**WHY WE CHOSE THIS TOPIC**
For many, the pandemic has eroded the positive relationships that are necessary for healthy development. This makes our focus on social connectedness more important than ever before.

Here we emphasize the importance of actively rebuilding positive peer relationships to help young people recover and thrive.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**
- Due to the pandemic, many young people and their families now have greater mental health needs but fewer social connections.
- Isolation can create a vicious cycle of social anxiety and social avoidance that can persist even as normal life resumes. Recent research showed that adult social isolation generally remained even as social distancing decreased.
- To break this cycle, both experts and young people emphasize the need right now for youth to connect with one another (while adhering to public health guidance). Both informal interactions (e.g., through school, extracurriculars, or free time) and formal opportunities to share pandemic experiences (e.g., through facilitated discussions, art or expressive projects, and peer support services) can help young people connect during this time.

**WHAT’S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?**

**Listening to Youth**
Both OCMH Youth Listening Sessions and the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project highlighted the need for young people to be given non-stigmatizing opportunities to talk about how the pandemic has affected them, how they learned to cope, and their insights on school and peers.

**Youth-led initiatives** like REDgen, Hope Squad, Sources of Strength, and NAMI Raise Your Voice Club provide young people with a way to connect with skilled peers around mental health.
SUPPORTING CHILD WELL-BEING THROUGH REBUILDING PEER CONNECTIONS

PEER CONNECTIONS

Positive peer connections are powerful. When adolescents are involved in positive youth programming, they report that peers and slightly older “near peers” are effective at helping them make social connections and build skills and strengths.9

MAKE CONNECTIONS

- 73%
- 88%

BUILD NEW SKILLS AND STRENGTHEN EXISTING SKILLS

- 63%
- 77%

PROVIDED USEFUL INFORMATION

- 61%
- 75%

NEAR PEERS

TEACHERS/PROFESSORS

PEERS

WHAT WE CAN DO

PUTE PARENTS:

- Look for in-person or positive online opportunities for your child to reconnect with friends and peers.

SCHOOLS/TEACHERS

- Embed discussions of student experiences, coping strategies, and reflections into the classroom (e.g., in social emotional learning programming, advisories, health class, English writing assignments).
- Prioritize time spent restoring peer and adult relationships as a key investment in student success.

POLICY MAKERS:

- Fund programs like Sources of Strength that help students help their friends.
- Help reduce evictions and mobility so that young people can remain in their neighborhoods, schools, and day cares (and, therefore, connected to peers) even when their families are experiencing a financial crisis.

COMMUNITIES:

- Incorporate life skills and mental health literacy into youth programming so that young people have the skills to best support one another.
- Foster places and programs for youth to connect with each other.

REFERENCES: