



Utah Department of
Health & Human
Services

Transforming communities through youth connectedness

A shared risk and protective
factor approach to improved
community health

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Introduction

Connectedness and why it matters

Connectedness is a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging. It can be centered on feeling connected to school and work, family, or other important people and organizations in a person's life. For a young person, this means having a sense of belonging in their family, at school, among their friends or other groups, and in their community.

Connectedness is an important protective factor for youth because it reduces the likelihood that they will adopt or engage in a variety of unhealthy behaviors. It can also buffer risk factors that may be present in an adolescent's life so that they are less likely to experience negative health outcomes related to sexual risk, substance use, violence, and mental health. In addition, the more ways a young person feels connected to people in their life, the more protected they are from these negative health outcomes, not just in their youth but across their lifespan.

What to expect from this toolkit

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide guidance to individuals, families, and communities on how to create a culture of connectedness for youth within the home, school, and broader community setting in the following ways.

1. Increase the understanding of the developmental stages and set reasonable expectations based on social, emotional, and cognitive stages.
2. Provide concrete examples of strategies to increase connectedness at the individual, family, and community levels.

Protective and risk factors

Protective factors are conditions or attributes in an individual, family, or community that increase health and well-being. They can also buffer against risk. **The more protective factors someone has in their life, the more protection they have from harmful health problems or outcomes.**

Risk factors, on the other hand, are conditions or attributes in an individual, family, or community that can increase risk for negative health and well-being if not addressed or treated. **The fewer risk factors someone has in their life, the less likely they are to have harmful health problems or outcomes.**

Reduce early adversity

The foundation of healthy childhoods and adult wellness is centered on safe, stable nurturing relationships and environments. Stable nurturing relationships and environments create the opportunity for positive childhood experiences (PCEs) and help to prevent and mitigate the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood, while the brain and body are developing, that may impact health across the lifespan. They may include abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, or aspects of the child's environment that undermine their sense of safety, stability, and ability to bond.

Just as ACEs can have a profoundly negative impact on a child's health and development, **positive childhood experiences (PCEs)** can protect youth from poor health. PCEs help a child build resiliency, regardless of their history with early adversity and childhood trauma. PCEs are experiences and interactions that help youth feel heard, seen, valued, and supported within their home, school, and community.



As bad as ACEs may be, the absence of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) and relationships may actually be more detrimental to lifelong health so we need more focus on increasing the positive.

- Ali Crandall
Assistant Professor of Public Health, BYU

Support for parents and caregivers

Parents and caregivers who have their own trauma history may experience obstacles that prevent them from being the very best support they can be for their children and young people. The only way to make sure children have healthy, safe childhoods is to first support the mental and emotional needs of parents and caregivers, especially those bearing the additional burden of unresolved trauma.

63% of Utah adults reported experiencing and/or being exposed to at least 1 adverse childhood experience (ACE).¹

Every caregiver, regardless of their trauma history, benefits from a healthy support system and positive coping skills. The social connections that form a strong safety net can help model healthy parenting behaviors, aid in problem-solving, offer advice, and provide concrete support in times of need.

Foster social connections for parents and caregivers



Prioritize

- It is important to spend quality time with the people in your life who matter most. Schedule times to connect with these people, in-person as often as you can.

Participate

Getting involved and sharing experiences makes us feel like we belong and gives us the chance to meet new people while having fun.

- Join a group of people who share a common interest.
- Participate in family, neighborhood, and community gatherings and traditions.
- Parenting classes provide an opportunity to increase skills while connecting with other parents.
- Become engaged in your child's school.
- Civic engagement - get involved in issues that impact your community.



Asking for help is healthy

- There are times when every adult needs extra help. **There is no shame in seeking help when you need it for parenting concerns, mental health; or support such as food, rent, or transportation.** Try to accept help when someone offers it to you and think of ways you can help others in need.
- Calling a friend or speaking to a trusted person in your life can help you cope during difficult times and gives you the chance to connect, share, and learn from others.



I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."

