

Tackling Social Isolation in Middle School

Imagine a world where every child felt included, respected, and valued by their peers, regardless of their differences. It sounds like utopia for parents, teachers, and students, doesn't it? This was the world my husband and I wanted to support

By Laura Talmus
co-founder of
Beyond
Differences

when we co-founded Beyond Differences 10 years ago; I'm happy to say it is becoming our reality more and more each day.

We founded Beyond Differences—a non-profit that inspires middle school students to end social isolation and create a culture of belonging for everyone—after the death of our daughter, Lili Rachel Smith. Lili had Apert syndrome, a rare cranial-facial syndrome that caused Lili to look different from other kids.

When she was a little girl, Lili had friends and playdates, as differences don't seem to be noticed at a young age. As she got older, however, Lili faced a number of social challenges. Her middle school years were the toughest time for her, as invitations to parties and sleepovers stopped. Feeling invisible and excluded from any friend group at school, she found herself dreading lunch; often, she would retreat to the girls' bathroom and call me, pleading for me to pick her up.

We didn't have a name for it then, but Lili was experiencing social isolation—a term that had been more commonly used to characterize senior citizens. Social isolation is different from bullying; it is a feeling of being invisible, left out, and without connection to others. This feeling impacted Lili's motivation to do well in school. Ultimately, our family decided Lili would do better being home schooled. It was a very tough decision and not one we would want other families to have to face.

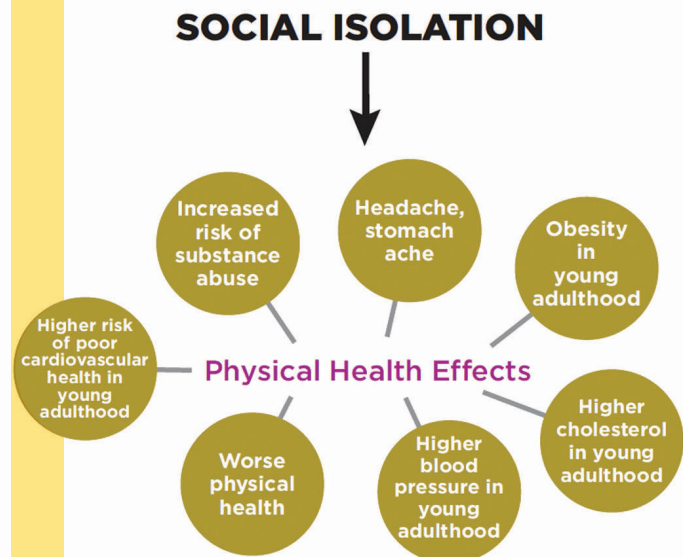
Tragically, in the fall of 2009 when she was a freshman in high school, Lili passed away unexpectedly due to medical complications

associated with Apert syndrome. At her memorial, teens who had known her as a classmate in middle school recognized how excluded Lili had felt during those years. They wanted to do something to honor her life. In 2010, together with Lili's classmates, we created Beyond Differences, with the mission of raising awareness about social isolation among adolescent youth. Within a few short years, what started out as a tribute to Lili has touched a nerve in middle schools all over the country.

Serious Impact of Social Isolation

Research indicates that social isolation among youth is on the rise and not only impacts a child's self-esteem, but also plays a key role in health and academic performance.

A 2013 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* linked social isolation with depression, loss of sleep, eating disorders, and poor cardiovascular health. In 2016, a national survey revealed that 20% of middle school and high school students in the United

