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# Loneliness

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# Loneliness: Adolescents' perspectives on what causes it, and ways youth services can prevent it

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## A B S T R A C T

Loneliness particularly affects adolescents and is linked to long-term health and social difficulties. Existing literature lacks clarity on young people's perspectives around how loneliness develops and can be prevented. We examined young people's views on ways youth services can prevent loneliness, and how this can be further informed by their perspectives of its causes. We spoke to fourteen adolescents living in England, with a diverse range of abilities and ethnicities, aged 10–18. Adolescents were identified by youth group leaders of a youth group they regularly attend to take part in interviews and focus groups. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted. Causes of loneliness included personal experiences, inappropriate interpersonal skills, and society. Ways youth groups can prevent loneliness include promoting self-development, emotion regulation, and interpersonal skills. Our research illustrates young people's perspectives, and we make practical recommendations which we hope services will implement to reduce the risk of loneliness in young people.

## 1. Introduction

Loneliness can be defined as a manifestation of negative feelings or perceptions towards relationships with others, and can occur across the lifespan (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Coyle & Dugan, 2012; Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Almost half of British adults feel that the general population is getting lonelier (Griffin, 2010), with loneliness currently recognized as a public health problem (Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 2017). Loneliness appears to peak in adolescent years (Perlman & Landolt, 1999; Qualter et al., 2015; Goossens, 2018), during which time it has the potential to become chronic (Vanhalst et al., 2018).

Chronic loneliness creates a risk of poor social and emotional development (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Specifically, mental illness (Schinka et al., 2013; Fontaine et al., 2009), suicide attempts (Macrynikola, Miranda, & Soffer, 2018), physical health problems (Valtorta et al., 2016; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), alcohol-related harm (McKay, Konowalczyk, Andretta & Cole, 2017) and psychosocial difficulties, such as low self-esteem and social competence (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Notably, there is strong evidence that loneliness increases mortality risk (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017).

Given that it can be hard for school staff to recognize loneliness (Campbell, 2013), youth groups can provide crucial individual and social support. In our research, youth groups are defined as community groups where young people meet regularly in a local space, to socialize and participate in activities in the presence of facilitators. Most groups are run by charities with a mixture of paid and volunteer staff. Youth groups provide children with space and time to interact without adult involvement, which can encourage friendship formation (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). The positive impact of youth groups on developmental outcomes has been widely documented across large samples (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000), for example by improving social behavior and self-esteem (Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010).

Previous research has focused on demonstrating the impact of programmes, whereas explorations of the specific relationship between features of groups and positive outcomes are limited (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Furthermore, the voice of young people has been largely ignored in this work (Granger, 2010), and national policy calls for solutions to loneliness in line with needs adolescents have identified themselves (Crouch & Wright, 2018). Finally, existing loneliness literature often uses samples based on specific disabilities or sociocultural background (Lasgaard, Nielsen, Eriksen & Goossens, 2010; Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010), which does not reflect the diverse nature of youth groups, typically welcoming young people across a wider disability and sociocultural spectrum. It is notable that higher levels of loneliness have been documented in lower social classes

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(Madsen et al., 2018; Snape & Manclossi, 2018) and those with a diagnosis of autism (Chang et al., 2018), meaning current research needs to reflect the range of young people in typical youth group cohorts. The present study thus aims to inform how youth groups can prevent loneliness, shaped by adolescent's views of factors that contribute to its development.

Loneliness and belonging have been posited as two related continua rather than opposite ends of the same continuum (Lim, Allen, Furlong, Craig & Smith, 2021). However, the framing of belonging – defined in terms of having lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships – as a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), remains highly relevant to understanding of loneliness. Indeed, an evolutionary hypothesis of loneliness has been posited (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), which equates the perceived social disconnection of loneliness to physical pain, motivating people to establish and maintain social connections that, at least in evolutionary terms, are essential for survival. Within this model, the unsafety associated with loneliness pushes people towards being hypervigilant for potential social threat, which can bias social interactions and create a vicious circle of increasing loneliness (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). In the context of adolescence, inherent transitions can reduce the availability of significant positive relationships. Furthermore, the uncertainty and predominance of emerging self-identity associated with the period, can even further negatively bias social interactions (Goossens, 2018). In addition, patterns of brain maturation during this period make adolescents more vulnerable to over-interpreting social threats (Wong, Yeung & Lee, 2018).

These models suggest that factors reducing the availability of significant positive social interactions, and those influencing cognitive and emotional responses to social interactions, would all have the potential to precipitate loneliness in adolescents. They therefore provide a useful context for viewing the wide range of factors that have been documented as potential causes of loneliness in adolescents, for example: loss and divorce (Lasgaard, Armour, Bramsen & Goossens, 2016), emotion regulation (Zysberg, 2012; Rydell, Berlin & Bohlin, 2003), self-esteem (Perlman & Peplau, 1982), attachment (Bogaerts, Vanheule, & Desmet, 2006; Bernardon et al., 2011) and the parent–child relationship (Ulu-Yalçınkaya & Demir, 2018). It remains unclear however, how any of these are considered by adolescents and how these could be harnessed for intervention.

In order to derive a starting point that was meaningful for the young people involved in our research, we consulted staff at their youth group, asking them to identify factors deemed most relevant: self-esteem, which refers to how positively or negatively we perceive ourselves (Macdonald & Leary, 2012), emotion regulation, defined as the ways in which we attempt to maintain or change our emotions (Eisenberg et al., 2000), and the parent–child relationship (PCR). We aimed to understand adolescents' perspectives around these causal factors of loneliness, and use these to stimulate adolescents' thinking around ways youth groups can prevent the development of loneliness.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We recruited an opportunistic voluntary sample of adolescents aged 13–18 years who regularly attend a local youth group (pseudonym LYG). LYG is an inclusive project offering after-school sessions and projects in a suburb of Birmingham. The group has high levels of attendance from children living in poverty, care, and with disabilities or mental health issues. Information about special educational needs was obtained from the group coordinator from participants' records. Youth sessions are a mixture of free time and organized group activities, and in school holidays trips and projects are planned.

Participants were identified from 10 to 18 year olds attending LYG via liaison with the group leader to ensure participants had the capacity

to understand the research, make a decision about participation, and would not become too distressed. The research was advertised and discussed in sessions, to identify young people who were willing to take part, choosing whether they wanted to partake in interviews or focus groups, or both. Child information sheets were given to adolescents, and for those under 16, a parent information sheet and consent form were taken home to be signed. Adolescents took part in one or both activities. Further demographic information about participants can be found in Table 1. It is worth noting that none of the three participants with special educational needs took part in both interviews and focus groups. There was however, participation from adolescents with special educational needs in both of these types of data collection activity. It is possible that adolescents' special educational needs contributed towards their choice of which type of data collection activity they opted for. However, since only 6 of 14 participants took part in both interviews and focus groups, this was not unusual in our sample.

### 2.2. Procedure and data collection

Ethical approval was gained from the Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham. The first author regularly attended the after-school groups for recruitment and offered information sheets and consent forms. Once consent forms were returned, interview and focus group slots were allocated, which were conducted in a private group room at the project. Interviews and focus groups began with confirmation of consent/assent (depending on age) from adolescents.