- Brené Brown

How are Utah parents and caregivers handling the day-to-day demands of raising a child?²

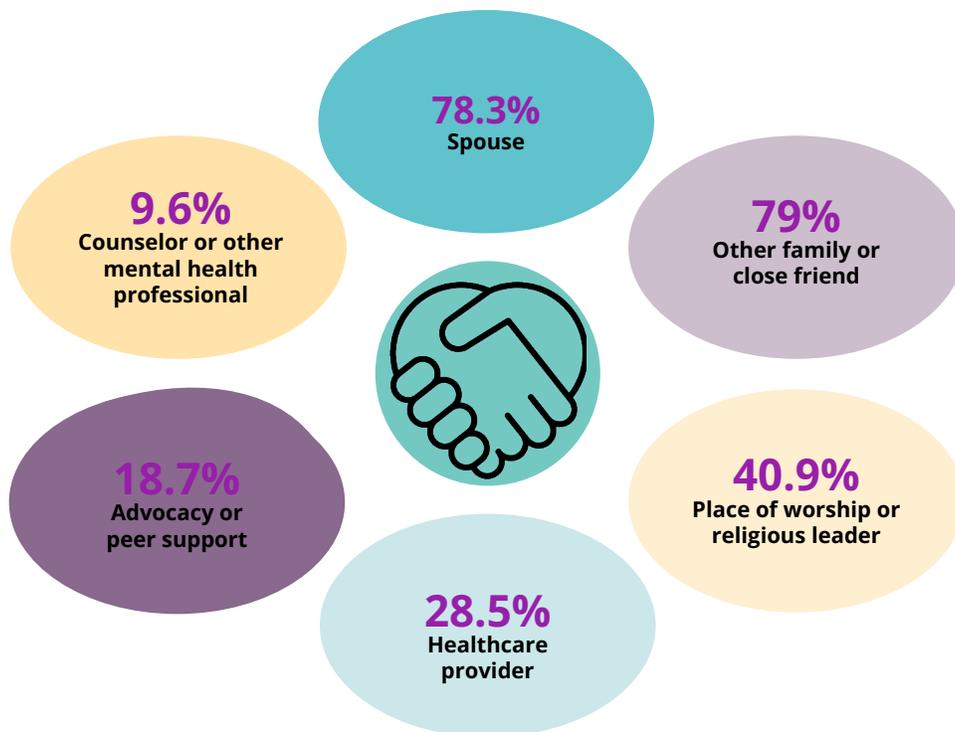


55.6% think they are doing “very well.”

42.6% think they are doing “somewhat well.”

1.8% think they are handling things “not very well or not well at all.”

Utah parents and caregivers received emotional support from many sources in the past year.²



Connectedness starts early

Understanding the developmental stages of childhood is important for building strong healthy connections and social attachments. Having reasonable expectations of children and their emotional capacity at each stage of their development can reduce the risk for child maltreatment and poor mental health outcomes. It can also help improve the chance a person experiences positive outcomes related to their education, relationships, and career. (See Appendix A, ages 0 to 10 years)

Social and emotional development during the teen years

The teen years can be difficult for youth and the adults in their lives. So much is changing all at once as adolescents make the transition to adulthood. It is important to recognize that social and emotional development is highly variable during this time. Having a good grasp of reasonable expectations for young people will go a long way toward reducing stress for both parents and caregivers and their teens, while continuing to build important social skills and connections.

61.8% of Utah youth aged 6–17 are flourishing (are curious, resilient, and able to self-regulate) according to their parents.²

Early adolescence aged 10–13

A child will navigate important social and emotional changes during this time of their life.