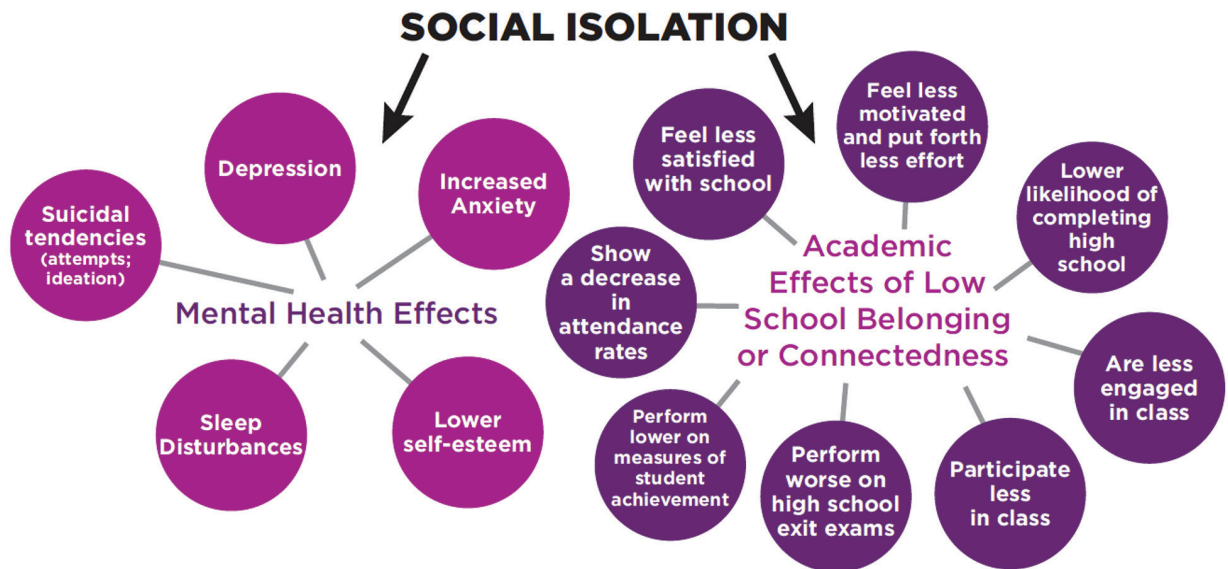




States had trouble making friends, and nearly 50% did not participate in school clubs and extracurricular campus activities. In extreme cases, social isolation can lead to self-harm and community violence.

About Beyond Differences

Beyond Differences is the only student-led non-profit organization and social justice movement dedicated to ending adolescent social isolation. We believe that excluding others should not be



an accepted part of middle-school culture, and students can lead the way in making meaningful change in their community.

Peer-to-Peer Assemblies

Our Teen Board of Directors is made up of approximately 100 high school students in four cities across the United States who are trained to go into middle schools and talk to students—peer to peer—about what social isolation is and how it can be stopped. Our Teen Board members share their own experiences with social isolation, which helps students understand the countless scenarios that have a lasting impact on their younger peers. Some students share stories about remaining a bystander when someone else is being left out, for fear of shining a light on their own insecurities. When high school teens open up about their own vulnerabilities, the middle schoolers feel more at ease sharing their own stories.

Early on, we learned that most teens have experienced social isolation at some point in their lives: during school, at events outside of school, or as a result of social media posts. Their stories—from being the “new kid” at school; being on the outs with a friend group; not understanding social cues at school; or feeling left out because of identity, racial, or cultural differences—all have the common thread of not feeling connected.



Our organization saw the need to help teachers, school counselors, and students create more inclusive, accepting communities at their schools. We’ve developed unique curricula that meets Common Core guidelines and are aligned with the social emotional competencies defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). We developed programs and national awareness days—what we call our Positive Prevention Initiatives—with online resources available for teachers entirely free of charge. Our goal is to inspire students to change the culture of middle school and create a positive, more inclusive environment.

No One Eats Alone™

In 2012, we piloted our first No One Eats Alone™ Day in just a handful of schools in Northern California. The day encourages students to sit with

classmates they don’t know and include students who typically sit alone. Our Teen Board, along with middle school ambassadors (students who either volunteer or are recommended to take a lead role at their own middle school), helped facilitate the first event. The program has grown each year. In 2019, we sent over 2,500 schools a free backpack filled with everything they needed to celebrate No One Eats Alone Day: our original curriculum, wristbands, posters, balloons, conversation starters, and the supplies and instructions for a collaborative art project.

The curriculum includes eight stand-alone classroom lesson plans and three student leadership activities with accompanying worksheets, links to suggested videos, and fully scripted lesson plans. The lessons do not have to be delivered sequentially, but can be chosen according to interests and what is happening in the news or in response to the school community’s needs.

