

Burnet Institute

Coping with COVID-19

Young People & Social Connection Co-design project

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Social connection is an important predictor of health and wellbeing.

The public health measures introduced to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted human interaction and potentially increased social disconnection and loneliness. Young people are more likely to be engaged in education or work in casualized or face to face sectors and thus experience significant disruption to their lives. Because adolescence and young adulthood are critical times of development, including social development, they may be at higher risk for loneliness during the pandemic thus interventions are needed to improve social connections.

The Burnet Institute's "Coping with COVID19" study has identified a crucial need to work with young people to understand their experiences of social connection during the pandemic and develop approaches which enable them to contribute to building back better as the community transitions into future phases of its pandemic response.

This project

The current project used co-design principles to engage a diverse group of young Victorians (n8) to gain a detailed understanding of their experiences of social connection during the pandemic and their wants and needs to enable social connection in the future. The project aimed to combine the lived experience of young people with existing evidence to define key opportunities to develop response strategies which will enable quality social connection across Victorian communities.



The details

Recruitment and participants

Social media and VicHealth networks were used to advertise the co-design project. To include a diverse range of perspectives, we conducted purposive sampling to recruit participants (n8) based on their age, gender, education and employment status, cultural background, living situation and location (metro, urban, regional Victoria).

Participants were aged between 16–24 years old and identified as female (3), gender non-binary (2) and male (3). Interviews revealed different levels of social connectedness (low/poor social connection–high/quality social connection). Subject matter experts including young people’s health specialists, social connection researchers and strategic designers were included in the co-design.

Co-design methods

Because of the sensitive nature of talking about social connection among peers, we conducted a mixed method approach which included a scoping review of evidence, facilitated generative interviews with young people and an online co-design workshop with the entire group (n8).

Interviews were conducted first to understand the experiences and needs of our group and identify key areas. A summary of key insights was presented back to participants during the co-design workshop. These insights were used to co-design response strategies with young people in small groups across the workshop to enable them to further define key challenges and opportunities by working together. Key learnings have synthesized in the context of existing evidence and transformed into a design brief.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this project which are detailed in this report include:

- Key learnings about young people’s experience of COVID19 and social connection and enabling environments.
- COVID19 and social connection
- Quality social connection for young people
- Designing pro-connection spaces and activities

A set design briefs which define opportunities areas for organisations or communities aiming to co-design future activities or programs to enable social connection for young people.

Lessons learned to guide future online co-design with young people in relation to sensitive and complex topics such as social connection.



The design brief

What is a design brief?

Often, we start a co-design process with a problem we want to solve – rather than a defined opportunity to design a solution. In a design process, understanding and defining the challenge are critical steps. How Might We (HMW) questions are a way to translate insights from young people into how they understand and define a challenge into actionable design briefs. This injects the voice of young people into the framing of the challenge. Using an open question means that the challenge can be solved in multiple ways, with people with different types of expertise coming together to generate ideas in response to the question.

How can a design brief be used?

A design brief can be used to begin a co-design process relevant to your community, organisation or context. It is a starting point to provoke more questions and exploration with your group.



The challenge: Social connection, social isolation and loneliness

Evidence suggests that social connection is a fundamental part of the human experience and an important predictor of health and wellbeing(1, 2). Social connection is defined as a person's subjective sense of close and positively experienced relationships with others(1). Studies indicate that social connection shapes an individual's sense of identity, belonging, interests and motivation(3). In 2010, a meta-analysis identified that people with stronger social relationships had greater odds of survival than people with weaker social relationships(4). Importantly, there is strong evidence that social isolation and loneliness pose a major threat to health and wellbeing and increase the risk of mortality(5).

Social isolation is an objective measure which refers to having limited social contact with others(6). This phenomenon can be quantified through the number of social contacts a person has and the frequency of their interactions. In contrast, loneliness is considered a subjective, emotional and unpleasant experience where there is a discrepancy between a person's desired and perceived availability and quality of social interactions(7). This distinction is important because social isolation and loneliness do not always co-exist(8). People who are socially isolated may prefer having fewer social contacts and are not necessarily lonely. Likewise, people who are regularly surrounded by others can still experience loneliness if they do not perceive their connections as intimate and meaningful. Loneliness is also highly stigmatised with research showing that lonely people were more likely to be labelled as personally deficient, dislikable and less intellectually and socially competent than non-lonely people(9). There is clear evidence that reducing social isolation and loneliness and promoting strong social connections are vital for long-term health and wellbeing.



