How do I help my child stay connected?

Having to stay at home and being unable to visit friends and extended family members or to participate in our usual activities is a reality for most during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although individuals vary in their desire for social connection, there’s no doubt that these restrictions impact all of us – particularly young people, as they’re at a stage in their development where social connection is particularly important for their sense of self and identity, which feeds into their sense of wellbeing. Social connection is also a powerful antidote to stress and anxiety.
HERE ARE FOUR STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SOCIAL CONNECTION AND REDUCE THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:

**GUARD AGAINST SOCIAL ISOLATION AND INCREASE A SENSE OF CONNECTION**
Connecting with others can be the best antidote to stress, anxiety and low mood. For children who are socially anxious or naturally shy, social isolation may seem to have some benefits as it reduces the opportunities for them to engage in anxiety-provoking situations. However, it’s important for you to encourage your child to face social situations in a gradual way as avoidance will only make it really hard for your child to engage in these social situations post COVID-19. Some ideas on how to approach this include:

- Use technology to help your child engage in video chats, telephone calls or playing games over the internet with friends and family.
- Ask your child to write a letter, make a card, write a poem or create something for a friend and send it to them.
- Design a poster with a message for a friend, and drive by the friend’s house holding the sign.

Doing something for someone else is in itself a way to connect and increase your child’s sense of empathy for that person as well as enhance their wellbeing.

**PROBLEM-SOLVE**
Help your child to work through their feelings of being disconnected from others. Most children will be missing their friends or other important people in their life, so it may be helpful to sit down with them and think of ways to increase their sense of connection. Children are great at coming up with ideas and solutions to problems, and by involving them, it will give your child a sense of control over the current situation. Draw up a list of options, briefly noting the pros and cons of each option, and then let your child choose the solution that seems the most practical and potentially helpful.

**ENGAGE IN DETECTIVE OR REALISTIC THINKING**
If you notice that your child is feeling sad, withdrawn or anxious, it may help to engage in some detective or realistic thinking. Ask them to identify the thought behind the feeling. If they feel lonely, left out or isolated, collect some evidence for their thoughts and come up with alternative ways to cope. Some questions you could ask include:

- What is the evidence for and against your thought?
- Is there another way you could look at this situation?
- Is this situation as bad as you’re making out?
- What is the most likely, best- or worst-case scenario? If your child is worried that they may never see their friends again, help guide their thoughts to likely scenarios in 12 months from now.

**TOLERATING YOUR CHILD’S DISTRESS**
The hardest part about being a parent/carer is seeing your child suffer or experience distress. In the current situation, this may be due to your child missing their friends or not being able to undertake usual activities. Try to see this as an opportunity to support your child to develop coping strategies. As parents/carers, we often try to solve or get rid of problems for our children to reduce their distress. In the long run, this is not always helpful as it doesn’t give your child an opportunity to develop ways of coping. The most helpful thing you can do as a parent/carer is to tolerate and accept how your child may be feeling, acknowledge their feelings and provide a safe space for them to talk about them. If appropriate, share with them how you’re feeling and what you’re doing to cope. Being a role model to a child and demonstrating effective ways of coping and staying connected with others will help them to feel less alone and more connected to you and to others. It may also motivate them to come up with some strategies of their own.

**LINKS TO KEY SUPPORT SERVICES**

**CENTRE FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH CLINIC**
Macquarie University
T: (02) 9850 8668  
E: ehc.admin@mq.edu.au  
mq.edu.au/CEH-clinic

**IN CASE OF A CRISIS, CONTACT**
- **ACT**: 1800 629 354 – Mental Health Triage Service
- **NSW**: 1800 011 511 – Mental Health Line
- **NT**: 1800 682 288 – Northern Territory Mental Health Line
- **QLD**: 1300 MH CALL or 1300 642 253 – 24-hour specialist mental healthcare
- **SA**: 13 14 65 – Mental Health Triage Service
- **TAS**: 1800 332 368 – Mental Health Service Helpline
- **VIC**: [Victoria’s Mental Health Services](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health) – See website for services in your area
- **WA**: 1800 676 822 – Mental Health Emergency Response Line

**LIFELINE**
T: 13 11 14

**KIDS HELPLINE**
T: 1800 55 1800  
kidshelpline.com.au

**HEAD TO HEALTH (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT)**
headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support

**BEYOND BLUE**
Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service  
T: 1800 512 348

A dedicated COVID-19 [online forum](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/GetSupport/CoronavirusMentalWellbeing/COVID19CommunityForum) is available for people to share their concerns and connect online to support one another.  
[coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au](https://www.coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au)

**REACH OUT**
[Online youth forums](https://www.headspace.org.au/services/online-support) and [online parents forums](https://www.mindspot.org.au/parents) for COVID-19 offer peer support in safe and established online communities.  
[au.reachout.com](https://au.reachout.com)

**MINDSPOT CLINIC**
T: 1800 61 44 34  
E: contact@mindspot.org.au  
mindspot.org.au

**HEADSPACE**
headspace.org.au

**AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY**
[psychology.org.au/FindAPsychologist](https://www.psychology.org.au/FindAPsychologist)

In an emergency, dial [000](http://www.000.com.au/).