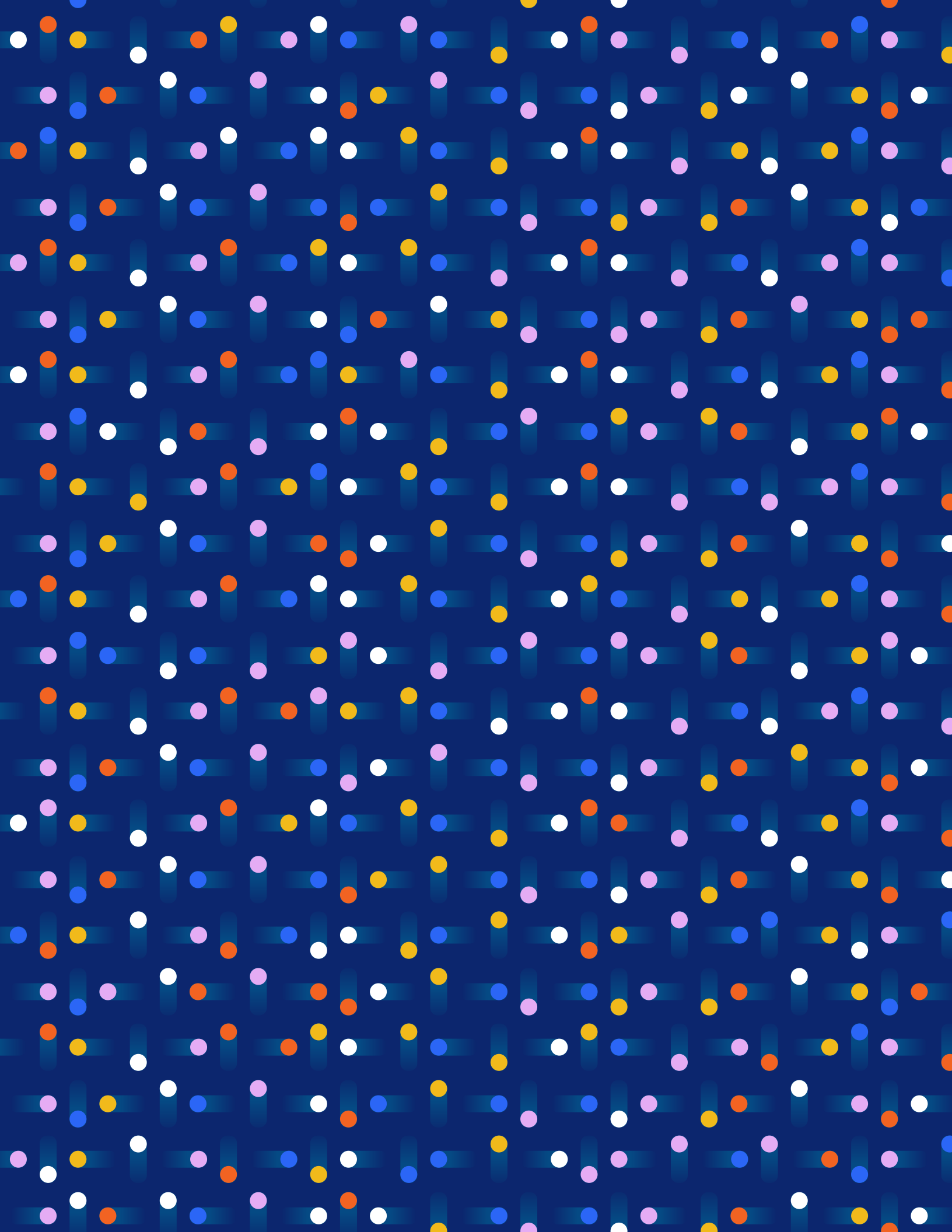
Uneven connectedness across domains is associated with higher risk. Teens whose level of connectedness varied across domains experienced higher loneliness, anxiety, and depression than teens with more uniform ratings.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings suggest that youth mental health cannot be addressed through treatment-focused approaches alone. Boosting connectedness should be a foundational public health strategy. Youth-serving systems can support adolescent mental health by intentionally building the conditions for meaningful connection across the settings where teens live, learn, socialize, and spend time online.