Social connection and young people

Adolescence and young adulthood are crucial life stages for developing positive social connections. Research suggests that young people under 25 years and older people aged 65 years and over experience the highest levels of loneliness (10). These life stages culminate with significant social transitions in which young people may move out of home, start a new job or enroll in further education or training (11). These transitions also require young people to adjust to new environments which may interact with other risk factors to trigger loneliness (12). In 1997, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reported that family and school connectedness were protective against multiple health risk behaviours including emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, violence and substance use (13). More recently, higher levels of connectedness to family, school, peers and neighborhood predicted higher levels of wellbeing among adolescents over time (14).

Online platforms are also important environments for social connection among young people. Social media sites are often extensions of the social networks that young people have in their everyday lives (15). Young people can build and maintain positive social connections online however, they may also be exposed to negative situations by virtue of being constantly accessible. Social media has been described as a paradox for social connection because it allows people to form online communities while also enabling ostracism and alienation (16). Interventions are required to ensure that young people have opportunities to develop social connections in ways that are relevant to their lifestyles.



Interventions to increase social connection

There are numerous interventions that aim to reduce loneliness and improve social connections. In 2011, Masi and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis to determine which interventions were most effective at reducing loneliness among adults, adolescents and/or children (17). The study found that interventions that addressed maladaptive social cognitions were more effective at reducing loneliness than interventions that aimed to improve social skills, enhance social support or increase opportunities for social contact (17). Addressing maladaptive social cognitions included interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy, that aimed to mitigate an individual's increased sensitivity to social threats which can increase focus on negative social interactions and exacerbate feelings of loneliness. In 2020, Eccles and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis to determine which interventions were most effective at alleviating loneliness among young people (18). Overall, results suggested that interventions were effective at reducing loneliness, however there were no significant differences by intervention type including psychological therapy, social and emotional support, social skills development and learning a new hobby. Similarly, the study found no significant difference in effectiveness based on whether interventions were delivered in person or through technology (18).



The impact of COVID-19

In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic saw the introduction of numerous public health measures to reduce virus transmission. Measures included border closures, mandatory quarantine for people returning from overseas or interstate, physical distancing measures, closures of workplaces, schools, universities and entertainment venues and limits on the number of people allowed to gather in public and private spaces (19). While necessary, these measures had profound implications for human interaction, with many people spending long periods of time at home and relying on technology to connect with friends, family and colleagues (20). Some evidence suggests that levels of depression and loneliness have increased during COVID-19, particularly among people with fewer in-person social connections (21). Other studies report that there has been only a small decline in feelings of social connection during COVID-19 (22). Young people may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness during the pandemic. Research with over 15,000 participants in the United Kingdom reported that females and young people aged 18-30 years had a higher risk of general psychiatric disorders and loneliness during COVID-19 than males and people aged over 30 years (23). A survey of 337 young adults in South Africa also reported high levels of loneliness, particularly among participants who perceived they were at higher risk of infection, had limited knowledge of COVID-19 and rated their resilience as low (24).



Local responses

Recently, Victorian-based organisations and local councils have included loneliness and social connection as public health priority areas. For example, during COVID-19 the Victorian Government provided funding for the Community Activation and Social Isolation Initiative (25). This program connected people experiencing loneliness with Australian Red Cross volunteers over the phone. Volunteers were trained to provide mental health first aid and to connect callers with local support services with strong community networks (25). Monash Council have also developed a Draft Loneliness Framework highlighting potential strategies for reducing loneliness among their community (26). Key strategies include place-based and special interest groups, online activities and digital communities, volunteering opportunities, education campaigns to de-stigmatise loneliness, embedding loneliness into plans and policy and offering affordable and homely environments where people can chat and forge connections. Other councils have included loneliness as a priority area and developed strategies to facilitate positive ageing among elderly residents (27, 28).