### 2.3. Metaphor maps

Participatory research methods enable young people to speak openly in a safe environment (Ansell, Robson & Hajdu, 2012), increase attention, enrich the data and enable discussion of sensitive topics (Colucci,

**Table 1**
Participant Table.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Special Educational Needs | Race | Research Activity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sarah | F | 16 | – | White British | FG 2 |
| Sophie | F | 18 | – | Black British | FG 2 & I 1 |
| John | M | 13 | – | White British | FG 2 & I 5 |
| Ellie | F | 15 | – | White British | FG 2 |
| Charly | F | 15 | – | White British | FG 2 & I 3 |
| Josh | M | 14 | – | White British | I 4 |
| Emily | F | 15 | – | White British | FG 1 & I 7 |
| Sally | F | 16 | – | White British | FG 1 & I |
| Rob | M | 14 | – | Black British | FG 1 & I |
| Daphne | F | 15 | Autism & Down's Syndrome | White British | I 2 |
| Simon | M | 14 | Autism | White British | I 8 |
| Jane | F | 13 | – | White British | I 6 |
| Polly | F | 18 | – | White British | FG 1 |
| Anthony | M | 18 | Learning difficulties | White British | FG 1 |

*FG = focus group. I = interview

2007). Less structured methods also assist young people with a diagnosis of autism to express themselves more freely and clearly (Winstone, Huntington & Goldsack, 2014) considering potential communication difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Arts-based methods also allow children to better portray their true opinions (Bagnoli, 2009). We therefore used metaphor maps in research schedules, which are creative mind-maps exploring a topic under investigation. Their use is supported by research illustrating drawing helps to explore children's feelings, and is enjoyable (Jackson Foster, Deafenbauch & Miller, 2018), meaning they tend to invest more in the quality and quantity of information provided (Colucci, 2007).

### 2.4. Interview development

To maximize the relevance of the topics explored with our target population, we surveyed youth leaders experienced in working with the adolescents at LYG, to identify the most relevant potential causes of loneliness. This method is supported by research illustrating that collaborative design approaches produce findings deemed credible by participants (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Harper & Carver, 1999). Staff were asked to select the three factors they deemed most important for regular attendees, from a list of twelve factors identified from the extant literature (Mitic et al., 2021) the most agreed factors were the parent–child relationship, self-esteem, and emotion regulation, each with four votes. These created a focus for the interviews.

### 2.5. Interview description

Eight thirty-minute individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews used a mix of open and closed questions. The schedule aimed to investigate adolescents' experiences and opinions on loneliness, firstly discussing loneliness in young people and then their ideas of its causes (Table 2, Supplementary Material 1). Metaphor maps were used to facilitate discussion of how to define loneliness and causes of loneliness. Following adolescents' unprompted responses on the map, we added ER, self-esteem and PCR in a different color pen to encourage discussion of these factors. We then gathered information about the impact of LYG for them on both their ideas of causes of loneliness, and emotion regulation, self-esteem and the PCR. Questions were asked to explore their views on what helps and hinders loneliness. We used optional filler questions about hobbies to reduce demand characteristics and facilitate discussion with those who were hesitant, and empathy cues to ensure sensitivity and reduce social desirability bias, e.g. "that sounds like a difficult time". Before ending, a verbal debrief summarized the aims and anticipated outcomes.

### 2.6. Focus group rationale

In order to offer collaborative generation of ideas, the first author conducted two forty-five minute focus groups. Alongside adolescent participants and the first author, LYG staff members were also in attendance to help facilitate the groups. Collaborative design enables stakeholders to shape research and researchers build greater understanding of what they want and need from research, enhancing value to participants (Chambers, Pringle, & Juliano-Bult, 2012). This provided an opportunity for young people to work together to take ideas further, planning how they could be implemented and how barriers and obstacles could be addressed.

### 2.7. Focus group description

Groups had five participants, a number deemed small enough for everyone to offer insight whilst maintaining diversity of opinion (Krueger & Casey, 2014). To begin, the participants were reminded of the information sheet and asked to sign a consent form (for children under 16, this was an assent form since parental consent was already

**Table 2**
Interview summary table.

| Topic | Question example | Justification |
|---|---|---|
| Defining loneliness | What do you think loneliness is? | To check understanding and create concept to hold in mind. Definitions used were based on Perlman & Peplau (1981, 1982) and Heinrich and Gullone (2006). Children as young as primary school age are able to distinguish the concepts of loneliness and mere aloneness (Galanaki, 2004). |
| Example metaphor map | This is an example of one of the maps that I did, with the post it notes explaining what causes us to be hungry. Do you see what I mean? | To ensure children understand the task and its expectations before they begin. |
| Loneliness metaphor map task | So, I'd like you to use these post-it notes to write down or draw certain things that you think cause young people to feel **lonely**. | To encourage subjective ideas on what causes loneliness without researcher influence. |
| Loneliness metaphor map reflection | Tell me about that. How does it affect loneliness? | To encourage discussion and explanation of factors causing loneliness. |
| Loneliness metaphor map: inserting factors | Can you name some emotions? How do you react when you feel [input used]? | To define emotion regulation. Our definition was informed by Cole, Martin and Dennis (2004) and Eisenberg et al., (2000). |
| Loneliness metaphor map: inserting factors | Does this (ER strategy) make you feel better or worse? How? Does it ever affect how lonely you feel? How? | To investigate child's opinions on the link between emotion regulation and loneliness. Prior to study the staff noted that the children often struggle to regulate their emotions effectively, e. g. sometimes resulting in aggression. Research shows that the ability to regulate emotions has been directly linked to feelings of loneliness (Zysberg, 2012). |
| Loneliness metaphor map: inserting factors | What do you think this one: self- confidence and self-belief means? | To define self-esteem. Our definition was informed by Leary and Baumeister (2000) and Macdonald and Leary (2012). |
| Loneliness metaphor map: inserting factors | Have you ever felt low in confidence or belief in yourself? How did that affect your feelings of loneliness? | To investigate child's opinions on the link between self-esteem and loneliness. Research suggests that self-esteem can influence loneliness (Leary et al., 1995). |
| Loneliness metaphor map: inserting factors | The environment we are in at home can make us feel lonely too. We are talking about the connections you have with those care for you. How do you think young people's relationships with their **parents or carers** might cause them to feel lonely? | To investigate child's opinions on the link between the parent child relationship and loneliness. Prior to study staff noted that many children come from disadvantaged, broken homes which can make them feel distant from their peers. Research suggests that harsh parenting can affect adolescent loneliness (Anear & Yates, 2010) though research documenting the subjective experience of young people is scarce. |

**Table 2** (*continued*)

| Topic | Question example | Justification |
|---|---|---|
| Loneliness before youth club | If you could think back to before you started to come to the clubs here, how did you feel then? | To use as a comparative tool to loneliness since coming to youth club. |
| Differences after youth club | How are you different now to before you started coming to Youth Group? | To investigate the overall impact of youth club. |
| Differences after youth club: emotion regulation | How do you manage your feelings now? | To investigate the overall impact of youth club on emotion regulation. |
| Differences after youth club: self-esteem | Has it helped you to get better at anything? How has this changed? Has it affected your belief in yourself? How has it changed? | To investigate the impact of youth club on self-esteem. |
| Differences after youth club: parent–child relationship | Has it affected your family relationships? | To investigate the impact of youth club on the parent–child relationship. Literature currently offers mixed results on the relative contributions of parents on loneliness. |
| Differences after youth club: general relationships | Has it affected your social life? e.g. quantity/quality of friendships. How has it changed? | To investigate the impact of youth club on loneliness/ relationships with others. |
| Positives of youth club | Why do you keep coming back? Is it because of the young people, or staff? | To understand the reasons young people attend youth club. Some children regularly attend. |
| Overall take home of youth club | If you were trying to describe LYG to another young person, what would you say they do or help with? | To investigate the overall impact of youth club. |
| Psychological harm | I know it can be quite hard to talk about these things. How are you feeling after our interview today? | To ensure the patient does not feel too distressed and action further if necessary (i. e. put support in place, offer helplines) |

obtained). The schedule centered on what can be done to alleviate youth loneliness within services like LYG, and how barriers can be addressed to create a wider reach (Table 3, Supplementary material 2). A metaphor map was used again, where participants collaboratively produced a diagram to represent their ideas. The researcher asked participants to feedback their ideas and documented these on a whiteboard to facilitate discussion, after which a debrief was offered.

