

FIT TO
BELONG



ARE WE
DOING ENOUGH
TO ADDRESS LONELINESS
IN ADOLESCENCE?

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Ethics Statement:

The University of Manchester approved the research conducted as part of the Erasmus 2019-1-TR01-KA201-076895 project and documented in this report. Data were collected in the Partner countries by School Psychologists in line with ethical procedures and COVID-19 regulations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Purpose and Aims of the Fit2Belong Project

1.1.1 Inspiration for the Fit2Belong project

Inspired by the BBC Loneliness Experiment, Fit2Belong is an Erasmus+ funded project exploring strategies to help young people who are experiencing loneliness. The BBC Loneliness Experiment explored the role of belongingness in different cultures and age groups. The large-scale survey highlighted some important issues about loneliness that had been previously overlooked by researchers, policymakers, and those wanting to help people who report loneliness. It was clear from that work that a lack of belonging (also referred to as loneliness) was a common experience for older adolescents ages 16-24 (more so than any other age group), but also that culture impacts that experience.

1.1.2 About the Fit2Belong project

Building on the work of the BBC Loneliness Experiment, the Fit2Belong project aimed to (1) explore loneliness in 14 to 16-year-olds across European countries and (2) identify and develop common strategies to help adolescents cope with loneliness.

The Fit2Belong project comprises 3 phases:

- Phase 1: Development of a guiding core framework (Output 1)
- Phase 2: Development of teaching and learning materials (Output 2)
- Phase 3: Development of an on-line service/application (Output 3)

1.1.2.1 Purpose of Output 1. The current document is the culmination of work conducted in Phase 1 of the Fit2Belong project. Based on extensive desk research and interviews across Europe with young people ages 14-16 years, we have developed a framework that provides guidance for the development of teaching and learning materials for youth who report loneliness – Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project. The framework detailed within this report was developed following a thorough review of the academic and grey literature on youth loneliness, which assessed what is already known about loneliness in young people and what has been done about it thus far. We also conducted interviews with young people across five partner European countries exploring loneliness from the perspective of young people in different cultures, something missing from the academic and grey literature. Together, the results from the review and the interviews enabled us to identify foci for targeted intervention to help adolescents cope better with loneliness. The current report summarises what we have learned from the literature search and from young people's perspectives on loneliness.

This report is kept simple so it is accessible, digestible, and informative for teachers and youth workers, who in Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project will use the guiding framework we have developed to devise intervention sessions to help adolescents cope well with loneliness.

This report does not include all the detailed stages of either the review process or the interviews, which we will be publishing as scientific papers to extend the dissemination of our findings.

1.2 Phase 1. The Guiding Principles Underlying Output 1

Several guiding principles, drawn from what is known about the experience of loneliness during youth from our literature review and interviews, underlie both the structure and the content of our framework. These principles include the fact that loneliness appears to be a consistently common and similar experience among adolescents from different countries in Europe, youth's capacity to overcome loneliness, the consideration that socioenvironmental factors are important for predicting and mitigating loneliness, and the development of improved coping over time as social and emotional skills improve.

PRINCIPLE 1. The consistency of the loneliness experience among youth across Europe.

Our interviews with high school students across Europe showed that, across countries, adolescents think of loneliness as **a negative emotional experience**. That consistency in response across countries supports previous published interviews with adolescents from The United States, the United Kingdom, Finland, and Australia. Specifically, it seems that loneliness for adolescents, occurs when they did not have people around them that have similar interests to them or when they feel their **peers did not understand them**. Adolescents also said that loneliness happens when one perceives that one is different from others, and so some young people might experience loneliness due to their **peers excluding them**. In our interviews, we asked about coping with loneliness and the wider context of the adolescent social world and how that affected loneliness, something we did not find reference to in our literature search. The adolescents in our interviews made similar suggestions as are found in the adult literature on loneliness (e.g., psychological therapy and finding new hobbies), but they also suggested that adults and peers could help by being approachable and providing support and inclusion.

PRINCIPLE 2. Youth's capacity to overcome loneliness. Our review of the literature suggested that **loneliness is a common, and maybe an inevitable, experience during adolescence**. That is because adolescence is a time when youth attempt to become independent from their parents, work out who and what they want to be, and find the group into which they want to belong. Given that, one could argue that loneliness may not be preventable during adolescence as, for example, friendships will end/change as identity exploration occurs. What is important during this stage, then, if loneliness is somewhat inevitable, is that **adolescents have the capability to overcome loneliness and cope with feelings of loneliness when they do occur**. The research highlights that when loneliness becomes prolonged (or chronic) it can have a negative impact on wellbeing, physical and mental health, and educational outcomes. Chronic loneliness can be especially difficult to overcome because people can become sensitive to social threats and begin to avoid the social connections that they desire. Temporary experiences of loneliness are also important because intense bouts of loneliness can have negative impacts on current wellbeing and mental health,

and, in some studies, they can have ongoing effects on wellbeing even when the loneliness is no longer evident. So, we need to help young people overcome loneliness (both temporary and prolonged) and prevent their experiences from becoming prolonged.

PRINCIPLE 3. Socioeconomic factors predict and mitigate against loneliness. Our review of the literature showed that most research that explored risk factors for loneliness focused on intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics; **far less attention was given to potential socioenvironmental factors**, such as school or youth centre climate and cultural differences. That said, the available literature did indicate social climate and cultural differences as important for understanding youth loneliness, suggesting the **context of loneliness is crucial** in understanding differential loneliness experiences among adolescents.

