

WHY WE CHOSE THIS TOPIC

For many, the pandemic has eroded the positive relationships that are necessary for healthy development. This makes our focus on social connectedness more important than ever before.

Here we emphasize the importance of actively rebuilding positive peer relationships to help young people recover and thrive.

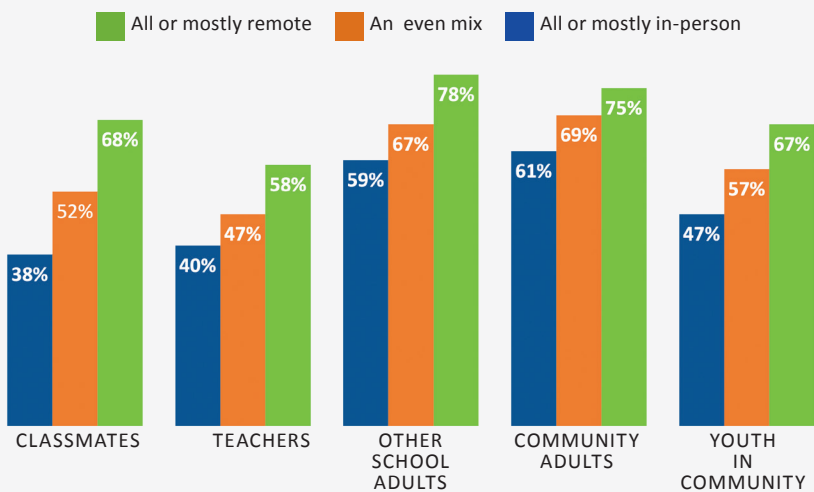
WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ▶ Due to the pandemic, **many young people and their families now have greater mental health needs¹ but fewer social connections.²**
- ▶ **Isolation can create a vicious cycle of social anxiety and social avoidance³** that can persist even as normal life resumes. Recent research showed that adult social isolation generally remained even as social distancing decreased.⁴
- ▶ To break this cycle, both **experts and young people emphasize the need right now for youth to connect with one another** (while adhering to public health guidance). Both informal interactions (e.g., through school, extracurriculars, or free time) **and formal opportunities to share pandemic experiences** (e.g., through facilitated discussions, art or expressive projects⁵, and peer support services) can help young people connect during this time.⁶

DISCONNECTED

Whether remote or in-person last year, U.S. students felt disconnected from others.⁷

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS NOT AT ALL OR ONLY A LITTLE CONNECTED TO EACH GROUP, BY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?

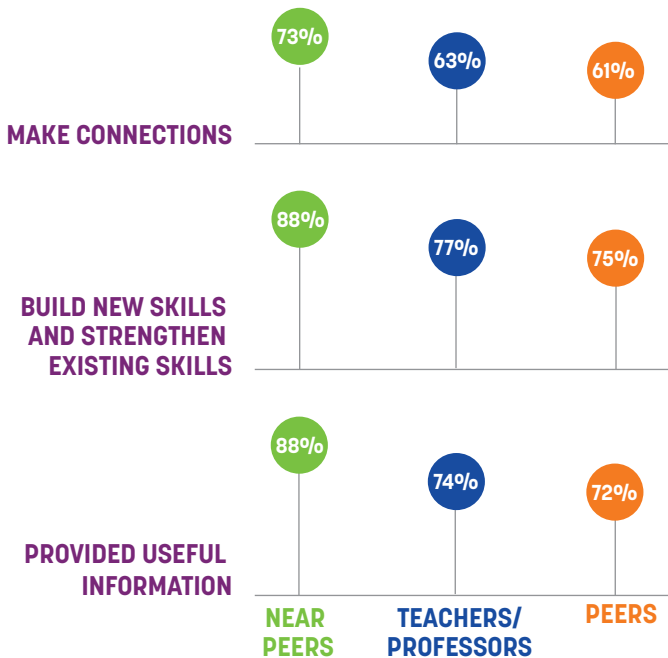
Listening to Youth

Both OCMH Youth Listening Sessions and the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project highlighted the need for young people to be given non-stigmatizing opportunities to talk about how the pandemic has affected them, how they learned to cope, and their insights on school and peers.

