

Connecting in Changing Times

While connecting in person may not be possible right now, maintaining positive social connections for youth is important for supporting their social and emotional well-being. These connections are critically important for all youth; those who appear to be doing okay with these uncertain times and for those who may be struggling. Certainly, everyone is experiencing the sudden disruptions in routines and being with friends.

During stressful times, the role of a caring adult is certainly important. Examples of caring adults include parents, extended family members, teachers, coaches, neighbors, and other mentors youth regularly interact with such as youth group leaders, 4-H club leaders, etc.

As caring adults, we can do the following to help young people through challenging times.

- Encourage socializing from a distance. Social supports are important in helping minimize feelings of isolation or loneliness. Use safe methods of maintaining social interactions, such as spending time virtually talking to friends and family using video conferencing, playing games, or writing letters to each other.

Finding ways to hang out virtually and connect can be very helpful in reducing stress because it allows young people to realize and knowing that they are not alone in feeling sad, disappointed, or lonely. Technology is an excellent resource, but youth should be encouraged to think outside the box while connecting with others.

- Acknowledge it is common for youth to want to stay connected with their peers, both physically and socially. During this pandemic, it can be really difficult to maintain physical distance practices. Commiserate and say, “I hear you, this really can be difficult.”

- Support youth in maintaining a routine. Following a routine provides some predictability and control. It can also be helpful to include intentional times to connect with friends, families, and mentors. It gives something for youth to look forward to as well. Ask youth if they would like some help setting up a time to talk with their teacher, caregiver, friend, extended family member, etc. via telephone, email, text, or letter.
- When appropriate, encourage youth to seek inner connection. The practice of reflection is one example of how to connect to inner thoughts and feelings. Examples of practicing reflection is keeping a journal, reading a book, learning a new hobby or skill or engaging in art.
- Brainstorm with youth ways to practice acts of kindness and share their gratitude. These practices can help maintain and build a sense of a community. Examples include writing letters to others, baking or cooking food for someone, or offering to help someone in a safe way.

When faced with difficult and uncertain events, we can stretch ourselves to do things in creative and helpful ways. Help youth identify creative and safe ways to not get consumed with worry but instead to stay socially connected.

More information and resources about youth social emotional development in difficult times can be found at <https://disaster.unl.edu/families> or by contacting the Nebraska Extension in Otoe County Office at 402-269-2301 or at otoe-county@unl.edu.