Opportunities to strengthen adolescent well-being:

1. **Prioritize meaningful connection across domains.**
2. **Strengthen family connection and emotional availability.**
3. **Support healthy peer relationships and in-person connections.**
4. **Use schools as a key setting for prevention.**
5. **Build self-connection as part of youth well-being efforts.**
6. **Promote intentional digital engagement that supports human connection.**
7. **Monitor emerging reliance on AI companions and chatbots with curiosity and care.**
8. **Assess connectedness by domain and coordinate around specific gaps.**
9. **Treat connectedness as a public health priority.**



BUILDING BRIDGES: TEEN LONELINESS AND CONNECTION

Adolescence is a developmental period defined by relationships — with parents, peers, teachers, and coaches. A growing body of research (Birrell et al., 2025; Pastor et al., 2025; Resnick et al., 1997; Steiner et al., 2019) has found that connectedness — the perceived sense of belonging, acceptance, support, and authenticity across environments — can provide strong protection against depression, anxiety, and other mental health factors. Loneliness and social isolation have emerged as major concerns for teens and their parents (Child Mind Institute, 2025), with increasing evidence linking a lack of connection to poorer mental health outcomes (Diggs et al., 2025; Widnall et al., 2022).

Today's adolescents are growing up in a social landscape characterized by rapidly evolving technology, expanding digital communities, changing family dynamics, heightened academic pressures, and increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Widnall et al., 2022; Diggs et al., 2025). While young people seem to have more opportunities to connect due to technological advancements, this generation may be feeling less connected in meaningful ways (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

Although research has demonstrated the importance of family relationships, peer support, and school belonging (Diggs, et al., 2025; Pastor et al., 2025), these areas have largely been studied independently. Most research has focused on one relationship system or setting at a time (Birrell et al., 2025), making it difficult to understand how adolescents experience connectedness across multiple environments. A teen's sense of well-being may be shaped by an interconnected network of relationships — with their families, friends, schools, online communities, and themselves. Understanding how these domains together affect teens' mental health and feeling of loneliness is essential to pinpoint meaningful opportunities for impact.

This study was designed to address these gaps. Conducted by the Child Mind Institute in partnership with Ipsos, this nationally representative survey of 1,000 adolescents aged 14–17 examined connectedness across five domains: family, peer, school, self, and digital connectedness.

By examining these domains together, this study provides a comprehensive picture of how connectedness relates to loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Equally important, this study focuses on the voices of young people. Highlighting youth voice alongside the data provides meaningful insights into teen well-being that come directly from young people themselves.

Lastly, this study moves the conversation toward more actionable problem-solving around what types of connection matter most and where families, schools, communities, and policymakers can invest to strengthen teen mental health.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted online in partnership with Ipsos and included a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adolescents ages 14–17 who explicitly consented to the research across the United States from January 26 to March 13, 2026.

Participants completed validated measures of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (De Jong-Gierveld Loneliness Scale, GAD-2, PHQ-2) as well as a comprehensive connectedness survey examining experiences across multiple domains. Open-ended questions were also included to capture adolescent voice in defining connection and belonging.

Five domains of connectedness were examined and defined as:

Self-connectedness: The ability to understand, accept, and remain attuned to one's inner experience (thoughts, feelings, values, needs) and to act in alignment with the inner self.

Family connectedness: The sense of love, trust, belonging, emotional safety, and mutual engagement a young person experiences within their family relationships.

Peer connectedness: The sense of belonging, trust, authenticity, and mutual support shared between a young person and their peers.

School connectedness: A student's sense of belonging, trust, respect, emotional safety, and meaningful relationships within their school environment — including peers and adults.