Rationale for current project

Local services and existing research have identified the need to develop programs that promote social connection in the community by enhancing social skills and providing opportunities to connect. While there are some programs already established, it is unclear which is the most effective approach to reduce loneliness among young people. More evidence is needed to better understand young people's experiences of social connection and how this has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to generate potential areas of action for future intervention and policy for social connection from the perspective of young people using co-design principles.



Key learnings from young people



A. COVID-19 and social connection



The pandemic created huge transitions in young people's lives—like moving to online education which impacted on their ability to connect.

We know from existing evidence that transitions can create challenges to social connection. We heard from young people that many felt less connected during lockdown. The in-ability to connect with friends, classmates or colleagues face to face during COVID19 impacted on mental health and reduced participation in education and employment.



However, this experience also helped them reflect on social connection in their lives and some reassessed their relationship with technology.

We heard that they became more aware of their needs, how to balance social connection and identify what quality social connection means for them. Because of the shared experience provided by the pandemic, it was more OK to feel disconnected because everyone was in the same boat. Mental health became a normal part of the conversation with friends and teachers.



Because of physical distancing young people learned a new “normal” and developed different ways to connect socially.

The experience of lockdown among young Victorians may have reduced the stigma associated with only having “online friends”. This created a shift in perception as articulated by a participant who commented “what was weird before isn’t weird now” (p1). Because of these changes some young people felt more socially connected than before and spent less time comparing themselves to others. New communication habits formed during lockdown (i.e. “good morning texts” or catching up via one on one walks) that helped people feel a deeper sense of connection with existing networks, but habits didn’t always persist once lockdown ended. Spending more time at home had drawbacks, but for some young people it created a “better sense of connection with family”.



COVID changed the way young people saw themselves in their communities.

The shared experience of the pandemic and lockdown in Victoria helped to override other differences and make people feel like part of something bigger. People felt connected to their communities and to Melbournians. Because of this having a hard time during lockdown was common so people could talk about it with each other. It became a common thread to start conversations during and after lockdowns.



Slowing down highlighted some of the pressures and barriers to connection for young people.

Young people were highly aware of cultural values that prioritise productivity and individual achievement over developing social connection, wellbeing and community. We heard that balancing everything in young people's lives can be challenging. Slowing down during lockdown created more time to deeply connect with a few people and develop new interests, but also a sense of guilt for not being productive all the time.



Physical distancing helped them recognize the importance of incidental connection.

Experiencing changes to structures like education and employment highlighted how important “forced” or incidental moments of social connection are to young people. We heard from young people that accessing or maintaining incidental connection is critical to ongoing participation in education, work and social life. But, without structured or “forced” engagement creating or strengthening connections can be tough. Especially for people who are already feeling disconnected. While this is consistent with existing literature, the pandemic enabled a growing awareness of how these structures function.



B. Quality social connection for young people



Programs that aim to directly tackle social connection or mental health may be alienating or unappealing to young people.

We heard that social connection is a by-product of other activities. We don't go out with the intention of 'achieving social connection'. We do things we enjoy with people and social connection is a happy accident along the way. Being identified as "in need" of a program or service to socially connect is perceived as a barrier to engagement.



Young people recognise the link between mental health and social connection but see accessing mental health support for ‘other people’ who might need it more.

We know from the literature that there can be a feedback loop where poor mental health leads a person to withdraw leading to more isolation. This was reinforced by the young people that we talked to, who could see this cycle happening in their own lives. However, mental health support is not seen as a way to enhance wellbeing or prevent illness, but as treatment and as something needed by ‘others’.



Meeting new people is only one step in a longer process to form meaningful connections.

We heard that young people crave social connections that enable the intimacy and trust required to have fun in the “mundane” moments of life. Building quality connections takes time and emotional investment. The first stages of meeting new people often feel awkward or artificial and even though they know they need to push past that it can be scary. Young people need opportunity and a safe environment to incubate these social connections so they can become meaningful.



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Connecting to identity, culture and community helps make connections more meaningful– but not everyone has access to these experiences.