Sample Lesson Summary: No One Learns Alone

This lesson is designed to give students a better understanding of social isolation and how to identify it: what it looks and sounds like. Students develop an awareness of social isolation and its root causes and create alternative endings to stories of isolation that promote inclusivity. This lesson can be tailored to each classroom, with worksheets, suggested reading, video, questions to spark



discussions, and writing activities. A worksheet like the one at the bottom of this page can be used to engage students in thinking deeply about social isolation, in both literature and real life, and exploring creative storylines with actions to take that would help a fictional character and fellow students feel included.

Know Your Classmates™

To combat negative beliefs about differences—a key factor in social isolation—we launched Know Your Classmates™. For this initiative, Beyond Differences developed a curriculum to teach students about personal identity and appreciating differences in others, with the goal of increasing acceptance and building strong communities within schools. Know Your Classmates focuses on breaking down barriers around culture, faith, family traditions, gender identity, immigration status, and many other facets that make us who we are.

Sample Lesson Summary: Exploring Self Identity

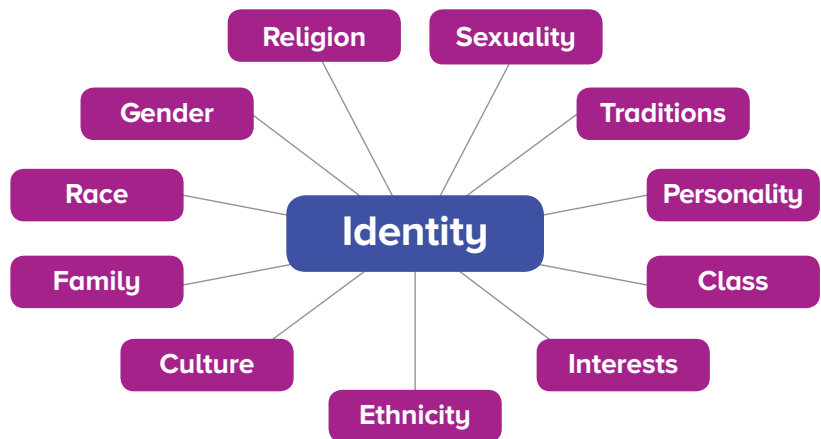
This lesson encourages positive peer relationships in the classroom. It focuses on fostering a better understanding of self-identity as individuals and within the classroom community. Students explore the question, “What is self-identity?” Identity spans culture,



ethnicity, race, gender, family role, religion, sexuality, age, and other markers (e.g., artist, soccer player, cook, brother, sister, and athlete).

Discussion Questions:

- How do we socially isolate people based on these identity markers?
- Why do you think we socially isolate people?
- Have you ever felt socially isolated?
- How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever socially isolated someone else?
- How did it make you feel?



Chapter	Character who is socially isolated	Summary of the isolating event	Isolating actions (What were people doing or saying?)	Feelings of isolation (Infer how the character feels)	Create your own ending of inclusion! (Insert yourself into the plot! What actions can you take to make the character feel included?)
---------	------------------------------------	--------------------------------	---	---	--

- How could ignoring one of your identity markers or another’s identity marker cause miscommunication or conflict?
- What did you learn about your classmates through this exercise?
- What are identity markers you can see?
- What are identity markers that you CANNOT see?
- What do you think this means when we meet someone new?
- Wrap up: Students Take Action!

Be Kind Online™

Knowing the effect that social media can have on how socially excluded we feel, we created Be Kind Online™ to nurture healthy relationships and combat social isolation online. This program teaches students how to spot social isolation in the online environment, how to respond to digital gossip, and how to be authentic and true to themselves online. Be Kind Online includes lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations, articles, links to videos, and worksheets for in-class discussions and interactive exercises. One of the lessons, Standing Up to Negative Online Behaviors, includes descriptions of realistic scenarios of online cruelty for small groups to discuss. In another exercise, students watch a talk and discuss and write about the power of “likes” on social media.