Digital connectedness: How supported, understood, and “seen” a young person feels in digital spaces, and whether online interactions feel meaningful.



Each survey domain included 8 questions rated on a 1–5 scale. Domain scores were calculated by averaging responses across the 8 questions, with higher scores indicating stronger connectedness. For one secondary analysis, a four-domain connectedness composite was calculated by averaging family, peer, school, and self-connectedness scores.

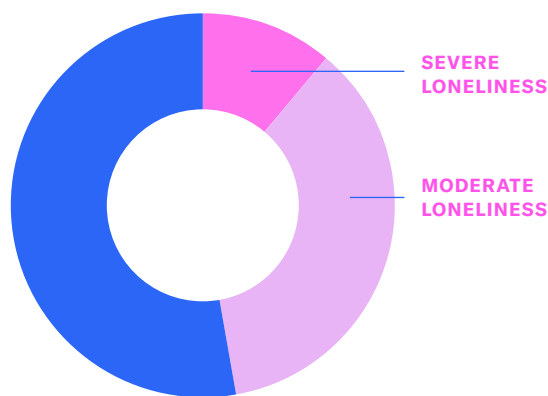
This multi-domain approach allows us to identify which domains are most protective and to understand how strengths and vulnerabilities across domains interact with one another.



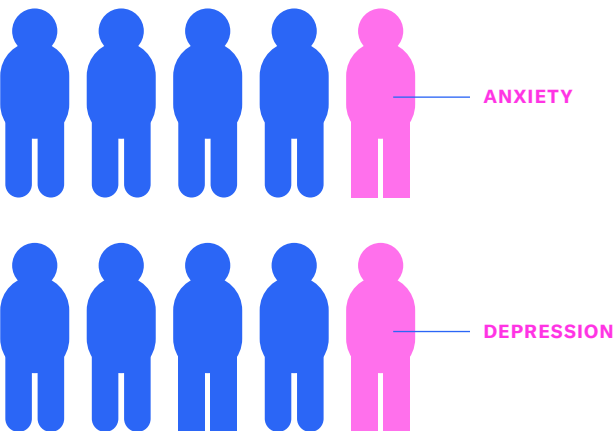
FINDINGS

1. MANY TEENS EXPERIENCE LONELINESS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION.

Nearly half of the teens surveyed (47%) reported feeling moderate (36%) to severe (11%) loneliness, while one in five screened positive for anxiety (23%) or depression (21%).



This baseline finding establishes the scope of the problem this study addresses.



2. CONNECTEDNESS IS A CORE DEVELOPMENTAL NEED FOR TEENS.

This study found that connectedness is not a peripheral issue for adolescents but one that is central to how they define well-being.

80% of teens reported that being connected is “very” or “extremely” important to them. Open-ended responses further showed that teens often define connection through belonging, feeling understood, emotional safety, trust, and supportive relationships.

80% of teens reported that being connected is “very” or “extremely” important to them.



3. CONNECTEDNESS IS FAR MORE THAN SOCIAL INTERACTION.

When asked what connectedness means, teens' open-ended responses most often emphasized relationships. About 60% described connectedness in broad relational terms, such as "having friends," "spending time with people," and "not being alone."

The remaining responses included more specific language about the qualities that make relationships feel meaningful or supportive. Within these responses, teens named themes such as:

How Teens Define Connection

Belonging	20%
Feeling understood	10%
Supportive relationships	7%
Emotional safety	5%
Trust	5%
Connecting through shared meaning and purpose	2%

Together, these findings suggest that most teens understand connectedness relationally, while a smaller but meaningful share describe connectedness in terms of the specific emotional qualities that make relationships feel safe, supportive, and meaningful.

