Cultivating Connections: Enhancing Social Skills and Peer Relationships in Youth Programs

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Disclosure Statement

I, Jacob W. Diestelmann, Ph.D., do not have any relevant financial interest or other relationship(s) with a commercial entity producing health-care related product and/or services.

Learning Objectives:

- Why we need to socialize/the role of socializing in human
development and wellness
-What has been happening with since COVID and concerns with social
engagement/skills
-The impact of social media: the good, bad, and ugly
-Ways to meet those youth where they are at/finding the growth edge
for social connection, skills, and overall wellness

This presentation explores the effects of social isolation, particularly during adolescence, on brain structure and function.

We will examine how limited social interaction can alter brain development, leading to emotional and behavioral challenges, and discuss potential interventions to mitigate these effects.

Our focus is on the latest research in neuroscience and psychology, aiming to provide insights for educators, caregivers, and anyone who works with youth.

The Fundamental Need for Social Connection

Psychological Consequences

Prolonged social isolation can have severe psychological consequences. Studies on orphans and empty nesters have long shown an increased risk of depression and insomnia due to the absence of regular social contact. Social isolation has been characterized as an "epidemic" by some researchers.

COVID-19's Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlighted the importance of social interaction, demonstrating that our need for connection is as fundamental as our need for nutrition and sleep. Lockdowns and physical distancing measures led to increased rates of depression and loneliness in adults and adolescents.

Neural Alterations Due to Social Isolation

1

Prefrontal Cortex & Amygdala

Neuroimaging studies reveal structural alterations in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala. These regions are crucial for social interactions and emotion control. The amygdala often shows an increased total volume in response to social isolation, likely contributing to emotional problems.

2

Hippocampus Changes

To a smaller degree, the hippocampus may also be affected. Neuroimaging consistently reports reduced total gray and white matter volumes in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, indicating delayed cortical maturation and potential loss of cognitive function.

3

Oligodendrocyte Development

Cellular changes include alterations in oligodendrocyte development, affecting myelin formation. Myelin is critical for neuronal communication. Reduced white matter integrity disrupts neural pathways, especially those connecting the frontal and temporal lobes, impacting thinking and memory processes.

Adolescence: A Critical Period for Social Development

1 Social Experience

Adolescence is a critical period for brain development. A lack of social interaction during this time can have lasting consequences, changing brain structure and affecting normal development and decision-making behavior into adulthood.

2 Synaptic Connections

During adolescence, the brain undergoes significant synaptic pruning, where unnecessary connections are eliminated. Social isolation can disrupt this process, leading to biases in decision-making and increased reliance on habit-based behaviors.

Understanding Loneliness: A Modern Epidemic

Loneliness and social isolation have become significant public health concerns affecting people across all age groups. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct experiences - people can have many social interactions yet feel lonely, while others may have limited social contact by choice without feeling lonely.

Contrary to popular belief, younger generations report high(er; as high) rates of loneliness than older adults.

The Youth Loneliness Crisis

1 **Developmental Vulnerability**

Youth are particularly vulnerable to loneliness as they navigate physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Self-esteem challenges can affect how they relate to others, potentially leading to social withdrawal as a protective mechanism that ultimately reinforces negative self-perception.

2 **Alarming Statistics**

According to recent studies, 79 percent of Gen Z and 71 percent of millennials report feeling lonely, compared to just 50 percent of boomers. Additionally, 42 percent of high school students reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year.

3 **Digital Disconnect**

While today's youth are digitally connected, they often lack real-life social skills. Technology has fundamentally changed social communication norms, leaving many teens proficient with keypads but struggling with face-to-face interactions.

Social Media's Impact on Teen Mental Health

Research shows a direct correlation between social media usage and increased depression among teens. According to a 2021 study from Common Sense Media, young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms use social media far more frequently than their peers.

The statistics are alarming: in 2018, 21 percent of youth with depressive symptoms used social media "almost constantly"; by 2021, this number jumped to 34 percent. Teens who use social media over three hours daily face higher risks of anxiety and depression.

Young brains are especially vulnerable to social media's effects. From the dopamine hit received after getting a "like" to the shame felt when comparing themselves to others online, social media creates unhealthy psychological patterns.

The pandemic exacerbated these issues, with a substantial increase in depressive symptoms among teens and young adults over the past few years, particularly affecting those who were already struggling with mental health challenges.

Physical and Psychological Consequences Social Skills and Loneliness

Health Impacts

A large body of scientific data consistently demonstrates that meaningful close relationships and social connection are associated with good physical and mental health, and even reduce the risk of early death. Conversely, social isolation and loneliness are significant risk factors for mortality.

Middle–Age Vulnerability

Research by Holt-Lunstad (2017) found that "Middle-aged adults were at greater risk of mortality when lonely or living alone than when older adults experienced those same circumstances," suggesting that loneliness may affect different age groups in distinct ways.

