

Loneliness and Learning Disabilities

Loneliness has been described as sadness and distress experienced when a desire for social relationships is not achieved. It includes feeling badly about not having close friends, not belonging to a social group and emotional discomfort when alone. Loneliness is different from solitude. Solitude involves a deliberate choice to be alone. It is considered to be a healthy response at times, particularly when it offers a respite from stress or a chance to pursue leisure or creative activities.

Loneliness can be excruciatingly painful. Lonely and isolated children and youth lack opportunities to learn and practice being social. Those who lack peer support have been found to be more at-risk for peer taunting, teasing and bullying as well as mental health problems throughout life.

Many children and adolescents with learning disabilities have social difficulties, including problems initiating and sustaining positive social relationships, struggles in interpreting social cues, and disruptive or withdrawn behaviour. While these difficulties may result in rejection by peers, at times other forces compound the issue. Lonely children may have a negative reputation due to their social isolation or to the stigma associated with 'disability'. In adolescence, when peer relationships are so important, adolescents with learning disabilities may have fewer social connections, fewer friends of both sexes, and receive less all-round support from classmates. Parenting a child with a learning disability can be a lonely, isolating experience. Parents may be blamed and criticized by relatives and

friends for their child's difficulties. Parents may not know others who have children with similar struggles. If the child has a difficult temperament parenting may be further challenging. Parents may have difficulties finding resources to help their child. These may all lead to family stress, conflict and isolation.

What can be done to assist children and youth with learning disabilities to address their loneliness?

Parents should actively assist their children to find and form supplementary relationships. These relationships may develop through active pursuit of opportunities for the child and youth to be with others. They may include joining a within or after school club, developing hobbies that have classes or groups associated with them, attending guides/scouts or enrolling in summer camp. Some parents create a home environment that is enticing to the child's peers, inviting peers to play and monitoring that their child is a positive participant in the play.

Siblings and other family members can provide companionship for children with learning disabilities.

Some lonely children and youth with learning disabilities may require therapeutic support. This might include seeing an individual therapist or group support. Talking through the very painful feelings of loneliness allows children and adolescents to feel heard and understood. Explicit help with enhancement of conversation skills, development of self-regulation, understanding social conventions

and development of assertiveness can also be very useful.

Parents may also benefit from support in addressing the loneliness of their children. Parent counseling or parent support groups can provide opportunities to receive advice and information, share strategies, and be listened to by someone who understands the experience of parenting a child with a learning disability.

The messages received from parents, peers, teachers and significant others about attitudes and acceptance are highly important in shaping the feelings children and youth have about themselves. Parents and teachers should model pro-social attitudes and skills and explicitly point out ways of entering social activities. Positive feedback and encouragement will assist children and youth with learning disabilities who have experienced rejection and disappointments in the past.

Children and youth with learning disabilities need to develop a positive self image, see themselves as capable and worthwhile, and feel that they have something valuable to offer others. This will give them the internal strength needed to persist in making efforts to be part of the social world.

See:

Margalit, M. and Al-Yagon, M. (2002). The Loneliness Experience of Children with Learning Disabilities. In B.Y.L. Wong & M. Donahue (eds.). *The Social Dimensions of Learning Disabilities: Essays in Honor of Tanis Bryan*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.



Integra, founded in 1967 by parents and professionals, is an accredited Children's Mental Health Centre dedicated to helping children and adolescents who experience social, emotional and behavioural problems related to their learning disabilities. We are a charitable organization administered by a Board of Directors comprised of dedicated volunteers from the community.

Integra has an experienced and multidisciplinary professional staff that is dedicated to creating and implementing a range of programs. Integra serves as a centre for research, practicum placement and continuing education.

Integra is committed to the promotion of a community-wide understanding of the mental health needs of children and adolescents who have learning disabilities, and to improving community-based services for them and their families. A range of clinical services is provided by Integra, as well as related activities in research and evaluation, and in training, consultation, collaboration and advocacy.

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TIPS FOR PARENTS

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