*2.8. Analysis*

The interview and focus group methods we employed were successful in engaging all participants across the range of disadvantaged backgrounds, including the adolescents with special educational needs. The first author who conducted the data collection activities did not note any specific difficulties with engaging with the activities that appeared to be linked to special educational needs.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy and all identifying information was removed. Transcriptions were added to the qualitative software NVivo 12. In focus groups specifically, ideas for ways in which the wider community could prevent loneliness were also explored, but these are not elaborated in the present study, given its scope on youth group actions. Given the corresponding schedules, it was primarily interviews that contributed to the data around causes of loneliness, whereas both interviews and focus groups contributed to ways to prevent loneliness. This partial overlap provided the means to triangulate parts of the analysis across the two data sources. Data from both sources were processed and analysed in the same way.

**Table 3**
Focus group summary.

| Topic | Question example | Justification |
|---|---|---|
| Defining loneliness | What do you think loneliness is? | To check understanding and create concept to hold in mind. Definitions used were based on Perlman & Peplau (1981: 1982) and Heinrich and Gullone (2006). Children as young as primary school age are able to distinguish the concepts of loneliness and mere aloneness (Galanaki, 2004). |
| Introduce metaphor map concept | We want to know how to make young people feel less lonely. When you're not feeling lonely, what does that look like? | To introduce the idea of what can help loneliness. |
| Example metaphor map | This is an example of one of the maps that I did, with the post it notes explaining what causes us to be hungry. Do you see what I mean? | To ensure children understand the task and its expectations before they begin. |
| Loneliness metaphor map task introduction | Now it's over to you to discuss as a group about what could help young people feel less lonely. You can use this to draw the poster. You can be as creative as you want with how you do this, for example you could draw pictures or write words. It's up to you! | To encourage subjective ideas on what causes loneliness without researcher influence. |
| Loneliness metaphor map task prompts: community | What makes young people feel connected to people/ happy with their relationships? What should be done within the community? | To keep focussed on task and encourage discussion. |
| Loneliness metaphor map task prompts: youth club | What more could they do? Who might this help? If you were hired by LYG as the loneliness officer, what would you do? | To keep focussed on task and encourage discussion. To find out how youth clubs can alleviate loneliness. |
| Loneliness metaphor map task prompts: youth club barriers | How could we reach lonely people who don't come to groups like LYG? | To explore what young people think the barriers are to accessing youth clubs, and how to address these. |
| Loneliness metaphor map reflection | So now, let's summarize what you've put. Tell me about your ideas. | To encourage discussion and explanation of what can be done about youth loneliness. |
| Loneliness metaphor map reflection | Is this based on your real experience? Has anyone else experienced this? | To find out about the young people's experiences |
| Psychological harm | If any of the discussions today have upset you, you are welcome to talk to any of the staff here. There are also helpline numbers on your information sheet. | To ensure the patient does not feel too distressed and action offered if necessary. |

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted using recognized guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019a). We took a critical realist epistemological stance in that we adopted the assumption throughout data collection and analysis that causes of loneliness and ways to prevent loneliness that are potentially meaningful for members of inclusive youth groups, can be identified from participants' responses. However, we acknowledged in our work with participants and the data we generated with them, that individuals' responses were being influenced by their own perspectives and experiences, and these contributed

to the data produced. A reflective diary maintained by the primary researcher (first author) throughout the analysis helped to ensure these multiple contributors to data generation were explicitly considered during the analysis.

Initially, the first author familiarized herself with the data by reading it through repeatedly and actively (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to orient herself to the data set. Data were read and re-read and coded in terms of minimally meaningful units of information related to the research questions.

An inductive approach was then taken to code the data descriptively, at the lowest level of what was said, allowing information to be generated from the data (Braun & Clark, 2019b). After independently coding the data, the first and third author met to discuss, examine and revise the codes, which is a key part of analyzing qualitative data (Packer, 2011). These meetings were documented and codes were revised until the point of agreement. We acknowledged that there was a power differential present between first and third author (masters student and research supervisor) and emphasised the greater experience of the student with study participants in our discussions to balance the power.

The first author then independently used a latent procedure to generate higher-level categories from the codes, grouping similar ideas using NVivo software. A latent approach focussed on identifying deeper, underlying meanings, assumptions, and ideologies within the data (Braun & Clark, 2019b). This process was interpretative, and involved combining and comparing codes, analyzing how they related to one another, and identifying patterns and ideas across the data set (Braun & Clark, 2006). Categories were grouped iteratively at successively higher levels until higher-level groupings were judged not to be meaningful. Highest-level categories were identified as themes.

The first and third author then met to review evidence for each theme, to ensure there was substantial supporting data within each theme, and that the data has acceptable levels of commonality (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Themes were refined until themes were coherent and acceptable (these decisions were documented), meaning that we did not feel that additional revisions would yield a significant change to our results (Braun & Clarke, 2019b).

Finally, themes were named to ensure they were descriptive yet succinct (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the evolution of names was documented. The researchers together reviewed each theme, considering how best to narratively describe its meaning, and wrote descriptions. This involved explaining how the coded data contributed to the themes. Data extracts were identified to possibly present in the final report, to illustrate each higher order theme (Tables 4 and 5).

## 2.9. Reflexivity

Staff at the youth centre were consulted about causes of loneliness in order to generate meaningful starting points for the present participants to discuss causes of loneliness. Given the very broad range of possible factors contributing to loneliness, we judged that this approach would allow us to access information around adolescents' perceptions of causes, which was most relevant to strategies to prevent loneliness that would be relevant to LYG. Thus, the data generated on causes of loneliness is framed – and to a degree limited – by a self-esteem, emotion regulation and parent–child relationship lens. And that lens was established by people with substantial experience of working with disadvantaged young people in a community support role. We believe that this perspective is likely to have steered the present data on causes of loneliness towards those amenable to being the subject of support strategies. This may have facilitated young people's capacity to generate ideas around support strategies but it may also have led them in particular directions. Thus, the ongoing interaction between the present young participants, staff at the youth centre, and other young people, contributed to the data produced.

The researcher who conducted the interviews had also been working regularly in the youth group with the young people involved for several

**Table 4**

Table for illustrative quotes of themes: causes of loneliness.

| Higher order theme | Theme | Illustrative Quote |
|---|---|---|
| Loneliness as a personal experience | Low self belief | I: Ok. Um, so when you feel kinda low in confidence when people are being a bit nasty, urm, how does that affect your feelings of loneliness? How does that lead to loneliness? [rustling] Jane: Urm, well like, if people just, if you start feeling less believed in yourself then, you just, you just kinda give up on life itself. I: Mmm. Jane: And then just be like, well I don't have the self-confidence to do this anymore, and just give up on stuff. I: Yeah, so not doing things you used to do?Jane: Yeah. |
| | Inappropriate management of negative emotions | I: So you're not, not think about the sadness. If you think about, if you know, do let yourself sit and think about the sadness, and be sad, how does that affect your loneliness? Sophie: It gets worse. I: Yeah Sophie: Cuz like, if you overthink things, you'll blow things out of proportion. I: Mmm. |
| | Independent mindset | Sophie: Just like, urm, as you get older, people say that you should become more independent, but it's very hard to find the balance between being independent, being able to do things for yourself, and isolating yourself from other people. I: Ok. Sophie: So if you get that balance wrong, you do end up alone. I: Yeah.Sophie: And lonely. |
| | Physical state | John: No but thinking back there's a lot more going on with loneliness than just the social aspect. I: Like what? John: There is mental aspects as well. Like having a bad sleep routine can bring up these feelings even though you don't necessarily have a reason to. I: Yeah! |
| Loneliness as inappropriate interpersonal skill in the wrong interpersonal context | Lack of emotionally supportive relationships | Sophie: Urm, like, there will be times when people get busy and then you'll no longer be a priority in their life, so… I: Like? Sophie: Friendships become distant. I: Yep.Sophie: And that can leave you feeling lonely. |
| | Poor communication | John: but for instance my vocabulary is very mixed up sometimes and that can be. |