Sample Lesson Summary: Physiological Effects of Social Isolation Online

This lesson is designed to make students aware of how powerful social media and online spaces can be and how they affect us physiologically. This lesson challenges students to be mindful of their body responses when on their favorite social media sites and asks students to empower themselves in their online experience by embracing the positive sides of their favorite social media platforms.

Addressing Social Isolation Around the World

We encourage schools to take advantage of all three Beyond Differences programs throughout the school year to reinforce the message of inclusion and tackle divisive rhetoric in the media that fuels fear of differences.

Currently, more than 6,000 schools in all 50 states have used one or more of our Positive Prevention Initiatives. As Beyond Differences has grown in the United States, we have begun to receive interest and requests from schools and communities all over the world. We’ve discovered that the issue of adolescent social isolation is universal. In 2017, for example, visitors from South Korea met with Beyond Differences seeking support in addressing the problem in their own country. Comprehensive teacher guides

Social Emotional Competencies

Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision Making
Identifying emotions	Impulse control	Perspective-taking	Communication	Identifying problems
Accurate self-perception	Stress management	Empathy	Social engagement	Analyzing solutions
Recognizing strengths	Self-discipline	Respect for others	Relationship-building	Evaluating
Self-confidence	Self-motivation		Teamwork	Reflecting
Self-efficacy				Ethical responsibility

are available on the Beyond Differences website for use by schools outside of the United States.

All of our resources, materials, and program support are provided to schools at no charge, no matter where in the world our participants live. Beyond Differences does not receive any state or federal funding for these programs. We rely solely on the generosity of our private and corporate supporters.

I know Lili would have been proud of the work her life has inspired. We are happy knowing that we have made such an impact, but we still have plenty of work ahead of us. We remain committed to ending social isolation among youth and look forward to a day when inclusion is the norm. For more information, visit www.beyonddifferences.org

SOCIAL EDUCATION: RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AND POSITIVE THINKING



According to Brigham Young University psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad, the ideal school curriculum for addressing loneliness would target social isolation as well as the cognitive processes that make people feel lonelier. This “social education” could be integrated into existing health-education curricula to teach students how to build and maintain friendships and relationships. Learning how to provide the kind of help and support a friend or partner needs is an invaluable social skill that can be taught in the classroom.

Holt-Lunstad believes that in addition to learning how to support others, students also need to learn how to reframe their own negative

responses to social situations. “We’ve all had a situation where you text someone and they don’t respond right away,” she says. “Instead of assuming they’re snubbing you, they’re blowing you off, all of these kinds of negative things that could in turn lead you to respond with nasty comments or become irritated, which is not going to elicit the sort of friendly response you want,” she says, “reframe it as, ‘Perhaps they’re driving.’ ‘Perhaps they’re in a meeting.’ If you’re interpreting others’ social signals as negative, how you behave toward them is more likely to mirror that.” Strategies for helping people think in more positive ways could easily be adapted for a classroom setting.

FURTHER READING ABOUT SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS AMONG YOUTH



“Why Addressing Loneliness in Children Can Prevent a Lifetime of Loneliness in Adults”

By Elizabeth Tillinghast

In *The Conversation*

<https://theconversation.com/why-addressing-loneliness-in-children-can-prevent-a-lifetime-of-loneliness-in-adults-76248>

Tillinghast, a clinician who treats mental health issues caused by loneliness, reviews the need to understand what causes loneliness in order to develop effective interventions.

“Social Isolation in Middle School”

By Rebecca London and Dabney Ingram

In *School Community Journal*, 2018, Vol. 28, No. 1

Available at <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx>

Existing medical research demonstrates that social isolation during childhood and adolescence has negative mental and physical health effects. And education research finds that school belonging or connectedness is important for motivational, behavioral, and school performance outcomes. This article also explores the work of Beyond Differences to catalyze social change.

“Social Isolation in Schools Erodes Our Sense of Self and Community”

By Andre Perry

In *The Hechinger Report*

<https://hechingerreport.org/social-isolation-schools-erodes-sense-self-community/>

Perry reflects about the societal effects of young people feeling disengaged from community, and considers ways that teachers can, and should, reach out to lonely kids.