

How Social Distancing Can Put Young People at Risk

By Jolene Erlacher



Clinical psychologist, Benjamin F. Miller, wrote that America was already on track to a mental health crisis before the COVID-19 outbreak. While many Americans are feeling the emotional toll of the pandemic, Millennials and Generation Z represent particularly vulnerable groups. Many were already suffering from declining mental health. The new normal of social distancing is increasing the loneliness and isolation that so many within these generations are experiencing.



Many argue that technology allows us to connect effectively even while separated physically. While this is true, we know that in-person interaction is better for emotional health than virtual connection. Jean Twenge, in her book, *iGen* addresses this issue. She explains that if virtual connection were as valuable as face-to-face connection, then “teens who communicate via social media and text should be just as happy, be just as likely to dodge loneliness, and be just as likely to avoid depression as teens who see their friends in person or engage in other activities that don’t involve screens.” However, the research demonstrates that, “teens who spend more time on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy....all screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness.” As we consider this research alongside the fact that most classes, church groups, sports practices, even some camps, not to mention almost all social interactions, have been moved to a virtual format involving screens, the potential for increased depression, unhappiness, and loneliness is evident.

While technology is undoubtedly a gift during this time, it is not without significant risks. Twenge reports that “the correlation between social media use and loneliness appears across all demographic groups: boys and girls, Hispanics, whites, and blacks, and those both lower and higher in socioeconomic status.” Twenge also reports that “eighth graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27%, while those who play sports, go to religious services, or even do homework cut their risk significantly” and that “teens who spend more than three hours a day on an electronic device are 35% more likely to have at least one suicide risk factor.” Research by Brigham Young University indicates that loneliness and social isolation may represent a greater public health hazard than obesity and present a risk for premature mortality.

Nicolas Kardaras in his book, *Glow Kids*, explained children between the ages of 10 and 17 today will experience nearly one third fewer face-to-face interactions with other people throughout their lifetimes as a result of their increasingly electronic culture, at home and in school. He goes on to explain that “an emotional connection is built, however, when eye contact is made during 60-70% of the conversation...the less eye contact, the less a connection is made.” Our kids, teens, and young adults today desperately need the emotional connection that comes from meaningful face-to-face time.

Peter Gray, my favorite researcher on the importance of play, notes a correlation between a decrease in playtime and a rise in major depression, anxiety, and suicide. Gray writes, “If we love our children and want them to thrive, we must allow them more time and opportunity to play, not less.”

As we navigate a season where many playgrounds are closed, sports and team events are cancelled, and other activities are being held virtually, we must be vigilant to monitor the mental and emotional health of the young people in our lives. Reduced emotional connection and increased risks for loneliness and depression are serious threats to the well-being of our young people at this time. We must be proactive to find ways to meet their needs for face-to-face interaction, emotional connection, and healthy activity and play in ways that will allow them to thrive.

For the next generation,
Jolene Erlacher