*(continued on next page)*

**Table 4** (*continued*)

| Higher order theme | Theme | Illustrative Quote |
|---|---|---|
| | Interpersonal conflict | That can be really bad. [laughs]<br>I: Does that make you feel lonely or?<br>John: If you can't communicate with people…<br>I: Yeah.John: …when you really want to or need to, yes it can. It can make you feel lonely.<br>I: Mmm. Yeah. Ok. Yeah that makes sense. Urm, so tell me more about the arguments with people then [rustling], how does that lead to loneliness?<br>Emily: Urm, because, in an argument you're normally saying like things, like bad things about each-other back and forth. [rustling]<br>I: Yeah.<br>Emily: And if someone's constantly saying these things to you, even if you are saying it back. It makes you feel like you aren't good enough, you aren't worth it. |
| **Loneliness as being constructed by society** | Exclusion | Emily: … Just everyone in general like, in my school you have specific students that are like..<br>Sally: Loved by the teachers.<br>Emily: Yeah.<br>I: So, favorites?<br>Emily: Yeah.<br>I: How does that affect loneliness?<br>Sally: Well people feel left out. |
| | External stressors | Sophie: Like, let's say someone in your family dies, or you become really ill, or like some other trauma which causes you to isolate yourself.<br>I: Yep<br>Sophie: And like, for a while, it might be good having your own alone time.<br>I: Mhmm.Sophie: …But after you've like cut those friendships off, you're faced with loneliness. |
| | Environmental structure | I: …Urm yeah, so anything else about the area that you live in that could make you, feel more lonely?<br>Simon: Like living in like just a remote place and stuff.<br>I: Yeah so if there's not much around. Yeah, what about living a remote place might make you feel lonely do you think? |

**Table 5**

Table for illustrative quotes of themes: ways to prevent loneliness.

| Theme | Illustrative Quote |
|---|---|
| Self development | Sarah: There's like not many group sessions that they do.<br>I: Like what? Like?<br>Sarah: So like for, like specific type of, so like talking about things like mental health and things.<br>I: Yeah?Sarah: They don't really do that.<br>John: Yeah! It actually made me realize I'm not a relationship person I'm not [laughs]. I Aww.<br>John: My entire life I've been chasing a relationship only to realize it wasn't for me.<br>I: Ahh.<br>John: So that's a good experience.<br>I: So you've learnt things about yourself?<br>John: Yes.<br>I: Urm what do you think = youth club = has done that makes your self-confidence better?<br>John: Well it's allowed me to interact with people who are on a similar spectrum to me.<br>I: Ahh.<br>John: And it's really helped both me and [inaudible] because we're able to talk to someone with common interests…<br>I: Yeah.<br>John: …build our relationship that way.<br>I: YeahJohn: Based on personality and interests and stuff. |
| Space for emotion regulation | I: Yeah, ok. Urm, have you got better at anything since coming?<br>Jane: Urm, well I didn't know how to play pool, at all.<br>I: Yeah.<br>Jane: So I got better at that.<br>I: Learned a new skill.Jane: And basketball.<br>I: Urm, and how does it make you feel when you come here?<br>Jane: Like say if I'm in a bad mood…<br>I: Mmm?<br>Jane: I'll be happy when I leave, so yeah.<br>I: By the time you leave?<br>Jane: Yeah. |
| Interpersonal skill and practice | I: Well that's a good thing! Um, so how are you different now, to when you started to come here?<br>Emily: Um, I've learnt to deal with situations better.<br>I: Ok, how?<br>Emily: Um, cuz I used, like before, I'd just start shouting and kick off.<br>I: Yeah.<br>Emily: But now, um like, I talk to people and sort it out.<br>I: Yeah? So you confront the problem. Do you mean in arguments or?<br>Emily: Just anything.<br>I: But has it made you, I don't know, has it improved your relationship at all?<br>John: It's helped me open up a little bit, as like, personally I've opened up quite a bit.<br>I: Mmm.<br>John: So that's, that's a good thing.<br>I: Do you mean opening up with your mum or?<br>John: Opening up in general and that…<br>I: Ahh. So just putting yourself out there.<br>John: Yeah, and by extension that helps open up with my mum as well.<br>I: Yeah? And have you got closer with anyone, any of your friends…<br>Jane: Urm.<br>I: …would you say, because of it?<br>Jane: Well yeah, I do talk to them a lot more now, and I hang around at their house a lot more, yeah. |
| Developing and sharing resilience | I: Posters is a good idea, so you said as well social media. So how would you use social media to make young people less lonely?<br>Sally: Have like an anonymous page they can go onto.<br>I: Yeah, and what would they do on the page?<br>Sally: Write how they feel.<br>I: Ok.<br>Emily: Like a, like ahh… |

months. Thus, the way she conducted the data collection activities was influenced by her ongoing relationship with the present young people. She is a graduate Psychologist, pursuing a professional career in Clinical psychology and so her understanding of the concepts discussed during data collection and relevant to data analysis is influenced by an academic psychology lens. The third author is a senior academic psychologist with her most longstanding research lines being with young people with neurodevelopmental disorders. Thus, the perspectives raised by the

**Table 5** (*continued*)

| Theme | Illustrative Quote |
| --- | --- |
| | Rob: Counseling.<br>Emily: Agony aunty. Agony aunt. [inaudible mumbling]<br>I: An agony aunt page?<br>Emily: Yeah.<br>I: An anonymous agony aunt page I like that… So would that be, just something that happened outside of = youth club = or would you want = youth club = to have that page?<br>Emily: Have it.. = youth club = have it.<br>Polly: But everyone, everyone can…<br>Emily:…but anyone can..<br>I: Ok<br>Polly:…message in. And I fink, I don't fink, well I fink = youth clubs = should have like check on the page but I think it should be the um, young people giving the advice.<br>Anthony: But…<br>I: oh ok, why's that?<br>Anthony:…not like…<br>Emily: Um because they understand it a bit more like.<br>Anthony: Yeah<br>Emily:… like when like the staff [coughing] was younger it was completely different [coughing] to how it is now. |
| Safeness | Sophie: It's a safe space.<br>I: Mhmm?<br>Sophie: They encourage equality so it will make [rustling] people who feel isolated in other groups of people, feel less isolated because they feel accepted.<br>I: Great one. I like that. Do people agree with that?<br>Group: Yes. |
| Opportunity | Emily: Urmm, the fact that they've got the new space. And doing different activities.<br>I: Yeah, so new space. How do we think the new space can help with loneliness? [writing] Emily: Um, cuz isn't that the theme of the place. [laughter and inaudible mumbling]<br>I: I need more detail [P1: urmmm] How can it help? P1: Cuz, ummm, the way we're decorating it, it's…being done in a way that expresses everyone. |
| Limitations | Emily: … there's just been a lot of problems like, especially recently there's been a lot of problems that have come off it.<br>I: Like what?<br>Emily: Like arguments with people.<br>I: Ahh.<br>Emily: And because everyone knows that my parents, are sort of like, all the problems get dragged back.<br>I: Ah ok. So what could = youth club=, does that affect loneliness then?<br>Emily: No.<br>I: …a bit?<br>Emily: I don't think it does.<br>I: No? But, how could like = youth club = help with that?<br>Emily: I don't think they can. I Ok [laughs]. P Yeah.<br>I: So it's just like a separate issue.<br>Emily: Yeah, cuz like in = youth club = there'll be an argument and like, [writing] everyone will split, and then I'll be dragged. |

present participants with neurodevelopmental disorders may have been treated with particular prominence in the analysis.