PRINCIPLE 4. Social and emotional skills improve loneliness, but socioeconomic factors that have been targeted less in intervention, are likely to be effective. We also found that **existing attempts to prevent loneliness tend to focus on individual characteristics**, mostly social and emotional skills. Evaluations of those interventions showed small improvements in loneliness among young people. We found only one intervention that incorporated a societal or a whole school approach to tackle loneliness, suggesting **the context of loneliness is rarely targeted as the focus for intervention, despite its significance**. In this report, we build an argument for employing a societal or whole school/whole youth centre approach for tackling loneliness. We challenge the current focus of interventions that target characteristics of the individual; we reason that **interventions designed to mitigate loneliness that focus on the social context that the adolescent lives and works in are likely to be especially effective**: they will reach more young people and reduce stigma associated with loneliness. Given the limited research evidence that has evaluated whole school interventions for loneliness, we use literature that studies ‘sense of community’ and ‘school bullying prevention interventions’ to guide our recommendations.

Using these guiding principles from our literature review and the interviews with adolescents from different European countries, we have developed a Guiding Framework for use in the development of interventions for youth reporting loneliness in Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project. The framework presented in this report is based on a large and growing body of research on loneliness among adolescence and our interviews with youth as part of the Fit2Belong project.

1.3 Phase 1. The Core Guiding Framework

1.3.1 Structure of the Framework

Based on the guiding principles outlined above, we created the core guiding framework for Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project. The Framework comprises three dimensions that broadly outline what loneliness is for adolescents across Europe and what can be done about it. The three dimensions of the framework constitute the major conclusions of our report.

- **Dimension 1** describes the importance of detailing the rationale and foci for the intervention materials that are developed.
- **Dimension 2** highlights the need to consider the barriers to intervention success, including stigma attached to loneliness and preconceived ideas about who is likely to feel or report loneliness.
- **Dimension 3** describes the core ideas about prevention/intervention practices for adolescents reporting loneliness, and how to ensure applicability across different European countries.

1.3.1.1 **Recommendations for using the Framework.** The use of The Fit2Belong Guiding Framework in Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project should follow these principles of working practice:

- **Co-production** of materials by bringing together expert knowledge from teachers, youth workers, and youth. Such an approach increases the likelihood that the developed materials will meet the needs of the community, are relevant to real-world contexts, and can be scaled up when appropriate.
- **Precision** in the development of materials. This involves having a clear understanding of what each session of a program entails, what it targets, and what the ultimate goals are.
- **Shared Learning** across the partners involved in the project, with clear communication of those ideas to others wishing to work with youth reporting loneliness. To help facilitate cross-project learning, Fit2Belong will centralize information in a shared repository, allowing for careful monitoring of session materials and then, their trial across different contexts. Learning from failure as well as success is an essential and valued aspect of Shared Learning.

Quick Guide to Fit2Belong: The Core Guiding Framework

Dimension 1: Aim of loneliness interventions

Decide what the foci of the intervention are. Loneliness looks different for different adolescents: it can vary in intensity and last for distinct lengths of time. Thus, interventions should aim to do either or both of the following:

- reduce loneliness in those chronically affected
- prevent transient episodes from becoming chronic (e.g., developing coping skills, providing opportunities for reconnection, creating inclusive environments).

Dimension 2: Designing Loneliness interventions

When designing loneliness interventions, the following need to be considered:

- cultural and socio-environmental differences (e.g., how loneliness is perceived, prevalence of bullying, gender stereotypes that may affect the acceptability of loneliness in certain genders) and whether the focus/content needs adapting based on these differences
- whether young people want to make their loneliness visible
- how to reduce the stigma associated with loneliness
- interventions can sometimes increase this stigma, so we need to be careful with the language used and even the content of interventions
- gaining input from or collaborating with young people.

Dimension 3: The Focus of Loneliness Interventions

Intrapersonal dimensions (e.g., low self-esteem and confidence), interpersonal factors (e.g., negative social experiences and lack of social opportunities) to socioenvironmental conditions (e.g., bullying and stigma) are all important for understanding youth loneliness. Therefore, we need to have a **toolkit of resources** to help as many young people as possible, regardless of the cause or contributing factors to loneliness. To cover each level of risk factors, interventions should **consider how to do the following:**

Intrapersonal/Interpersonal	Socioenvironmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make young people aware of distorted views they may have • Support young people in overcoming distorted views (e.g., class-based group CBT or even through an app) • Increase presence of factors shown to be protective against chronic loneliness (self-efficacy, competence, self-esteem) • Enhance social and emotional skills and confidence in skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate young people about the effects of rejection, exclusion, and victimisation • Educate young people about the effects of cyberbullying • Promote an inclusive attitude among peers • Support young people in developing & maintaining close & meaningful friendships • Provide young people with the opportunity to gain connections, make friends and maintain friendships.

Role of Community

Specific communities in which youth find themselves are important to young people. Schools or community centres run by youth workers are often seen by adolescents as crucial for their own social and emotional development. Schools and Youth Centres need to foster a “sense of community” by focusing on:

- integrating all students into the school/youth centre community
- promoting a supportive and inclusive ethos
- promoting positive student-teacher/child-youth worker relationship
- encouraging supportive peer experiences.



If you would like more information about the Fit2Belong project you can visit our website <https://fit2belong.eu/> or email our Project Coordinator, Ilknur Aktas, ilknuraktas84@yahoo.de