Teens were also asked open-ended questions about what connectedness means to them, where they feel most connected, and who they turn to when they

need support. Their responses reveal that connectedness is not defined primarily by the frequency of social interaction or the size of someone's social network. Instead, teens often described connection in terms of relationship quality, including feeling understood, accepted, supported, and able to be their authentic selves. Examples of teens' responses about how they define connectedness are included below:

Feeling a sense of community. Safeness, security, and honesty. When I'm in a community with my interests or talking to a diverse group.

Teen, age 17

Feeling connected is having friends I can rely on and talk freely to. I feel most connected at home and at school.

Teen, age 16

It means being a part of something — not just by myself. I feel most connected when I'm on Discord talking with my older brother.

Teen, age 14

Being a part of my school, my church, and the area where I live — and helping others in need whatever way I can.

Teen, age 17



4. TEENS REPORTED HIGH LEVELS OF CONNECTEDNESS ACROSS ALL FIVE DOMAINS. ON AVERAGE, THE STRONGEST CONNECTEDNESS WAS WITH FAMILY AND THE LOWEST IN DIGITAL SPACES.

Before examining specific domains of connectedness, it is helpful to look at teens' reported connectedness across the domains measured in the survey. While many teens reported that being connected is important to them, the domain scores show where teens reported feeling more or less connected in practice.

On average, teens reported the strongest connectedness with family (mean = 4.33), followed by peers (mean = 4.22), self (mean = 4.09), school (mean = 3.98), and digital spaces (mean = 3.77). These scores indicate that teens generally reported high levels of connectedness across domains, with family and peer connectedness rated most strongly and digital connectedness rated lowest.

The sections below examine how connectedness in each domain, as well as the balance across domains, is associated with loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

Average Connectedness Across the Five Domains

Family	4.33
Peer	4.22
Self	4.09
School	3.98
Digital	3.77

5. HIGHER CONNECTEDNESS IS ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER LONELINESS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION.

One of the clearest findings from this study was the association between connectedness, mental health, and loneliness. Teens who felt less connected were also more likely to feel depressed, anxious, and lonely.

Compared with highly connected youth, those with low connectedness reported:
3.2 times higher loneliness
3.5 times higher anxiety
4.1 times higher depression

How Connectedness Tracks with Distress

Loneliness	
Low (Composite score < 4.0)	4.04
Mid (4.0 – 4.5)	2.14
High (4.5 – 5.0)	1.28
Anxiety	
Low	2.49
Mid	1.39
High	0.72
Depression	
Low	2.11
Mid	0.98
High	0.51

In four domains — family, school, peer, and self — more connectedness correlated to less loneliness. However, digital connectedness showed a much smaller difference between lonely and less lonely teens, suggesting that it may function differently from other measured domains.



6. FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS IS MOST STRONGLY ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER LONELINESS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION.

Among the domains examined, family connectedness showed the strongest association with lower loneliness, anxiety, and depression. It also had the highest average connectedness score, suggesting that family relationships were one of the strongest reported sources of connection for teens in this study.

Family connectedness was also the most equitable domain, where teens who identified as being introverted or extroverted had very little differences in family connectedness.

88% of teens reported feeling genuinely cared for by their family.

88% reported having at least one family member they could turn to when stressed.

Home and family were the most frequently cited sources of connection — cited 60% more often than friends, twice as often as school, and more than 10 times as often as online/digital spaces.

7. FAMILY AND PEER CONNECTEDNESS MAY WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT TEEN WELL-BEING.

While family had the highest connectedness score, additional analyses suggested that peer connectedness appears to buffer the relationship between family connectedness and loneliness. High family connectedness appears to be protective even when teens report lower levels of peer connectedness. Nevertheless, when family connectedness is low, strong peer connectedness can provide an important additional source of protection. Among teens with low family connectedness, loneliness was less common among those with strong peer connectedness (51%) than among those without it (78%). This suggests that meaningful peer relationships may buffer against the risks associated with lower family connection. Youth with both low family and low peer connectedness experienced the highest levels of loneliness, demonstrating that adolescents are most vulnerable when multiple sources of connection are absent.