### 2.10. Trustworthiness

Raw audio data was stored in a research data store until transcription and verification of those transcriptions. Analysis was then documented via successive versions of NVivo files, organised by date. The reflexive journal kept by the first author documented analysis decisions and how hers and others' experiences were impacting on these. In addition, meetings between researchers were documented to ensure that the evolution of themes could be traced (Nowell et al., 2017).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Loneliness definition

All participants reported that loneliness was not objectively about being alone, and that you can be around people and still feel lonely; "Sometimes you can be with friends and be lonely" (Emily, focus group 1). It was agreed that loneliness was negative, and some thought of it as a feeling, whilst others saw it as "an unhealthy state of mind" (John). See Fig. 1 for more detail.

### 3.2. Causes of loneliness

*Loneliness as a personal experience*
An individual may be motivated to engage in solitary activities, which can cause loneliness (and this may have a biological basis). Furthermore, an individual's general low self-belief and poor ability to manage negative emotions may cause loneliness even when these things do not directly affect interactions with others.

*Low self belief* contributes to this theme, which can include, but is not necessarily restricted to beliefs about social abilities. Generally, having low self-belief can negatively impact one's mindset, which in turn can cause loneliness. Beliefs about not being good enough to be in a particular situation, such as believing that others do not want to spend time with or talk to you, negatively impact on the ability or opportunity to interact and so cause loneliness – "and then you just feel like what am I good for?" (Jane).

Even when taking the ability or opportunity to interact out of the equation, comparing oneself negatively with others can make one feel lonely (participant talking about colourism) "there's not a lot of people around…looked like me…(so there's)…no-one to relate to (and) …no representation in the media" (Sophie). The negative impact on self-belief seems to be key here "If everything that social media is perpetuating, is not you… it's hard for you to be confident in yourself" (Sophie). Similarly, links between loneliness and poverty of the PCR arise via the negative impact on self-belief "Like if they don't love you then, you're thinking, like what, what are you here for and then you just get really lonely" (Jane).

*Inappropriate management of negative emotions* also constitutes part of loneliness as a personal experience. Excessive experience of negative emotion (anxiety/stress, depression, bereavement or other traumatic events or even boredom, can precipitate feelings of loneliness as "there's not people 'round there to like hang around with" (Simon). Maladaptive emotion regulation strategies precipitate loneliness also. Particular examples included passive strategies, for example dwelling, neglecting a problem, "Cuz like, if you overthink things, you'll blow things out of proportion….and then you like you have irrational thoughts…and you'll really play into the fact that you're alone" (Sophie). Isolating yourself was discussed by more than one participant: "lock[ing] themselves away from the world" (Jane). Self-harm was also noted. More active examples seemed to involve antisocial actions towards others, including actions that might have an adverse effect on their relationships, like aggression or lashing out at others, because "…if I shout at someone, then they're not gonna wanna speak to me" (Emily). Though other's actions were also noted, such as others not listening to you. Conversely, use of strategies that reduce negative emotion for an individual can reduce loneliness, such as doing something alone or "just… some time, space away, time out" (Daphne).

*An Independent mindset* is key to the understanding of loneliness as a personal experience. This refers to the precarious balance that exists between social and non-social motivations. Individuals can be motivated to spend time alone and be independent: "as you get older, people say that you should become more independent" (Sophie). And they can be motivated to spend time engaging in solitary activities: e.g. "listen to music" (Emily). Ultimately whilst independence may be beneficial in many ways, when the balance of time shifts too far away from others,

**Fig. 1.** Word-cloud of themes defining loneliness. Illustrative quotes for themes can be found in Table 4 and 5.

this independent mindset can cause loneliness "it's very hard to find the balance between being independent, being able to do things for yourself, and isolating yourself from other people"(Sophie) and because "it's just you, and you think about everything more" (Emily).

The *Physical state* a person is in which is specific to individuals (hormones, poor sleep) can also speak to possible idiosyncratic internal causes of loneliness, which make it a personal experience. For example "having a bad sleep routine can bring up these feelings even though you don't necessarily have a reason to" (John).

*Loneliness as inappropriate interpersonal skill in the wrong interpersonal context*

Lack of socioemotional, communicative and problem-solving skills in interpersonal contexts can lead to loneliness. But the actions of others in a relationship context appear to be capable of mediating this relationship.

*Lack of emotionally supportive relationships* can be caused by an individual's difficulty in initiating or maintaining (any) relationship, for example not being sociable or feeling unable to approach others: "You're shy and you don't wanna go out then and get to know people, then you won't have enough friends" (Jane). Though this may be the case even when relationships are in place (superficial friendships, child not being able to rely on parent): if parents "Just leav[e] them to do what they want and stuff" (Simon). Likewise, not having the general skill to persevere in social pursuits can result in lack of emotionally supportive relationships.

Similarly, perceptions of inappropriate support can cause loneliness, for example parents not spending quality time with adolescents or their approach to parenting being either passive or "if the parents are too controlling and like, strict" (Emily). Other examples included taking their own difficulties out on their child.

However, emotionally supportive actions from parents can reduce loneliness. For example, when parents recognize the child is not feeling okay, and offer small, unexpected gestures "She'll bring me a bowl of cereal…things like that just remind you that you're not alone" (Sophie).

*Poor communication* also feeds into loneliness as inappropriate interpersonal skill in the wrong interpersonal context. The wrong context for communication can arise when behaviors or characteristics of others' inhibit communication, such as when children feel unable to talk to parents, or feel like no-one is listening: "if no one listens to you like you, you might not want to be with them" (Josh). Poor self-esteem, as above, may interact with beliefs about communication.

Poor communication can also result from lack of personal skill or motivation in communication, such as not feeling comfortable to talk or having trouble communicating "If you can't communicate with people…when you really want to or need to… It can make you feel lonely" (John). And may be particularly important when communicating

particular interpersonal concepts, for example inappropriate communication of emotions when suppressing them or bottling them up.

Conversely, appropriate communication can reduce loneliness. Writing thoughts and feelings down allows me to "I can…get it out" (Daphne). Talking with others to improve emotions was also critical "she's like even willing to take time out of her day, to talk to me, that shows that I'm not actually alone" (Sophie), they can "help you get through it" (Jane) and "you're not building it up" (Emily). Particularly, communication with a parent was also important, such as by generally talking with the child and by sharing their own personal experiences and feelings.

*Interpersonal conflict* also contributes to this theme. This can include family conflict, peer victimization and arguments with others "And if someone's constantly saying these things to you, even if you are saying it back. It makes you feel like you aren't good enough, you aren't worth it" (Emily). Parents can cause loneliness by taking their own difficulties out on their child or having arguments with them. Furthermore, bullying was the most commonly mentioned "… if certain people are saying things that don't make you feel good about yourself…then it makes you feel like, anyone could do that to you, and maybe everyone thinks that behind your back" (Emily).

*Loneliness as being constructed by society*

Societal groups, defined by the collective action of their members, may exclude individuals in direct or indirect ways. However, inanimate features of the environment can also place physical or emotional constraints, which can cause loneliness even without the actions of others.