Young people with high levels of social connection had a strong sense of family, culture and community. Identity matters. Those who were able to connect their different friendship groups with elements of their identity (church, culture) were more confident in the quality of those connections. Family attitudes towards connection and community play a big role in forming young people's attitudes towards the value of connecting. This is a gap for some who may not identify as having a strong cultural identity.



What makes a “good connection” is different for different people and can change.

Spaces and activities for connection already exist but are not necessarily known, appealing or accessible to all young people– especially those who need them most who may be disconnected from employment or education structures. Interests and values vary. A one size fits all approach can't cater to the diversity of needs. Preconceptions around what makes a pro-connection space or activity can reduce the breadth of activities available and accessible to young people.



Youth engagement programs create opportunities for social connection and mental wellbeing; however, these activities can cater for people with existing social skills and/or connections.

The more you engage, the more opportunity you have for further engagement, and skill development. It becomes increasingly difficult for young people who have not engaged in the past to get involved or feel like they are the type of person who programs are for as one participant stated: “People who want to do those things will find it, people who don’t will shy away from it”. (p3)



It is difficult to reach young people who are not already engaged, and those are the young people who are most in need of social connection programming.

The voices and perspectives of young people who have not benefited from years of engagement don't come across as clearly because they have not been 'trained' in how to engage. Their inputs don't align with the way that you are already thinking about the problem or opportunity. However, these young people may have a deeper understanding of the experience of seeking better social connection.



Low confidence in social competence is a barrier to forming connections.

Some young people we spoke to had deep insight into the social skills required to develop quality connections suggesting that “social skills are useless if you don’t have the confidence to use them”. However, they identified confidence and context as key barriers to utilising their capabilities. Confidence is impacted upon by other factors such as employment, health and mental wellbeing. Context includes the social norms and expectations of people you are trying to connect with.



The way good social skills are modelled/rewarded in our community and society is not always reflective of what will create quality social connection.

Young people felt alienated from their peers by the idea that “being interesting is more important than being interested”. Curiosity, being open and being interested helps build connection, however this is not modelled in most interactions in our society. This discord is reflected in the increasing political polarisation witnessed online, which was seen as a barrier to connection by young people we spoke to.



There are systemic and socio-cultural issues that inhibit meaningful social connection.

Young people talk about how our culture and values can prioritise productivity and the individual over connection and the community. Those who are seen as most successful at connecting within this society aren't always the best role models for what a more connected society could look like. Having many social connections may not lead to quality social connection and enhanced wellbeing.



C. Designing pro-connection activities and spaces



We heard from young people that attempts to appeal to everyone will not cut through to some groups of young people.

But there are common ingredients that can make activities more appealing and impactful. Using co-design approaches will help to ensure that you understand the needs and wants of key groups you are seeking to engage with and can build upon these ingredients.

Pro-connection activities

Young people are under pressure, so creating spaces where they don't feel the need to 'compete' or feel they are being judged is important.

- We heard that they connect well when they have shared goals, interests or values
- According to young people "mild structure, low pressure" is the best environment for building connection so people feel secure with a role to play in an interaction
- Free and easy to access
- Whatever activity is happening it needs to be clearly about the experience/interest, rather than outcomes like social connection or mental health.

Authenticity is key to appeal

Young people look for key signs of authenticity in who is running the activity, language and design.

- Activities are more authentic if they are led by people with genuine skills and credibility.
- They can be led by other young people but may have reduced appeal if they are explicitly marketed "for young people" using language or popular culture.

Using projects

The 'mild structure' of a project with its defined roles and brief helps people join on groups with a shared goal of interest.

- People need options to increase or decrease one's level of involvement (without judgement), i.e. don't force people into 1:1 interaction if they don't want it.
- Some may want to be heavily involved, including in the design of the program itself

Fostering community

Feeling part of a community is an important ingredient in connecting your relationships to your personal identities.

- The community isn't one thing, but a number of different interconnected communities
- Many of the traditional infrastructures of community are disappearing or going online
- School, uni and work provide communities, however these are not accessible to all young people
- Support young people's communities and investigate the connection between individual social connection and communities



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Pro-connection environments

We heard that young people are not necessarily drawn to some of the traditional ‘third spaces’ that community offer (libraries, youth centers) they saw it as ‘not for them’.