Teen–Specific Effects

Teenagers experiencing loneliness often report higher rates of stress, sleep deprivation, and poor academic performance. The combination of these factors creates a cycle that can be difficult to break without intervention.

Loneliness in Young People

Vulnerability

Younger people are often lonelier than older people, possibly because youth are in a state of rapid development, making them particularly vulnerable to issues regarding self-esteem and social relationships. Challenges in dealing with self-esteem can lead to social withdrawal.

Protective Maneuvers

Withdrawal as a protective maneuver can foster a poor view of themselves, little confidence in their ability to interact with peers, and fear of failure leading to further issues regarding self-worth.

Breaking the Cycle of Loneliness

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Disengage from Toxic Situations

Help children remove themselves from harmful social environments that reinforce negative self-perception. Creating distance from toxic relationships is the first step toward breaking the cycle of loneliness.

Shift Focus to Positive Experiences

Guide teens to stop obsessing over social slights and instead focus on times when they felt accepted and appreciated. This cognitive reframing, which researchers call "priming acceptance," helps children recognize available opportunities for connection.

Create New Social Opportunities

No amount of mental reframing will produce lasting change without new relationships. Teens don't need many friends—just a small, reliable group of people who reinforce that they matter and are valued.

Build Adult Support Networks

Teens who feel connected to parents, teachers, coaches, or counselors are less likely to experience persistent loneliness. These adult relationships provide a protective buffer and model healthy social interaction.

The Impact of Social Media

Rising Use

The rise of smartphones and increased internet use correlates with a decline in psychological well-being among adolescents. Increased social media usage has a direct correlation to depression, particularly among those with moderate to severe symptoms.

Vulnerability

Young brains are especially vulnerable to social media's negative effects due to the dopamine hits from likes and the shame from social comparisons. It's essential to identify how and why kids turn to social media for positive change.

Education

Have an open dialogue to evaluate their social media use. Understand the tactics that cause these problems, and educate kids about the effects of screen time on mental health. Discuss the studies of researchers on this issue.

Helping Teens Overcome Social Media Dependence

Open Dialogue

Approach the topic in a relaxed setting, being easy to talk to and a good listener. Make it a dialogue by asking teens what platforms they use and how often they think they use them.

Evaluate Usage Patterns

Help teens identify how and why they turn to social media. Are they using it when bored, lonely, or nervous? Is it a distraction from life or just filling free time? Understanding these patterns is crucial for making positive changes.

Educate About Impacts

Share research on how social media affects developing brains. When teens understand the science behind social media's effects, they're more likely to recognize problematic patterns in their own usage.

Set Practical Limits

Work together to establish reasonable time limits and goals. Consider unfollowing accounts that trigger feelings of inadequacy, keeping phones out of bedrooms at night, or trying app-free days to rewire the brain's dependence.

5 Ways to Help Teens Become More Social In Real Life

Pursue Hobbies and Interests

Encourage teens to explore activities they're passionate about, from sports and dance to chess, writing, or drama. Meeting peers with similar interests can spark natural conversations and build confidence in social settings.

Volunteer in the Community

Community service not only fulfills school requirements but also connects teens with others while boosting self-esteem. Options include animal shelters, nursing homes, and daycare centers where teens can make meaningful contributions.

Get a Part-time Job

Working with peers teaches valuable social skills while providing financial independence. The workplace environment offers structured social interaction and prepares teens for future professional relationships.

Care for a Pet

Research confirms pets provide emotional support and connection. The relationship releases oxytocin, promoting feelings of being soothed and connected. Caring for animals is joyful and teaches responsibility.

Navigating Social Anxiety: Essential Skills for Teens

Social anxiety makes basic interactions overwhelming for many teens. While social skills come naturally to some, anxious teens often need direct support to build confidence.

Initiating Conversations

1 **The Challenge**

Starting conversations feels like stepping onto a stage. Fear of judgment leads to avoidance.

2 **Simple Strategy**

Begin with observations or compliments: "Cool jacket—where did you get it?"

3 **Building Confidence**

Small icebreakers help teens ease into interactions without overthinking.

Reading Social Cues

The Challenge

Anxiety makes it difficult to interpret body language and facial expressions accurately.

Learning Method

Observe tone, gestures, and expressions. Watch movies and discuss emotions behind interactions.

The Outcome

Recognizing subtle cues becomes easier and less overwhelming with practice.

Assertive Communication

1

Passive

Anxious teens often avoid confrontation, struggling to express needs or set boundaries.

2

Practice

Role-play using phrases like "I feel uncomfortable when..." or "I would prefer if..."

3

Assertive

Express thoughts clearly and respectfully, gaining control in social situations.