This finding suggests that family and peer relationships may function as complementary sources of support. Family provides a strong foundation for emotional well-being, while peers can serve as an important source of resilience when family connectedness is limited. Overall, adolescents experience the greatest protection when they have multiple meaningful relationships across their lives.



8. SCHOOL REPRESENTS AN ESSENTIAL OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE CONNECTIONS.

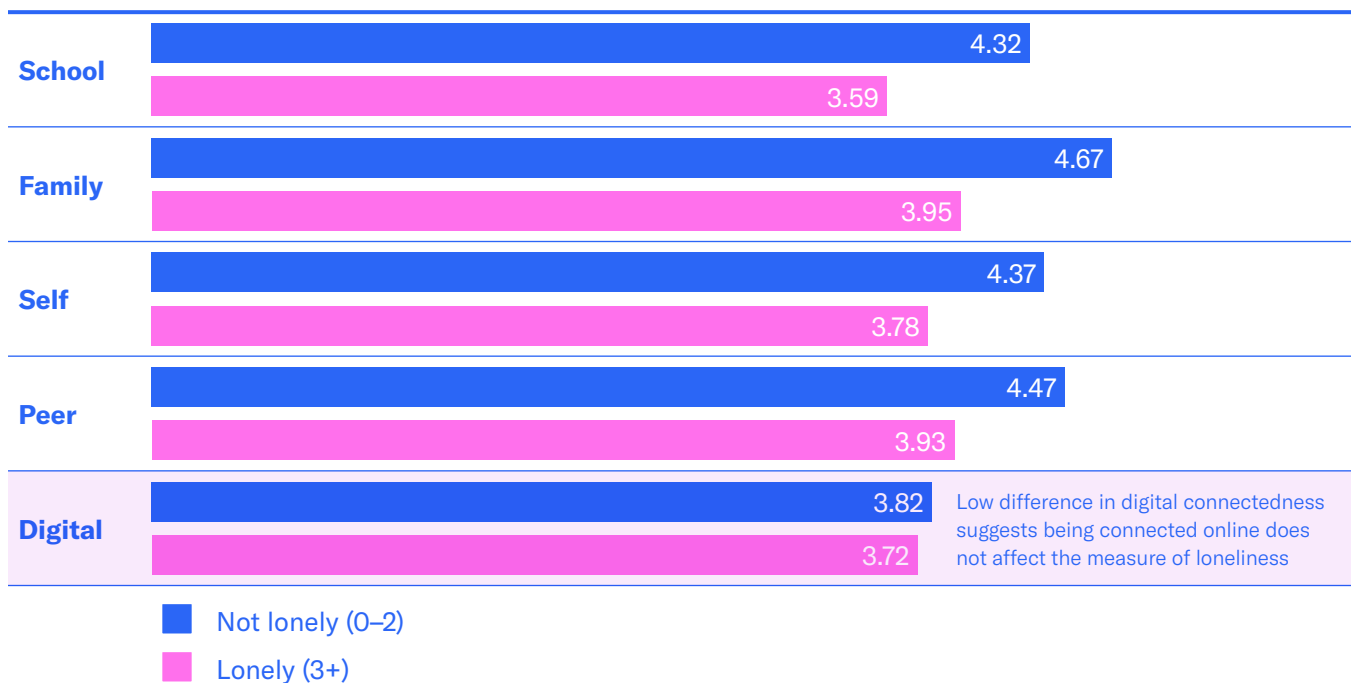
While family appeared to be the strongest association with higher connectedness scores, school connectedness showed the largest difference between lonely and less lonely teens. The gap in school connectedness between these groups was larger than any other domain.

Approximately one-third of students reported not feeling fully connected to their school community.

The strongest school-related indicator was having at least one trusted adult at school, which nearly 80% of teens said they had, while 71% reported that they feel part of a school community.

This finding is important, as schools represent one of the few universal environments that reach many teens.

