



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Building Social Connections and Promoting Connectivity

Youth need social support and connection to thrive.

Content Warning: mentions of suicide, suicidal thoughts, and ideation.

Social connection is an important aspect of life and as human beings, we are inherently social beings. And as human beings, we have a drive and psychological need to connect with others and build relationships - something that we found is especially important to youth's mental health and well-being. As we shared in our previous article, [Positively Impacting the Mental Health of Youth Through Community and Social Support](#), social connection and support is an important factor in lowering the risk of suicide among youth. Studies have shown that there is a significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and various school disruptions have had on the mental health of youth across the U.S. with increased suicide attempts and thoughts of suicide.

In the Minneapolis Public School District alone, students from pre-K through 12th grade have faced multiple disruptions since 2020. Schools were closed in early 2020 due to the pandemic with some schools moving to virtual or hybrid learning later in the year, with the option to continue with remote learning. Most recently, during the teacher's strike, schools in the district were closed for 15 days of canceled classes. (mspmag.com) These disruptions, although necessary, unavoidable, and/or meant to protect the health and wellbeing of youth and families across the district, and social isolation has presented challenges for parents but most notably have had unforeseen impacts on the mental health of youth.

"What we've seen our children experience is self-isolation. We're finding that because of the length of time that our children have been isolated, they are having a hard time making connections with others," said one parent with a child facing depression with little interest in activities they used to enjoy doing.

So how do we move past this disruption and work together as a community to re-establish social connectedness? And how can you support your child?

Establishing social connection and support looks different for each family unit and the individual child and their needs. Connectedness - or social connectedness - whether with a familial person or a peer, is the feeling of closeness or belonging, either to an

individual or to a group of people. Children need parents and caregivers to be present and available in order to grow resiliency. Resilience is the ability to bounce back after challenges and tough times, it's the ability to overcome serious hardships. It develops when children learn to deal with them positively and strong relationships are the foundation of a child's resilience. It comes from healthy relationships and connections, which are beneficial to a child's mental health. For some families or caregivers, that looks like preparing and feeding their families. For others, it is establishing religious teachings, while for someone else it is consistently offering quality time with your child. Rebuilding relationships is just as crucial as establishing them. We can do that by making a few changes in our home, like establishing a routine and consistency.

Younger children, even infants, can be just as affected when stresses, like disruptions and changes to their family and caregiving environments, are happening around them. For younger children, try encouraging bonding through one-on-one and family interaction. Time spent together will encourage participation and connection. Hands-on activities in the kitchen or daily living are great ways to start.

Amal Omar-Samatar, a bilingual parent educator in the Minneapolis School District, says that separation and a lack of connection are having an impact on learning. "As a parent educator, when in the classroom with young children, I noticed an increase in language delays," said Amal. "And parents and children are dealing with heightened separation anxiety."

As parents and caregivers, we must offer safe and inclusive spaces, which means accepting your child for who they are and providing the space for them to grow and become themselves in order to build strong connections to family. Building strong connections to the community and promoting a sense of connectedness in school and in organizations can look different but peer connections are most vital.

Building social connections with peers and community

Human connection or social connection can look different for each person but it remains an important aspect of the human experience. It can improve your emotional, physical, and mental health. It can help us regulate our emotions, lead to higher self-esteem and empathy, and lower anxiety and depression ([CMHA](#)). Most significantly, it is shown to help improve the mental health of youth and also decrease suicide attempts and thoughts of suicide ([CDC](#)). So it is hard to ignore the connections between social connectedness and its significance to mental health in youth.

"Since the pandemic, my child doesn't want to go to school social events outside of school hours. He still talks with some of his friends but he's lost many of those connections," said one parent whose child just isn't the same after being isolated and facing several school disruptions. "He was introverted but in school, he would talk to friends and attend school events. He would go to museums and movie theaters, but now he doesn't like to go anywhere."

Maintaining relationships with existing friends, navigating transitions in life with peers, and building new friendships can be difficult when youth do not have access to resources that can help them maintain those relationships. Fortunately, there are organizations in the Twin Cities that are out front in their efforts to support youth development and social connectivity as they welcome participants back after two years where youth rarely left their homes for extended periods of time due to various disruptions. Several organizations shared their experiences with us and the various innovative ways they are working with our youth.

