

It starts with

hello

Practitioner's Toolkit

Addressing loneliness in parents

A toolkit to support Early Years Practitioners with identifying signs of loneliness and adapting aspects of their provision to support families.

HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

IS WORKING WITH

**JO COX
LONELINESS**
start a conversation



HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

WORKS

From before they are born until they are into their twenties, we help disadvantaged children across the UK. We help them through fostering or adoption – and by intervening early to stop neglect and abuse. We make life better for disabled children. We influence policy and advocate for change. Our 7,000 staff and volunteers operate over 600 services, improving the lives of 370,000 children, teenagers, parents and carers every year. We succeed by doing what's right, doing what's needed, and doing what works for children.

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“Young or old loneliness doesn’t discriminate”

Jo Cox

In June 2016 Jo Cox MP was tragically killed. The news of her death shocked and upset people across all walks of life. One thing Jo was working on in the weeks leading up to her death, was the Commission on Loneliness. She wanted to find out more about causes of loneliness among people in the UK and look for practical solutions.

Loneliness can be difficult to experience. It is often associated with older people but Jo recognised that many children and parents also suffer from loneliness. After her death the Commission was renamed The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and in 2017 Action for Children were invited to lead the work on children, young people and families.

This toolkit aims to support those working in childcare settings to recognise the signs of loneliness in parents and suggest ways to help.

If you want to find out more about loneliness in children, young people and parents read Action for Children’s report ‘It starts with Hello’.



“To me everyone was having a lovely time with their baby and I hated the time I was having with my baby. It was such a lonely time.”

A mum who used Action for Children services

What is loneliness?

The Commission describes loneliness as “a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when we have a mismatch between the quality and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.”

In a survey undertaken by Action for Children, more than half of parents reported having had a problem with loneliness, with a fifth feeling lonely in the last week. Since becoming a parent, more than a third felt always or often cut off from friends and other means of support.

Parents can be lonely for many reasons:

- **They have no extended family close by** – many people move away from their families to find employment.
- **They have difficulty getting used to a change in lifestyle** – some parents who have had a busy adult-focussed 9 to 5 lifestyle find it difficult to adjust to the change in routine and demands of 24-hour parenting.
- **They have difficulty making new friends** – they may have less in common with their friends without children or have got out of the habit of making new friends.
- **They experience a decline in their social network** – the cost of childcare may prevent socialising or they may have little time or energy for going out.
- **They suffer relationship issues** – the demands of children can put a strain on a relationship.
- **Being a young parent** – the responsibility of a baby at a young age can make young parents feel separate from their peers and some find it difficult to join parent groups if they feel they have little in common with older parents.
- **Being parents of children with special educational needs (SEND)** – parents can find it difficult to join in activities or discuss the developmental milestones of their child as they may be different from other children.

“People stopped contacting me – presumably because I wasn’t able to drink and be ‘fun’ anymore. I’ve spent a year hardly going out socially The days are structureless and isolated and I can no longer relate to others in the same way I used to” Mumsnet 2017

The impact of parental loneliness on a young child.

Young children rely on the warmth, structure, and consistency of family relationships. As a result of the way they are feeling, parents experiencing loneliness sometimes find it difficult to provide this environment for their children. Research shows that children who feel their family members are remote, not listening to them, or not interested in their day-to-day lives because they are distant, uninvolved, too busy or unavailable, can feel isolated from their families. This feeling of isolation can manifest itself in negative behaviours in young children and also adversely affect their school performance and their mental health as they grow into adulthood.

It can be difficult to attribute certain behaviours of young children to the fact that their parents may be experiencing loneliness but if practitioners have concerns about either a child’s behaviour or worries about their relationship with their parents, it may be that loneliness could be an issue.

Those working with children in their early years could observe the following behaviours:

- **A child is constantly seeking adult attention.**
- **A child is withdrawn – does not seek attention from either adults or peers.**
- **A child is reluctant to join in group activities.**
- **A child shows no emotion when leaving or greeting a parent.**

Many other factors could be associated with children displaying some of these behaviours, but those working with children in their early years must create a picture of the whole child to determine what the underlying causes may be. The issues could be more serious or it could be that the child is living with a parent who is experiencing loneliness.





“Yes I feel very lonely my only conversation in a day is with my children (10, 9 and 1), the odd ‘Hi’ at the school gates, at the shop or as I say, surface chat (holiday, weather, school) at playgroups” Mumsnet user 2017

Recognising the signs of parental loneliness

Those working with children and their parents in the early years can play an important role in recognising the signs of loneliness and helping to support parents. The first step is to make staff familiar with the signs of loneliness.

The following behaviours may be normal signs of a busy parent or they may be a sign of a parent suffering from loneliness:

- **A parent who despite saying they will attend activities or events fails to turn up and does not offer any reason for their non-attendance.**
- **A parent who does attend activities but does not engage with other parents or staff members.**
- **A parent who is reluctant to leave their child because they rely on them for company and a purpose to the activities they undertake each day. They may be concerned about how they will fill the hours when the child is with you if they have no other interests to focus on.**
- **A parent who frequently makes an excuses to speak to staff.**
- **A parent who lingers at the start and end of the session or activity.**
- **A parent who finds it difficult to talk to staff, may avoid eye contact and is in a hurry to leave the setting when dropping their child off or collecting them.**

The role of Early Years Practitioners is to provide a safe and stimulating learning environment where children engage in high quality care and learning. Recognising when a parent needs support is part of this as well as knowing when to involve other professionals.

How can Early Years Practitioners help?

Playgroups, nurseries, children's centres and schools may be the only opportunities some parents have for social interaction throughout their day. By being aware of the signs of loneliness, combined with reviewing what you offer, you could help remove some of the barriers lonely parents experience.