Connectedness Score Among Lonely vs. Not Lonely Teens



9. IN-PERSON PEER RELATIONSHIPS REMAIN ESSENTIAL.

Despite growing digital engagement, teens overwhelmingly reported that face-to-face peer relationships remain essential to feeling connected.

Across the teens surveyed, 88% reported that spending time with peers in person helps them to feel connected, and over 85% reported having at least one peer they can talk to about important issues.

This finding suggests that digital relationships cannot fully replace in-person friendships.

88% of teens reported that spending time with peers in person helps them feel connected.

10. DIGITAL CONNECTEDNESS HAS LESS OF A BUFFERING EFFECT THAN OTHER DOMAINS.

One of the most striking findings is that digital connectedness seems to function differently from other connectedness domains.

While 76% of teens reported using technology to maintain relationships, digital connectedness showed only a minimal relationship with loneliness, anxiety, and depression compared with family, peer, school, and self-connectedness.

Numerically, this pattern is stark: digital connectedness showed almost no association with loneliness ($r = -0.098$), anxiety ($r = -0.040$), or depression ($r = +0.013$) compared with family ($r = -0.567$) and self ($r = -0.512$), the two strongest offline domains. Digital connectedness also correlated only weakly with offline connectedness itself ($r = 0.23$ with family, $r = 0.30$ with peer). Strong digital connectedness does not automatically translate into stronger offline relationships. Teens also described connecting with others online in more active ways; 72% said doing things together online with others (gaming, group chats, shared interests) helps them feel connected.

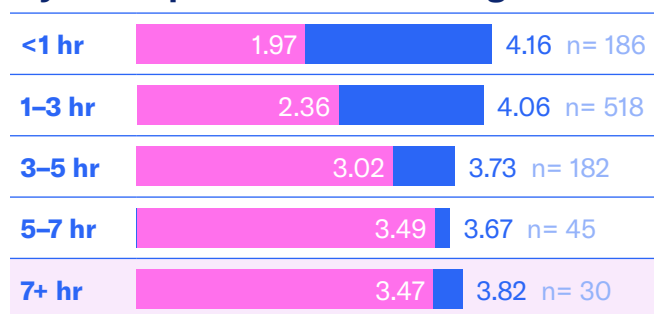
The gap in digital connectedness between lonely and less lonely teens was one-sixth the size of gaps in all other domains. This suggests that digital connection

may help maintain relationships but showed weaker associations with loneliness, anxiety, and depression than the other measured domains.

Like findings from previous studies (e.g., Marciano et al., 2022; Valkenburg et al., 2022), teens who reported spending four or more hours primarily engaged in passive social media use exhibited higher loneliness scores and lower school connectedness than their peers, highlighting that the quality of digital engagement — not simply screen time — may be particularly relevant for teens' well-being.

Given the cross-sectional design, the direction of this relationship cannot be determined. It is equally plausible that lonely teens turn to passive scrolling as a coping mechanism, rather than passive use driving loneliness, or both may be true. Longitudinal research is needed to establish causality. Notably, teens screening positive for depression were nearly twice as likely to use AI as a social substitute (44% vs. 25%). The AI use finding is consistent with the possibility that teens experiencing distress may be more likely to turn to certain forms of digital engagement, though the direction of the relationship cannot be determined.

Loneliness and School Connectedness by Time Spent Passive Scrolling



■ Average Loneliness Score

■ Average School Connectedness Score

n = number of teens in each passive-scrolling time group



11. EMERGING RELIANCE ON AI COMPANIONS WARRANTS ATTENTION.

Of the teens surveyed, 29% reported using AI as a source of connection or support. Rates were substantially higher among vulnerable youth:

45% of youth who screened positive for depression

41% of youth who screened positive for social anxiety

38% of youth who screened positive for general anxiety

These findings suggest that AI may be serving as a source of perceived connection or support for some teens, particularly those experiencing distress. Because the study is cross-sectional, the direction of this relationship cannot be determined.