“When we introduce mental health concepts with the youth we serve, we see the most engagement in spaces where trust and a sense of safety and social connection is already well established,” said Christine Nickels, Executive Director of Fred Wells Tennis & Education Center. “In these spaces, youth realize that they aren’t alone.”

At Kulture Klub Collaborative, Executive Director Siddeeqah Shabazz, has seen how vital it is for youth to stay social, further describing how anger, doubt, resentment, hunger, and cold settle in when youth isolate themselves. When they try doing everything alone and feel that they do not have anyone they can trust to help them through all of the strenuous situations and struggles to meet their basic needs, that can lead to self-harm or for the individual to fall deeper into a negative mental state.

The following is a list of local organizations promoting social connectivity for youth:

[Fred Wells Tennis & Education Center](#)

The tennis-based youth development program promotes a holistic approach to well-being, simultaneously promoting physical, mental, and emotional health. FWTEC ensures youth with fewer resources and less exposure to the game have the opportunity to play. They focus on relationship building, with 98 percent of youth in the free TennisWorks outreach program reporting that there is an adult whom they trust.

“Trusting relationships within safe spaces where kids can build confidence and learn through play results in better retention and greater opportunities for personal growth and well-being,” said Christine Nickels, Executive Director of FWTEC

[Kulture Klub Collaborative](#)

As an arts organization working with youth experiencing homelessness, Kulture Klub Collaborative (KKC) participants are struggling with housing stability and are historically underserved. The organization works hard to break down the barriers between accessing art and our youth. Not only are they creating art through multidisciplinary experiences but they are consuming it on a professional level as well.

“We use art as therapy, for fun, for expression, to broaden the horizons of the youth we serve, and to build their skill set,” said Executive Director Siddeeqah Shabazz. “Through art, youth learn how to better collaborate, communicate, analyze their emotions and

learn how to navigate their everyday life.”

KKC develops programs that support and connect youth to artists, supportive adults, peers, and their own creativity by minimizing barriers to participation. This includes offering programs at no cost, resources such as food, project stipends for youth, child care stipends, and transportation. No other arts organization in Minnesota engages exclusively with this unique community of young people.

“There has not been a day when a youth we serve had left KKC feeling worse than when they started, it is always better,” said Executive Director Siddeeqah Shabazz.

Appetite for Change

Appetite for Change believes that food is a key ingredient to nourishing well-being. Systemic barriers make accessing fresh food in North Minneapolis a challenge for many. Through youth and workforce development programs, social enterprises, and policy initiatives, Appetite for Change builds community capacity to engage with the food system in a fresh and sustainable way.

One way Appetite for Change is promoting healthy social connections and supporting mental health is by working on several team-building exercises. Like a five-minute, “free write,” exercise that allows youth participants the opportunity to share what’s going on with themselves, to write it on paper, but most importantly, it helps to ground them and leave what is going on at home, at school, or in their environment at the door. It allows them to focus on the moment and the “right now.”

“We focus on them and remind them that they are a part of something bigger - we try to build that confidence back within themselves,” said LaTajjah Powell, AFC Community Cooks Facilitator, and Youth Honorary Founder. “We are intentional about the questions and discussions we have with the youth during opening exercises. We try offering, and bringing them back to the whole group.”

Moving forward and building resiliency and connection with youth

Over and over again we see that youth are resilient. And with the appropriate social support and connection, that resilience and that child can continue to grow and become a happy and healthy person. Rebuilding relationships after isolation is possible, and all it requires is some effort and consistent work from those closest to them to maintain those healthy bonds. Fred Wells Tennis & Education Center, Kulture Klub Collaborative, and Appetite for Change are all bright spots in our community that are actively working on youth development and creating safe spaces where youth can build social connections with their peers.

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Watercourse Counseling Center is a nonprofit agency that strengthens our community by supporting people in the journey toward emotional well-being. We strive to improve community wellness by creating equitable access to mental health services, bringing services into the community, building partnerships to address community issues impacted by mental health, and mentoring mental health trainees in a community mental health model.



We are a group of a diverse, multilingual team of dedicated clinicians that currently provide mental health services in an outpatient setting and manage school-based clinics at 16 schools in Minneapolis.

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Contact Us:

Ashley Trepp, Executive Director
info@watercoursecounseling.org