*Exclusion* can be direct, involving purposeful distancing between social individuals, for example gangs in the community. Indirect exclusion has the same outcome as direct exclusion, in that the individual is not able to engage in a social relationship because "someone feels left out" (Daphne), but it is less purposeful. It could be the favoring of other pupils at school, or parents favoring other siblings which "make[s] you feel like the outsider" (Jane). One participant noted that due to the lack of representation of people of color in the media, she felt she had "no-one to relate to", "because there's not a lot of people around… looked like me" (Sophie). Finally a lack of active *inclusion* can contribute, such as being ignored in childhood, which would "affect me in later life", "cuz I'm not going to have the prior experience" (John).

*External stressors* were identified as contributing to loneliness, such as the trauma experienced from bereavement, or high-pressure events like exams. Transition was a key stressor noted by 3 participants, for example moving through education. The transition involved after divorce was also noted, for example the struggle of housing, "Having to like, choose, where to live, or…swap between the two houses…" (Emily). Thus, by having to choose which parent to live with, or not being in one house for an extended period of time.

Reducing the negative impact of stressors through support can reduce loneliness. The adolescents recognized that some services can support the PCR in alleviating loneliness, for example through social workers supporting them, or counseling: "opening the discussion" (Sophie), particularly when they feel unable to open up with parents.

*Environmental structure* is critical in causing loneliness. Opportunity is key, for example lack of extra-curricular opportunity in schools contributes to loneliness. Similarly, inappropriate living environments can limit social interaction, such as moving between two houses or living in a remote location "like there's not people round there to like hang around with" (Simon). A facilitative environmental structure can encourage social connections and protect against loneliness, for example parent's initiatives such as day trips or introducing them to youth club, which can "chang[e] … life in so many ways" (Josh).

### 3.3. How youth groups can prevent loneliness

Across interviews and focus groups, a variety of existing ways that LYG can combat loneliness were noted, including what they already do, as well as new ideas.

*Self-development*

LYG facilitates development of self for young people who attend. It does this by providing opportunities for young people to learn about themselves, build self-esteem, explore personal capabilities and receive teaching designed specifically to develop skills in a range of areas.

Seven of eight participants noted that there was general improvement in self-esteem following attendance of LYG. The most common way was by teaching to develop skills, both existing e.g. "football" (Josh) and new, "I didn't know how to play pool, at all…So I got better at that" (Jane). This can also be through existing structured programmes, like their volunteering schemes or peer mentoring.

The young people also noticed development in areas specifically related to interaction and communication with others. Most young people noted an improvement in the ability to talk to others, for example "I'm a lot more confident like, and start a conversation" (Sophie). It also encourages young people's confidence in feeling able to be themselves during interactions: "I'm not afraid to show my personal beliefs" (John). Feeling more comfortable when navigating social interactions was noted too: "just like how to carry yourself in a way that puts yourself at ease when you're in like new groups of people" (Sophie). Having the opportunity to interact with others was seen as a means to improving self-esteem, by being in social situations or meeting new people. It was also notable that young people felt more relaxed and liked by others after attending LYG.

Staff at LYG play a critical role in this process, as they encourage a sense of self-esteem, by having relationships with the young people and supporting them. It was felt that "all of the staff really are very supportive" (John) and help you learn to deal with problems. Critically, self-esteem is boosted by the staff who are supportive as they "help you integrate" (Sophie) with other people the same age.

*Space for emotion regulation*

LYG improves emotions and promotes adaptive emotion regulation, by providing opportunities to do this interpersonally with the support of others.

The group facilitates positive emotions, such as making people feel good, and making them laugh. It also offers space to talk about your feelings and generally helps young people to manage difficult emotions, through adaptive and interpersonal emotion regulation. For example, helping young people to combat anxiety in social situations: "They have helped, they have introduced me to a new set of people" (John). It was notable that young people feel more able to confront the problem and discuss it with others, both peers and staff, after attending LYG: "But now, um like, I talk to people and sort it out". They noted "You can always go and tell them and they'd always take it as seriously as something else" (Emily). Young people also more readily talk to staff and accept their advice, noting that they can trust them; "[they] give me

advice, and like they can keep it to themselves" (Charly). It was also crucial that staff understood them: "the staff at club understand you more than other people because that's what they're there for like, they're there to understand you" (Emily).

*Interpersonal skill and practice*

LYG facilitates relationship development and interpersonal skill acquisition. It does this directly through purposeful teaching and providing opportunities to communicate and develop relationships, both existing and new.

The group helps young people to develop social skills, for example by encouraging social interaction. Specifically, LYG has taught young people to build a rapport and enhanced their "communication skills", for example "I still find it hard to start a conversation…But, like I can carry one, pretty well". They noted "If I didn't come to [youth club] I think I still would've been like, very bewildered when I was thrown into certain social situations" (Sophie). Interestingly, all young people in one focus group noted how banning technology within sessions was helpful by encouraging real life interaction and communication "we're like forced to communicate with each-other" (Sarah).

Staff play a crucial role in helping young people acquire social skills, by supporting and chatting to them, and by helping them to integrate, "they show you round…And like, and then you get to know people better" (Charly). A notable way they do this is by actively including those who are alone "if there's someone sitting on their own, someone always goes up to them and talks to them" (Polly).

The experience of LYG enables young people to develop relationships, such as friendships with staff and young people, as it encourages you to "socialize". New friendships are created "I've made new friends since I've been here…and like…it's still growing" (Charly) and existing ones developed "It helps them stay in contact with their current relationships, so they can speak to their friends more often" (John).

Interestingly, LYG has an impact on relationships at home too, as a by-product of developing in other areas. For example, it changes parenting choices like allowing the child more freedom. It has also helped one young person to become more forthcoming and open with parents: "It's helped me open up a little bit…and by extension that helps open up with my mum as well" (John).

*Developing and sharing resilience*

LYG facilitates mental wellbeing by providing opportunities to understand mental health, to relax, share experiences confidentially and for peers and staff to support you, both formally and informally.

The group has existing schemes in place which support young people and combat loneliness, for example 1–1 counseling as it "gives people a chance to expect [/express/] themselves" (Rob) and peer mentoring as it "makes sure that the person's alright. And that they're not being left out" (Anthony).

The young people also proposed further suggestions the group could implement, to purposely enhance adolescents' wellbeing and prevent loneliness. Firstly, structured teaching sessions could be offered to teach about diversity, such as learning disabilities, loneliness and mental health, to "see who needs help and who doesn't" (Sarah). The young people felt that teaching on loneliness could teach "signs of loneliness and how you can help people feel less lonely" (Polly). A drop-in wellbeing space was also suggested, which a staff member would sit in, as sometimes staff "don't have time to just sit down and have a chat" (Sarah). An anonymous page was also recommended, monitored by staff, where young people can "write how they feel" (Sally) and young people "giv[e] the advice" (Emily). Young people proposed the idea of a box where they could write down and post their problems to staff, who would then "pick you out" and "take you to the counseling room" (Sarah). Finally, they suggested "a Solo room. A pod for…for people where they wana chill out, like" (Anthony).

*Safeness*

LYG offers a community that feels inclusive, accepting and safe, a place where young people feel comfortable, which in turn improves loneliness.

Crucially, LYG feels like a "safe space" which "gives you community" (Sophie). This prevents loneliness by offering somewhere where young people feel they belong: the activities offered are inclusive to all abilities, and "in a way that expresses everyone" (Emily). Generally, LYG encourages equality and acceptance of all sorts of young people: "they encourage equality so it will make people who feel isolated in other groups of people, feel less isolated because they feel accepted" (Sophie). This perception of acceptance has the power to generalize to other relationships "you start believing other people will accept you, if [LYG] will accept you as well" (Jane). One young person noted "you can tell that [the staff] care about all of them" (Sophie).