12. UNEVEN CONNECTEDNESS ACROSS DOMAINS IS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER RISK.

Perhaps the most novel finding from this study was that discrepancies in connectedness between domains are associated with higher risk for loneliness and mental health challenges.

Teens whose level of connectedness was not the same across domains (family, peer, school, and self) experienced higher loneliness, anxiety, and depression compared to teens who had a more equitable rating across domains — independent of their overall connectedness level.

Compared with teens whose connectedness was roughly equal across domains, those with high discrepancy reported 56% higher loneliness, 98% higher anxiety, and 70% higher depression. To define this more precisely: Teens whose connectedness was

consistent across family, peer, and school (standard deviation < 0.258, a “balanced” profile) reported average loneliness scores of 2.02, compared with 3.15 among teens with the most uneven profiles (standard deviation > 0.483), yielding a 56% increase. This gap held regardless of each teen’s average connectedness level, meaning a teen cannot “compensate” for an uneven profile simply by scoring higher on average.

So, a teen who feels deeply connected with family but completely disconnected from peers and school may experience elevated risk for mental health difficulties and loneliness.

Domain Discrepancy: Uneven Connectedness Elevates Risk

Loneliness		
Unbalanced (High Discrepancy)	3.15	+56% higher
Mid Discrepancy	2.38	
Balanced (Low Discrepancy)	2.02	
Anxiety		
Unbalanced	2.20	+98% higher
Mid Discrepancy	1.35	
Balanced	1.11	
Depression		
Unbalanced	1.70	+71% higher
Mid Discrepancy	0.94	
Balanced	1.00	

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study point to several opportunities for families, schools, communities, youth-serving organizations, researchers, and policymakers to strengthen adolescent well-being by fostering meaningful connection across the settings where teens live, learn, socialize, and spend time online.

1. PRIORITIZE MEANINGFUL CONNECTION ACROSS DOMAINS.

Efforts to support youth well-being should focus not only on increasing opportunities for social interaction, but also on fostering meaningful engagement, supportive relationships, and authentic belonging where teens feel understood. Because teens reported connectedness across multiple domains, prevention

and intervention efforts should consider the full ecology of teen relationships, including family, peers, school, self-connection, community, and digital spaces. Supports should prioritize the quality, meaning, and consistency of connection rather than focusing only on the amount of social contact.

2. STRENGTHEN FAMILY CONNECTION AND EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY.

Family connectedness emerged as one of the strongest areas of connection for teens and showed strong associations with lower loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Families and youth-serving organizations should support regular opportunities for conversation,

emotional check-ins, predictable family routines, and communication practices that help adolescents feel heard, cared for, and supported. Efforts should focus on relationship quality and emotional availability, not simply increasing time spent together.

3. SUPPORT HEALTHY PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND IN-PERSON CONNECTIONS.

Peer relationships are an important developmental source of belonging and support during adolescence. Schools, families, and communities should create both structured and unstructured opportunities for teens to build meaningful peer relationships through clubs, sports, arts, service learning, mentoring, youth

leadership, and other activities that promote belonging beyond academic performance or online interaction. Families should also recognize friendship development as an important developmental asset and support adolescents in building healthy, positive peer connections.



4. USE SCHOOLS AS A KEY SETTING FOR PREVENTION.

Schools are one of the few universal environments that reach most teens and are therefore a critical setting for strengthening belonging and connection. Schools should ensure that every student has access to at least one trusted adult, implement advisory or mentoring structures, create opportunities for student voice and contribution, and build relational practices

into daily instruction. Schools should also consider incorporating belonging and connectedness measures into climate and culture surveys and monitoring students who may appear socially disconnected, even if they are academically successful.