- Since social connection is a by-product of other activities, you don’t necessarily design a space that is for connecting. You design a space that allows people to do the activities in which they will connect, or to ‘bump’ into others in organic ways
- Some identified the need for semi-private spaces to convene
- Outdoors and nature were often mentioned as good connection spaces, especially during COVID19 lockdowns, but this was dependent on what was space was available and who lived close by

Strengths and interest-based approaches

We know that young people are not homogenous, and their strengths and interests will vary and change. But we also heard that because of the pandemic, many young people have been reflecting on their strengths and feel energized to pursue their interests including:

- Making things and being creative;
- pop culture; games (online and in-person);
- outside and nature; sport and exercise;
- shared culture;
- learning new skills and personal development;
- food;
- celebration and travel.

Some young people are also drawn to activities aligned to their values or to help build a better future (i.e: social and environmental causes), which can help them connect over a shared project.



Opportunities to co-design strategies to enable social connection during COVID-19 and beyond

Based on what we learned from young people about their experiences of social connection during COVID19 there are clear opportunities to develop strategies that enable young people to create meaningful social connection now and into the future.

While COVID19 has created some additional barriers to social connection, the existing challenges young people face to create and maintain quality connections remain.

Our insights demonstrate the importance of place-based, co-designed approaches to ensure that activities cut through to young people when and how they need them- including during times of crisis or physical distancing link into project categories.



A. Create partnerships to co-design local social connection projects



Structural enablers

We know that systemic and structural issues like access to housing, education, employment and infrastructure can impact on young people's ability to create and maintain quality social connection.

- How do we use systems thinking to better define how we can create healthy connected communities?
- How do we address structural barriers to sources of social connection such as education and employment?
- How do we ensure that young people with mental health problems can remain engaged in education and employment settings?
- How do we ensure that young people can remain engaged in education and employment settings during times of crisis?



Tools for reflection

We know that understanding and identifying connection and wellbeing needs can help enable quality social connection, but this is not always prioritised or made accessible to young people.

- How can we help young people to understand and explore the relationship between social connection and their own wellbeing?
- How can we enable young people to plan for and integrate small acts of social connection in their lives by identifying and prioritising their values and interests?
- How can we create activities and services that assist young people before transitions so that they can successfully enter a new phase or stage?



Discovering your interests

We know that having a common interest or hobby can be a great way to start conversations and connect with new people, however it can be hard to seek out interests when you are feeling stressed or down. Ways to connect over shared interests aren't always accessible to the young people who need them most.

- How might we help young people to identify the types of activities they might enjoy connecting through?
- How might we give young people a means to suggest new programs or connection opportunities?
- How might we help young people self-organise over issues and interests they are passionate about?



School and work based education and skills building

We know that social health education is missing from young people's school and workplaces and that this impacts on their ability to create and maintain quality social connection throughout their lives.

- How enable young people to develop social health skills?



Discoverability of existing connection activities

We know that young people will connect through activities they are interested in and excited by, but there are barriers to them getting involved in things that are already happening around them.

- How might we increase the discoverability of existing programs or connection opportunities?
- How might we amplify the social connection benefits of organisations run by young people that aren't explicitly focused on social connection outcomes?
- How might we enable young people seeking greater social connection to engage in existing activities that excite and inspire them?



Creating new connection activities

Even though young people may be seeking social connection, existing activities don't always interest them or provide the right structure to help them show up, create new contacts or grow contacts into deeper connections.

- How can we create activities that cater to the diverse and changing interests or values of young people in your community?
- How can we create opportunities for young people to make new connections?
- How can we create the opportunity and a safe environment for young people to grow contacts into meaningful connections?



Youth friendly connection infrastructure (online and IRL)

Community and public spaces don't always appeal to young people or meet their changing needs (both during the pandemic and otherwise).

- How can we create environments that enable young people to meaningfully connect regardless of their physical proximity to others?
- How can we make public spaces more accessible and appealing to those with low social connection?



Community and identity building

We know that having a sense of shared identity or community can contribute to quality social connection however this isn't accessible to all young people. Without these to leverage, starting new relationships or growing existing ones can be harder.