The young people also made additional suggestions on how the group can increase feelings of safety. Ways to make young people feel safe when starting LYG were suggested, such as offering an induction which included group games to involve others. Whilst inductions are in place, they felt that they could be improved by having an assigned member of staff to show you around: "if you had an induction and you had one person show you round, there's one member of staff that you know you're comfortable with" (Sophie) and introducing you to people individually. They also recommended that new members begin by coming to less busy sessions; "Come on a quiet day at first" (Sarah) to use an "anxiety hierarchy" (Sophie).

*Opportunity*

LYG improves loneliness by allowing young people to spend time together doing specific activities that are enjoyed within the youth group, but this can still be limited by external factors, such as insufficient awareness of its existence, funding, organization and parental decisions.

Group activities "allow young people to form important friendships" (Sophie). It was widely agreed that the current opportunities to play team games are helpful. However young people also brainstormed new ideas of a range of group activities which can be implemented to combat loneliness, so that "everyone's interests are being…catered for" (Emily). They discussed having more focus groups themselves, "Cuz everyone gets to [join in]" (Emily). They noted that giving young people different roles in games can support everyone to be included, should a certain game not appeal, such as the referee in a sports game. Interestingly, eating together was highlighted as an idea to connect during meals "you'd sit together" (Emily). Young people noted LYG offers the opportunity to engage in activities as an alternative to being bored, because "when you feel bored you feel like nothing to do so yeah, you just think about everything" (Emily).

The adolescents spoke at length about the idea of implementing a sleepover event at LYG. As discussed, LYG already offers a great variety of group activities, however the young people felt that the sleepover was even more influential, as they would be spending more time together, in a different context: it is "a chance to find people with the same interests as you, as you're basically spending a whole night with people…so you're guna obviously to bond a bit more than you would in a two hour session" (Polly). They went on to plan the sleepover with notable elements being "anyone can come", eating meals together, a range of team games and icebreakers "where you… have like a task like, see who can get the most information out about people in like a certain time. So you have to have like a conversation with them and find something out about them" (Sally).

A key aspect of opportunity for the young people was accessibility. They agreed that "we need more advertisement of club" (Emily) to increase reach and reduce loneliness. A few participants stated they didn't know the club was there, or they "didn't think it was for everyone" (Sarah). They suggested advertising in schools and colleges, on social media, using banners and posters. As knowledge of the service is increased, so is young people's opportunity to engage with it. Other barriers to the success of activities were highlighted, including "parents permission" (Rob) and the cost of trips, which again reduce opportunity to engage with the social aspects of the group.

## 3.4. Limitations

LYG may not be wholly effective in improving or preventing loneliness and facilitating positive relationships for every individual, as contextual and personal factors persist.

LYG can exacerbate arguments within relationships, such as between siblings when "the problems that happen inside of club, have dragged outside" (Emily), which has an impact on parent's opinions of the group. One young person felt unable to talk to all staff about difficulties. Another noted that LYG had no impact on their friendships and had not changed them as a person. Moreover, some maladaptive emotion regulation strategies remain after attendance, for example sleeping, spending time alone and aggression. Despite this, the large majority of responses documented a positive influence on both loneliness and personal development.

## 4. Discussion

Overall, our study aimed to understand the thoughts and experiences of young people, to shed light on what contributes to loneliness and how we might prevent it. Our analysis has supported some well-established links within the existing literature, whilst providing further interesting insights and new ideas, which have been less documented. In this discussion we endeavor to highlight these areas of nuance and explore how we might make sense of them. Our work also provides insight into the real-life experiences and voices of young people, and provides recommendations for further development, not only in research circles, but service development and funding priorities across the country. Recommendations from our findings are therefore described at the end of this discussion.

Our findings suggested that loneliness, for adolescents, is a personal and subjective experience. An individual's use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and their level of self-esteem can contribute to feelings of loneliness, concepts which are consistently linked to loneliness in the literature (Mahon et al., 2006; Vonhalst, 2013; Zysberg, 2012; Kearns & Creaven, 2017). A more nuanced idea that emerged from our findings was that an independent mindset can lead to loneliness; an individual's motivation to pursue social connection is key. Research shows that young people are more likely to report peer-related loneliness if they deliberately choose to spend time alone (Majorano et al., 2015), whilst chronically lonely teenagers are less likely to accept social invitations after feeling excluded (Vanhalst et al., 2018). They also score lower in traits of extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Teppers et al., 2013). Our findings extend this idea by suggesting that such motivations may exist more generally than just following exclusion, and they can inadvertently lead to loneliness for individuals without awareness of this process. Moreover, it was particularly interesting to find that young people feel that an individual's appraisals or perceptions are a key part of the loneliness experience. Our findings suggest that this can emerge through low self-esteem, including ideas about personal worth and how young people perceive social interactions. Both perceived social incompetence and perceived negative judgements by others are associated with loneliness (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Bastian, 2015; Saricam, Yaman, & Celik, 2016; Sakiz et al, 2020). These negative perceptions might also extend to maladaptive emotion regulation such as overthinking and dwelling, strategies our young participants felt lead to loneliness. Similarly, as loneliness can depend on mindset and motivations, it is important to consider how individuals perceive their alone time. Promisingly, it is possible to reappraise time spent alone so that its effect on negative mood is less severe (Rodriguez, M., Bellet, B.W. & McNally, 2020). Therefore, the way that individuals appraise personal and social experiences seems to be the critical factor in creating risk for experiences of loneliness. The importance of these risks for loneliness is further supported by the prevention strategies identified by our participants: they felt that loneliness can be prevented by facilitating self-development and enhancing adaptive emotion regulation

skills.

Our young participants highlighted that loneliness is not only associated with individual factors, but also the social world in which they are embedded. Whilst this can include personal skills such as poor communication, it also refers to contextual factors like the relationships available to a person, and potential conflict within these. Loneliness has been consistently found to be associated with poor communication (Jin & Park, 2013; Segrin, 2019), interpersonal conflict (Johnson, Lavoie, & Mahoney, 2001) and lack of supportive relationships (Nipcon et al, 2006; Lee & Goldstein, 2016). One of the newer ideas that emerged from our findings was that initiating contact is a key moment in the social chain. Interestingly, the young people valued when this initial contact was taken out of their hands, when staff introduced them to interaction. These findings fit with the suggestion that our adolescent participants made around preventing loneliness: to provide the opportunity to enhance, and teach about social skills. A particularly interesting example of this was the agreement that banning technology in youth sessions can be protective against loneliness. Whilst phones can undeniably increase social reach, our adolescents felt that when face-to-face interaction was available, they were a hindrance to this and to social skills acquisition. There is currently mixed evidence around the impact of the use of social media, including that it is positively associated (Pittman & Reich, 2016), negatively associated (Hunt, Marx, Lipson & Young, 2018 ) or not associated with loneliness (Yavich et al., 2019), which may be explained by the different apps and contexts studied. Interestingly, recent interviews with young people found that they believe encouraging positive use of social media can prevent loneliness (Snape & Manclossi, 2018). Our findings suggest that for some young people, there may be a positive impact on social interactions, of restricting use of phones within controlled group settings.