5. BUILD SELF-CONNECTION AS PART OF YOUTH WELL-BEING EFFORTS.

Self-connectedness should be included as part of a broader approach to adolescent well-being. Supports can help teens identify emotions, recognize the physical experience of feelings, practice mindfulness and self-compassion, accept feelings without judgment, explore personal values, and reflect on

how different relationships affect their mood and sense of self. These strategies can strengthen teens' ability to understand themselves and engage in relationships that feel authentic and supportive.

6. PROMOTE INTENTIONAL DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT THAT SUPPORTS HUMAN CONNECTION.

Digital spaces can help teens maintain relationships, but the findings suggest that digital connectedness functions differently from family, peer, school, and self-connectedness. Digital wellness efforts should focus less on screen time alone and more on how and why teens use technology. Schools, families, and youth-serving organizations should teach digital

literacy skills that emphasize intentional engagement rather than passive consumption, encourage digital experiences that strengthen offline relationships, and help teens distinguish between online interaction and meaningful connection.

7. MONITOR EMERGING RELIANCE ON AI COMPANIONS AND CHATBOTS WITH CURIOSITY AND CARE.

AI companionship is an emerging area that warrants attention, particularly because some teens reported using AI as a source of connection or support. Adults should approach conversations about AI use without judgment and seek to understand what needs teens may be trying to meet through these tools. Schools,

families, researchers, and youth-serving organizations should continue monitoring AI companionship while also strengthening opportunities for authentic human connection so that AI does not become a primary substitute for supportive relationships.

8. ASSESS CONNECTEDNESS BY DOMAIN AND COORDINATE AROUND SPECIFIC GAPS.

Screening, school climate efforts, and youth mental health programming should assess connectedness across multiple domains rather than relying only on a single overall sense of connection. We should ask: connected to whom, connected where, connected in what ways, and where are the gaps? This can help identify teens who may feel connected in one area

but disconnected in another, allowing supports to be matched to the specific domain where connection is weakest. Youth-serving systems should build coordinated supports across family, school, peer, community, and individual/self-connection domains.

9. TREAT CONNECTEDNESS AS A PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY.

Connectedness should be understood as a core factor for youth mental health, not a secondary outcome. Supporting adolescent well-being requires proactive investment in relationships before concerns become more severe. Families, schools, communities, and policymakers should treat belonging, trusted

adult relationships, peer connection, family communication, school climate, self-understanding, community participation, and healthy digital engagement as central components of youth mental health prevention.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study suggests that youth mental health cannot be addressed through treatment-focused approaches alone. Connectedness should be viewed as a foundational public health strategy that can be strengthened across families, schools, peer relationships, communities, self-connection, and digital environments.

The findings reinforce that adolescents benefit from a network of meaningful connections rather than a single source of support. Family connectedness showed one of the strongest associations with lower loneliness, anxiety, and depression, but peer, school, and self-connectedness also appear to play important roles in adolescent well-being. The findings also suggest that uneven connectedness across domains may be associated with higher loneliness, anxiety, and depression, underscoring the importance of identifying where connection gaps exist.

These findings point to the importance of investing in relationships before concerns become more severe. Rather than asking only whether a young person feels connected, families, schools, communities, and youth-serving systems should consider where teens feel connected, where they feel disconnected, and what kinds of relationships help them feel understood, supported, and like they belong.

Schools represent a particularly important setting for prevention because they reach young people consistently and can create daily opportunities for belonging, trusted adult relationships, student voice, and meaningful peer engagement. Families and communities also play critical roles by supporting emotional availability, healthy friendships, mentoring, youth leadership, and participation in activities that help teens feel valued and included.

Digital spaces should be understood as part of teens' broader connection ecosystem, not as a replacement for human connection. Digital engagement may help



teens maintain relationships, but the quality and purpose of technology use matter. Supporting teens' digital wellness requires helping them build online habits that complement, rather than substitute for, authentic relationships and in-person connection.

Taken together, these findings point to a clear opportunity: youth-serving systems can support adolescent mental health by intentionally building the conditions for meaningful connection across the settings where teens live, learn, socialize, and spend time online.

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