➡ Get to know your parents

- **Making time for a quick conversation can make a real difference.** You may even find out that parents have areas of expertise that could be used to support your setting or to help with activities or parent groups.

➡ Scheduling of activities

- **Review the timings of activities that parents are invited to attend.** Consider whether activities for parents to be involved in are always held towards the end of the session. Some parents will find an excuse not to return early so will not participate. If the activity is held at the start of the session, the parent can be encouraged to stay when they drop their child off. This may help them make contacts with other parents. If you are offering activities from a community building or family centre, you should consider whether the timings of activities enable parents with older siblings to take or collect them from school.
- **Alternatively, parents who are working may only be able to attend activities at the end of the session.** Considering the overall scheduling of activities based on the parent and child group you are supporting.

➡ Actively encouraging inclusion

- **A common comment from lonely parents' concerns the 'playground or playgroup cliques'.** Many schools have a member of staff at the gate at the beginning and end of the school day; encourage them to identify parents who seem to stand alone and encourage them to join in activities.
- **Be aware of the social groups that may form during an activity with parents.** Encourage the involvement of those parents who may not be included in discussions or conversations with other parents.

⇒ Volunteering and buddying arrangements

- **Ask for volunteers to come into your setting on a weekly basis to help with everyday activities or admin tasks etc.** Reach out to those parents that you believe may be lonely.
- **Ask for volunteers from parents who attend activities and events regularly that would be willing to “buddy up” with a parent who may find it difficult to join in with activities.**
Support and encourage them to attend and become more involved.
- **Recruit a “parent champion”** – perhaps a former parent – whose role is to befriend parents and encourage their involvement in activities.

⇒ Communications

- **Consider setting up a private Facebook page or “What’s app” community group** – and ensure all new parents sign up and receive a welcome message.
- **Send weekly Facebook messages informing parents of what is happening** – and encourage them to join in with any suitable activities.

⇒ Other

- **Offer any vacant space in the building to parents to use for coffee mornings or a weekly meeting group.**
Ensure that all parents are encouraged to join the group.
- **Display web addresses on setting notice board of organisations that are aimed at supporting parents of young children** e.g. your local Family Information Service; Gingerbread www.gingerbread.org.uk; Homestart www.Home-Start.org.uk; Mumsnet www.mumsnet.com; Netmums www.netmums.com.



⇒ Michelle's story

"It's difficult raising five kids on your own, but I just get on and do it. Back when my youngest was two and my eldest 12, I would go for weeks without speaking to another adult. To and fro to school every day, and not a word to anyone in the playground.

It seems silly to say I was lonely – how could I be, with the washing machine constantly going, lunches to make, homework to help with every night. After the kids' bedtime, the telly took the place of friends I used to have at work.

I didn't realise how bad things were until I noticed my three-year-old getting really clingy. We never went out, and she seemed scared of everything. By then, I couldn't cope in any new social situation – I thought people would just stare at me. I knew I had to change, not just for me, but for my kids.

It was a nightmare the first time we went to the Action for Children playgroup. My two little girls cried and cried and I almost took them home. But Monica, my support worker, came out to meet me and I stayed – just for twenty minutes, that first time. Then it was an hour, and finally the whole session.

That meant I could do a bit of adult education – jewellery-making. For the first time in a long time, I asked my ex to look after the kids, so I could go out and do something for myself. I could chat to people at the jewellery workshops without thinking they would ignore me.

Having support from Action for Children changed me – and my daughter. She is far more independent now and less clingy. I've got a hobby, new friends, and am thinking about going back to work. At one stage, I thought I was going to jump into that big black hole I tend to go into sometimes. Now I've got something to believe in."

⇒ Craig's story

Craig first came to Action for Children's father's group in 2012 with his son Joshua. Sadly Craig's marriage broke up and Joshua now lives with his mum. During this time Craig was supported by the Action for Children team.

"I went through a really difficult time. I was only able to see my son for two hours a week. That felt like my heart had been ripped out of my body. It was such a lonely time for me. I kept trying to find things to do to occupy myself but it was hard. I went through the court process to gain access. I now see my son weekly and he stays overnight every other weekend.

There are days where I feel lonely. Living by myself can get quite lonely. It's mostly when I come home from work and not having someone there. I feel the loneliness of not having my child there with me.

I really wanted to stay involved in the charity and help them like they helped me.

A member of staff suggested I volunteer. I started volunteering with the early year's groups, and then helped with the father's groups and crèches. I help out as much as I can, no job is too big or too small."

Volunteering at the centre gets me out of the house and keeps me from being lonely and feeling down. I get to give back to a wonderful charity and help children and families that are in need."

Quick guide for supporting parents suffering from loneliness.

Practitioners identify parents experiencing loneliness through observing some of the following behaviours:

- Reluctance to leave child.
- Frequent requests to talk to staff.
- Reluctance to leave setting at start or end of session.
- Avoiding engagement with staff, including eye contact.
- Non – attendance at setting activities.
- Does attend activities but does not engage with other parents or staff.

Settings could take the following actions to support parents:

- Review timings of activities.
- Be aware of social groups that may form during activities.
- “Buddy – up” parents.
- Set up a Facebook group.
- Send weekly newsletters.
- Use parent’s expertise to support setting.
- Recruit parent helpers.
- Establish weekly parents’ coffee morning.
- Recruit “parent champion”.
- Liaise with local Children’s Centre about courses on offer.
- Display useful website addresses.

Some parents may need additional support

Signposting to professional help:

- Health Visitors
- Local Children’s Centre
- Family Support Workers
- On-line organisations
- Volunteer organisations



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WORKS

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