Handling Rejection and Criticism

The Fear

Fear of rejection is why many anxious teens withdraw socially.

Reframing

Teach teens to view rejection as a learning experience, not personal failure.

Self-Compassion

Practice saying: "Not everyone will like me, and that's OK."

Joining Group Conversations

Listen First

Group conversations can feel overwhelming. Start by listening and nodding.

Bridge In

Use phrases like "That reminds me of..." to naturally join the discussion.

Contribute

Add to the conversation when ready, without pressure to take center stage.

Social Media: Benefits for Anxious Teens

Social Support

Creates opportunities for companionship and emotional intimacy, especially during isolation.

Practice Space

Allows greater control and practice of social interactions for teens with anxiety.

Finding Community

Helps marginalized teens connect with peers for support and information sharing.

Social Media: Potential Risks

Problematic Use

Using despite interference with daily tasks

Sleep Disruption

Interfering with needed 8+ hours

Social Comparison

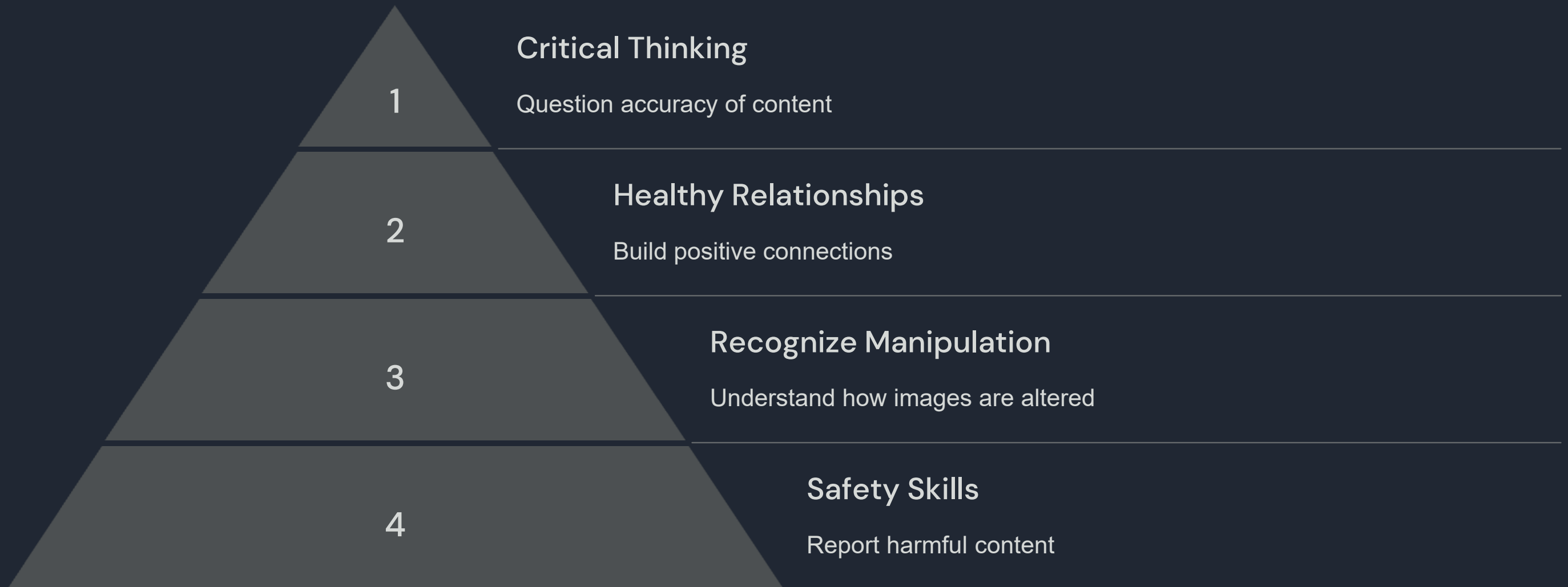Negative body image from appearance-focused content

Harmful Content

Exposure to cyberhate or maladaptive behaviors

1

2

3

4

Adolescents' social media use should be monitored with coaching and discussion while respecting privacy needs.

Building Digital Literacy

1 Critical Thinking
Question accuracy of content

2 Healthy Relationships
Build positive connections

3 Recognize Manipulation
Understand how images are altered

4 Safety Skills
Report harmful content

Digital literacy training helps teens maximize positive experiences while minimizing risks. These skills create a foundation for balanced, safe social media use.

Small Steps, Big Changes

Practice

Social skills improve with regular practice in low-pressure situations.

Support

Seek help from trusted adults, counselors, or mental health professionals.

1   2   3   4

Patience

Progress takes time. Celebrate small victories along the way.

Growth

Each interaction builds confidence for meaningful relationships.

Social anxiety can feel like an invisible wall. With these skills, teens can connect with others and build meaningful relationships.