- How can we create connection to a shared community?
- How can we help all young people connect over something bigger so that they can access a sense of belonging and purpose?



B. Strategies for more inclusive engagement of young people



Reaching and engaging a broad range of young people

We know that engaging in structured projects can be a great way to build self-esteem and connect, but these projects are not always inclusive of young people who are least connected. The shared experiences of the COVID19 pandemic among young Victorians may have increased the spectrum of people seeking engagement opportunities.

- How make the benefits of youth engagement accessible and inclusive to less connected young people?
- How partner with young people to co-deliver programs in the community?
- How capitalise on post lockdown energy of young Victorians to create sustained change?



Enabling a youth friendly co-design process

We know that co-design processes can enable social connection among participants and result in better design outcomes, however co-design isn't always inclusive of young people.

- How design and iterate a process for engaging young people in the design and delivery of connection projects?



C. Build an evidence base and evaluate existing programming effectiveness and reach to young people in need



Design and evaluation

We know that developing a sense of quality social connection happens across a lifetime and the experiences that build towards connection can vary. This makes identifying funding opportunities and evaluating programmatic success difficult.

- How can we change the way we define high impact so that we can create diverse and appealing activities with young people?
- How can we implement criteria of programs that take youth reach, appeal and accessibility into account?
- How can we provide opportunities to organisations and groups who don't fit existing funding criteria?
- How can we use the co-design process to create social connection between participants?
- How can we identify and measure the pathways toward quality social connection in the short, medium and long term?
- How can we build social connection KPIs into all programming?



Accessible funding

We know that organisations and groups with huge reach and appeal to young people may not be set up to access funding mechanisms for social connection programs.

- HMW provide opportunities to organisations and groups who don't fit existing funding criteria?



Co-design and Social Connection Lesson Learned



Co-design with young people for social connection

Co-designing activities with young people in our communities is a good way to ensure that programming remains relevant and appeals to those most in need.

We learned that young people want more opportunities to connect with others through shared projects. While co-design projects have the potential to create social connection, these processes can be alienating or hard to engage with for groups who are already less engaged and social connection can be a sensitive topic, especially for young people experiencing feelings of low/poor quality social connection. The things that we learned makes for good pro-connection activities can also help make accessible and impactful co-design for social connection challenges:

- Mild structure, low pressure
- Shared values and goals
- A sense of curiosity
- No competition or judgement
- Giving people options of their level of engagement (eg: 1:1 or group)
- Consideration on how to best engage online



How to make co-design work in the real world

Co-design is not a new concept for a lot of organisations, but there can be some difficulty translating it into action in ways that create meaningful engagement AND high impact activities. Based on what we have learnt conducting co-design here are some things to look out for during your planning process (this is not a checklist):

Resources

Having access to internal/external resources with the required capability to effectively run set up and run co-design, including creating and testing things.

Time

Allowing enough time for teams to deeply engage with the problem.

Diversity

Co-designing with mixed teams rather than only people with lived experience, or people with professional experience.

Responsiveness

Being responsive to the needs of your challenge or project rather than reliance on toolkits and methods.

Buy-in

Having the buy-in across the organisation on the mindsets required to effectively collaborate and share power.

Collaboration

Including participants beyond initial ideation, bringing them on the journey and involving them in decision making and implementation

Engagement

Using co-design as a replacement for community engagement.

Scope

Properly scoping a challenge or opportunity so that you can design solutions .

Setup

Having the structures and culture to work with ambiguity

Expertise

Having the expertise to make sense of what you are discovering and translate into action to help clarify how to scope challenges and where to start



Recommendations to VicHealth



Recommendations to VicHealth

The experiences of young people we co-designed with demonstrate opportunities to leverage the COVID19 moment to create sustained change. We have identified four key next steps to embed young people's needs into the implementation of strategies that will create impact.

1. Use the design briefs created here to create partnerships to co-design local social connection projects
2. Draw on key learning about social connection ingredients and co-design to implement strategies for reaching a broader group of young people to engage in advisory and co-design work
3. Review current funding and evaluation frameworks to ensure that programming can reflect the needs of less engaged young people
4. Plan for and measure social connection as an outcome of all co-design project processes



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