Youth-led initiatives like REDgen⁸, Hope Squad, Sources of Strength, and NAMI Raise Your Voice Club provide young people with a way to connect with skilled peers around mental health.

PEER CONNECTIONS

Positive peer connections are powerful. When adolescents are involved in positive youth programming, they report that peers and slightly older “near peers” are effective at helping them make social connections and build skills and strengths.⁹



Being positively connected to peers and near-peers can help provide young people with the connections, skills, and information they need to become more confident, competent, and ultimately successful.

REFERENCES:

- ¹Perlis, R. et al. (May 2021) “Report #54 Mental Health In The US”, The COVID States Project: A 50-State COVID-19 Survey. <https://osf.io/cgftz/>
- ^{2,4} Quintana, A. et al. (July 2021) “Report #55 Social Isolation During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, The COVID States Project: A 50-State COVID-19 Survey, <https://osf.io/pfxnv/>
- ³ Clark, Kareem. (July 9, 2021) “The neuroscience behind why your brain may need time to adjust to ‘un-social distancing’” The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/09/covid-coronavirus-neuroscience-social-distancing?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
- ⁵ For an example of what one school has done, see McKnight, Pat. (June 2, 2021) “A Real Treasure: Holmen Eighth-Graders Produce A Book of Essays During Pandemic”. La Crosse Tribune. https://lacsossetribune.com/news/local/a-real-treasure-holmen-eighth-graders-produce-book-of-essays-during-pandemic/article_0463511f-2a21-5c8f-ab30-0737ef542eed.html
- ⁶ For youth voice see e.g. Voices of Wisconsin Students Project (2021). Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy <https://wipps.org/data-design-collection-and-analysis/the-voices-of-wisconsin-students-project-learning-coping-and-building-resilience-during-covid-19/>. For expert opinions National Academies of Sciences, Engineering,

WHAT WE CAN DO

- ➔ **PARENTS:**
 - Look for in-person or positive online opportunities for your child to reconnect with friends and peers.
- ➔ **SCHOOLS/TEACHERS**
 - Embed discussions of student experiences, coping strategies, and reflections into the classroom (e.g., in social emotional learning programming, advisories, health class, English writing assignments).
 - Prioritize time spent restoring peer and adult relationships as a key investment in student success.
- ➔ **POLICY MAKERS:**
 - Fund programs like Sources of Strength that help students help their friends.
 - Help reduce evictions and mobility so that young people can remain in their neighborhoods, schools, and day cares (and, therefore, connected to peers) even when their families are experiencing a financial crisis.
- ➔ **COMMUNITIES:**
 - Incorporate life skills and mental health literacy into youth programming so that young people have the skills to best support one another.
 - Foster places and programs for youth to connect with each other.

- and Medicine (2021) School-Based Strategies for Addressing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Youth in the Wake of COVID-19. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26262>
- ⁷ Flanagan et al. (Summer 2021). “Where do we go next? Youth Insights on the High School Experience during a Year of Historic Upheaval” GradNation and Research for Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/where-do-we-go-next-youth-insights-on-the-high-school-experience-during-a-year-of-historic-upheaval/>
- ⁸ Linane, Rory. (May 20, 2021) “The pandemic and virtual classes have left students feeling isolated. Here’s how some learned to discuss their mental health.” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2021/05/20/redgen-groups-milwaukee-students-discuss-mental-health-pandemic/5163590001/>
- ⁹ Boat, A. (2021). The Power of Social Capital: Findings from the Social Capital Assessment and Learning for Equity (SCALE) Project [Insights & Evidence Series]. Minneapolis, MN.