Ways in which our society is constructed have the potential to cause loneliness in young people. One of these ways is social groups: perceiving oneself to be outside of, or not included in, the collective group can contribute to loneliness. This experience may occur through direct exclusionary behavior, or a lack of active inclusion. Loneliness has previously been found to mediate the relationship between direct exclusion from a school clique and depressive symptoms (Witvliet, Brendgen, van Lier, Koot, & Vitaro, 2010), suggesting that loneliness is linked to the negative psychological impact of exclusion. Our results extend this by suggesting that access and opportunity is also crucial in preventing loneliness. However, our data suggests that society can also create risks for loneliness even without the influence of the social group, through the impact of environmental or situational stress. Examples of the stressors highlighted in our study have been consistently linked to loneliness in relation to: parental divorce (Çivitci et al., 2009; Lasgaard et al., 2016) educational transition (Newman et al., 2007; Benner & Graham, 2009), bereavement (Snape and Manclossi, 2018) and lack of extra-curricular opportunities (McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin & Kawachi, 2006; Haugen, Säfvenbom & Ommundsen, 2013; Taliaferro, Rienzo, Miller, Pigg & Dodd, 2010). Loneliness is therefore seen as a product of our society and the ways in which we have decided to live our lives. It is interesting that some of the contributors affect all young people in a Western society, such as exams, suggesting that the accepted norms may be setting young people up for potential feelings of loneliness. Notably, the societal factors noted are also largely outside of young people's control. Perceived lack of control is associated with other negative feelings such as anxiety (Muris, Schouten, Meesters & Gijsbers, 2003) and low mood (Weisz, Southam-Gerow & McCarty, 2001), and thus may exacerbate feelings of loneliness. As loneliness is constructed by societal groups and experiences, there is promise in preventing it via promoting restorative or fulfilling inclusive experiences. Fittingly, our findings highlighted how the opportunity for social connection, developing resilience and a safe, accepting social environment can prevent loneliness. Thus, impactful change can come from the external systems in which a young person belongs. This is consistent with systemic approaches to psychological distress in mental health

services, where difficulties are viewed as a product of interactional relations within families, or wider social systems i.e. school. As a result, intervention is therefore targeted at these relational processes in the wider system of the individual (Dallos & Stedmon, 2013). Future research may benefit from further exploration of loneliness interventions through a systemic lens.

Perhaps our most unique prevention strategy suggestion was the idea of youth sleepovers away from home, where all are invited. The young people felt this would be an influential way to enhance social connection. This suggestion includes many of the young people's ideas about how to prevent loneliness: opportunity for social interaction and skill acquisition, staff initiative, inclusion, shared experiences and self development. Whilst we have not found this specific idea in the current literature, research suggests that shared activities, self-disclosure, and responsiveness are necessary for intimacy in adolescent friendships (Parks, 2007; Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008). A sleepover may act as the perfect shared activity to optimize self-disclosure and responsiveness. Young people's perspectives on the process of friendship development highlight that activities which test feelings of safety during interaction, involve deeper disclosure, and results in consolidating the friendship (Mitic, Woodcock & Shrank, 2021). Therefore it may be that a sleepover would allow young people to form deeper, more meaningful social connections.

### 4.1. Limitations

It is of note that our data offers perspectives from only one youth group, and our interpretations assume some level of transferability to other youth services. The particular group we used had high levels of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and was inclusive of special educational needs. We know that levels of loneliness tend to be higher in those with a lower socio-economic background (Snape & Manclossi, 2018). Given these specific demographics, it may be that our findings do not apply to other young people in different group settings and with different backgrounds. It could therefore be useful for future research to consider how disadvantage and inclusivity impact on our adolescent perspectives of the causes and ways to prevent loneliness.

We are also aware that the use of focus groups risks losing certain voices, as other participants can play a more dominant role in a group environment. As a result, it may be that perspectives from young people with certain characteristics were less represented in our data. We hope that using interviews allowed more individual exploration, though these focussed on the causes of loneliness rather than how to prevent it. It would be interesting to explore the views of young people about how youth services can reach quieter, more reserved members of the group, outside the scope of the current study.

Furthermore, as we have discussed above, focusing our participants' thinking around the potential causes of loneliness in line with factors identified as important by the youth leaders at the youth group, provided an important – and potentially restrictive – lens within which our results must be viewed. The decision to take this approach was driven by our important focus on strategies to tackle loneliness that would be relevant to the youth group setting. However, this presents an additional factor that potentially limits the transferability of our findings. And it will be down to further work in the area to ascertain the extent to which our findings are relevant within other settings.

### 4.2. Recommendations

Based on the prior analysis, we have identified key recommendations using both the data at hand and literature. 1. To promote self development, it may be helpful to both provide space and opportunity for young people to explore their capabilities themselves and meet new people, as well as purposefully engage and teach them new activities and skills. 2. Space for emotion regulation is also important, and services can do this by supporting young people to overcome difficulties in their lives by

talking with them and letting them offload their thoughts. Staff can make efforts to take their problems seriously, try to understand them, and offer advice where appropriate. It may also be helpful to encourage them to discuss and confront social conflicts. It is noteworthy that it is important to let the young people know that there are limits to confidentiality, and any risk of harm may have to be actioned and shared.

3. We urge youth services to directly promote interpersonal skills development too, for example by offering activities that allow discussion and informal communication, to support young people to build relationships. It may be useful to offer ideas of a purpose to interact e.g. to check if someone is ok/to find out when they are being picked up, to enable young people to approach each-other. Young people have been found to believe that physical proximity is an important factor in friendship formation (Krammer, et al., 2023). Staff can also deliberately initiate conversation between attendees. For instance, ice-breaker activities led by staff members can support young people to initiate conversations with one another, build group trust (Chlup & Collins, 2010), develop cultural awareness and tolerance, and foster a sense of connection (Kavanagh et al., 2011). Providing specific teaching about social skills and relationships, including what young people can do about loneliness, may also develop interpersonal skills, an idea young people have supported in other research too (Snape & Manclossi, 2018). Finally, we implore services to explore their attendees' ideas around the benefits and drawbacks of using technology within sessions, and act on their wishes.

4. Services can promote a feeling of safeness and acceptance by grading initial session attendance according to numbers attending, starting with the least busy. It is also helpful to assign one member of staff as a 'go to' during these sessions, who provides an induction where rules and expectations are made clear. Generally, having consistent staff members and allowing time given to build relationships (Bogaerts, Vanheule, & Desmet, 2006; Bernardon, Babb, Hakim-Larson, & Gragg, 2011). Services may also diversify their staff team with regard to age, class, gender, ability, race and so on, whilst using a wide inclusion criteria for attendees, including children with mixed abilities. In order to maximize feelings of inclusion and acceptance, we encourage services to operate a zero tolerance to exclusion of any kind, such as racism or ableism, and act appropriately to spread this message throughout the service. This may involve educating staff and young people around inclusive language and behavior, and staff should model this behavior to children. Adolescents can especially benefit from observing positive role-models to determine and reinforce appropriate behavior (Hurd, Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002).

5. Youth services can also develop and share resilience using schemes which purposefully support young people's wellbeing such as: peer mentoring, counseling, drop-in wellbeing spaces, space to write difficulties down. We also encourage them to use a wide range of activities that offer different roles, encourage more intimate connections, and promote a shared purpose, such as a sleepover. Widespread advertisement and addressing barriers to inclusion is also encouraged, such as only offering trips out that are free of charge.

These recommendations should be considered within the wider economic context, which is one of austerity and funding uncertainty within the youth work sector (Davies, 2018). Certainty about sufficient long term funding for youth services is likely to be an enabler, if not prerequisite for ensuring youth groups such as the one that is the subject of the present research can provide the best possible support for young people (Horton, 2016).

## 5. Summary

Overall, the key causes of loneliness identified by our research are best described by our higher order themes: personal experiences, inappropriate interpersonal skills in the wrong interpersonal contexts, and society. Our research also highlighted ways in which youth groups can

prevent loneliness, by promoting self development, supporting emotion regulation, developing interpersonal skills, developing and sharing resilience, providing opportunity, and offering safeness. As a result of these findings, we have made some practical recommendations which we hope services will be able to implement. We hope that future research endeavors to continue to highlight the voices of young people in further understanding how loneliness develops in adolescence, and use this to inform the design of services to prevent loneliness in future generations.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Sarah Turner:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Alison Fulop:** . **Kate Woodcock:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107442.

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