

SUPPORTING CHILD WELL-BEING THROUGH **STRENGTHENING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

MAY 2021

**WHY** WE CHOSE THIS TOPIC

Symptoms of emotional distress feel and look different for every youth. Having strong, positive, and consistent sources of social connection allows youth to talk about how they feel in a safe environment. Providing youth with positive childhood experiences (PCEs) can buffer symptoms of emotional distress. In general, PCEs include supportive relationships with adults and being socially connected with their peers, family, community and culture.

**WHAT** THE RESEARCH SAYS<sup>1,2,3</sup>

A study conducted using Wisconsin data evaluated the associations between PCEs and adult depression. It identified seven specific factors that protect children from emotional distress, reduce the harmful effects of trauma, and grow towards becoming a resilient child.

- 1** Ability to talk with family about feelings
- 2** Family is supportive in difficult times
- 3** Participation in family and community traditions
- 4** Feeling of belonging in high school
- 5** Feeling of being supported by friends
- 6** Having at least two non-parent adults who care
- 7** Feeling safe and protected by an adult at home

It is especially important for a **teenager's physical and psychological health to be part of a social network beyond their family.** As they develop their own identity, peers offer support and relief from depression, anxiety, and stress.



**WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?**

**Remember the 5 Strengths**

- 1** **Helping Kids Understand Feelings**  
*Social & Emotional Competence of Children*  
A thumb's up is a way we show emotions
- 2** **Parenting as Children Grow**  
*Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development*  
You are your child's first and most important teacher.
- 3** **Connecting with Others**  
*Social Connections*  
Like your middle finger, you shouldn't stand alone.
- 4** **Building Inner Strength**  
*Parental Resilience*  
Your fourth finger represents a commitment to caring for yourself.
- 5** **Knowing How to Find Help**  
*Concrete Support in Times of Need*  
Last, but not least, ask for the help you need.

Five for Families.org

Whether it's fostering positive peer relationships, educating parents about how to communicate effectively with their child, or promoting ways to become socially connected in the community, Wisconsin understands the importance of positive childhood experiences.

To assist families in building upon their strengths, the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board identifies five essential attributes that help parents and caregivers develop better connections with children called "[Five for Families](#)."

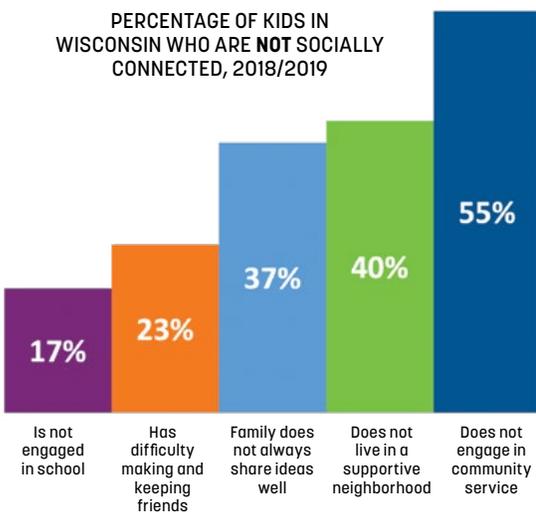
© 2018 Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board | Special thanks to the Michigan parents who created the hand concept.



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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SOCIALLY CONNECTED?<sup>4-6</sup>

Kids are socially connected when they have enough relationships to make them feel like they belong, are cared for, valued, and supported. However, not all kids in Wisconsin are always supported well. Without the protective factor of social connectedness, they may have difficulty becoming resilient in challenging times.



One of the most meaningful activities a teen can do to strengthen relationships is to contribute to a shared goal. Volunteering helps a teen establish a sense of belonging and civic responsibility.

## WHAT WE CAN DO<sup>7</sup>

### ➔ POLICY MAKERS:

- Incentivize initiatives and prioritize policies that encourage models of social connectedness such as integrated care, early intervention, and collaborative activities across sectors.
- Fund youth peer support groups so teens may connect with others and build relationships.

### ➔ SCHOOL:

- Promote mutual respect in the classroom by reducing any threats of a student being embarrassed or teased.
- Assign students classroom responsibilities that are developmentally appropriate.
- Form interdisciplinary teams of teachers who know, and are invested in, students' achievements.
- Include shared peer activities in a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

### ➔ PROVIDERS:

- Identify protective factors to reduce the effects of chronic exposure to adversity.
- Refer families to support groups, and encourage utilization of libraries, and other low or no-cost options to connect with peers.
- Teach life skills to children so they learn how to be a good friend and maximize their opportunities to socialize.

### ➔ PARENTS:

- Seek out ways for your child to connect with peers early and often so children learn to foster relationships on their own.
- Ask who your child's friends are, especially in high school.
- Talk with your child about when to foster relationships, when to set boundaries, and when to end relationships.

### REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> Bethell, C., Jones, J., et al. Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental and Relational Health in a Statewide Sample: Associations Across Adverse Childhood Experiences Levels. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2019;173(11):e193007.

<sup>2</sup> Yang, C., Boen, C., et al. Social relationships and Physiological Functioning. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Jan 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/early/2016/01/02/1511085112.full.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Braman, L. 7 Positive Childhood Experiences that Shape adult Health and Resiliency-Illustrated. (Website) 2021, April 6. Retrieved from: <https://lindsaybraman.com/positive-childhood-experiences-aces/>

<sup>4</sup> Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health. Collective Impact Definition. 2021. Madison, WI

<sup>5</sup> Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. 2018-2019 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) data query. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent

Health supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB). Retrieved [04/16/21] from [[www.childhealthdata.org](http://www.childhealthdata.org)].

<sup>6</sup> Forder, M.L., What Teens Gain When They Contribute to Their Social Groups. *Greater Good Magazine: Science-Based Insights for a Meaningful Life.* July 22, 2019. Retrieved from: [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what\\_teens\\_gain\\_when\\_they\\_contribute\\_to\\_their\\_social\\_groups](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_teens_gain_when_they_contribute_to_their_social_groups)

<sup>7</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth.* Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.