What to expect	Tips for parents and caregivers
Explores their own identity and exercise independence.	This phase includes many big changes as youth decide who they are as individuals. Among many other things, this is when first expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity may occur. If a child identifies as LGBTQAI+, it's vital for their emotional wellness that their parents or caregivers communicate with love and acceptance.
Forms and verbalizes their own opinions on topics of interest.	Encourage youth to participate in activities that interest them. Express appreciation when your child shares their thoughts and feelings. This will help build their confidence and curiosity.
Begins to be more heavily influenced by peers – both positively and negatively – in matters of attitude, interests, appearance, and self-esteem.	Peer relationships can be hard so it's important to be supportive while a child navigate these changes. Though friends can be influential, parents and guardians still have a lot of influence over the big stuff like career choice, values, and morals.
The Internet and social media become more prominent and influential.	Talk to youth early and often about Internet safety as well as potential risks they may encounter on social media. It's especially important to encourage critical thinking while navigating information online.
Begins to question authority, societal norms, and standards.	This can be a challenging phase for parents and caregivers as it will often be your authority a child challenges. Remember to practice clear communication, set firm and consistent boundaries, and be patient.

Early adolescence ages 10–13

What to expect	Tips for parents and caregivers
Takes on more responsibility.	This may require encouragement from parents and caregivers but it's important in developing self-confidence and a healthy work ethic. Offer encouragement and praise as a child takes on more responsibility.
Develops their own individual values and morals.	Communicate through words, and demonstrate through actions, personal, family, and community values.
Begins to show interest in romantic relationships.	Modeling healthy relationships early is a must.
Begins to seek new experiences as they test boundaries and explore their own limits and abilities.	At this cognitive stage, young people may be unable to appreciate and judge risk effectively. This can be particularly concerning for parents and caregivers. Clear communications of risks, expectations, and consequences during this stage is essential to the health and safety of youth, and aids in building strong connections with adults and peers.
Moods and feelings are intense and can fluctuate drastically without notice.	These ups and downs of emotion are because a child's brain is still learning to regulate feelings at this stage. Be patient.
Demonstrates more sensitivity towards others. More adept at reading others' emotions and responding appropriately.	While a child is getting better at reading emotions at this stage, they may still misinterpret things. Sometimes they'll need your help in understanding and appreciating the feelings of others.
As the body changes, a child may begin to feel self-conscious about their appearance and may compare themselves to others.	These feelings can lead to an unhealthy self-image for some youth, which may lead to depression, anxiety, or even an eating disorder. Be willing to have open, honest conversations about matter of mental health. Encourage youth to seek help from a trusted adult when they are in need.
May sometimes seem to act without thinking. Decision-making skills are still developing at this state.	Communicate that actions have consequences and also risks. Be consistent with appropriate discipline when it is necessary.

Middle/late adolescence ages 14–19

Between the ages of 14–19 the front part of the brain responsible for complex reasoning, problem solving, thinking ahead, prioritizing, long-term planning, self-evaluation, and emotional regulation goes through its final developmental stage. Through this phase, a teen's thoughts and feelings will still be mostly focused on themselves. Teens at this stage are still quite egocentric but are learning to appreciate the thoughts and feelings of others more.

What to expect	Tips for parents and caregivers
<p>Develops and apply abstract thinking skills. This changes the way a teen thinks about themselves, others, and the world around them. Will revert back to concrete thinking in times of stress.</p>	<p>Engage a teen in discussions about topics that interest them. Challenge their thinking and perspectives. Encourage them to explore other points of view.</p>
<p>Develops a sense of personal identity, exploring self-worth, competence, and where they fit into the bigger picture.</p>	<p>Discuss and support future goals. Encourage a part-time job if it won't negatively impact grades and school participation. Recognize and praise hard work.</p>
<p>Develops more meaningful values, religious and spiritual views, and belief systems that guide choices, behaviors, and future goals.</p>	<p>Encourage civic engagement within the community. Volunteer with youth to do community outreach.</p>
<p>Begins to renegotiate relationships with parents and caregivers.</p>	<p>Encourage autonomy while balancing independence with healthy family connections. These connections will be redefined, sometimes through conflict, but should remain strong and supportive.</p>
<p>Begins to develop stable, productive peer and friend relationships. These connections are instrumental in shaping a teens self-concept and are more influential in the later years of adolescence as a teen spends less time with parents and family and more time with their peers.</p>	<p>Be familiar with the teen's friends. Set clear boundaries based on your family values on things like using alcohol and other substances and sexual intimacy. Talk about these issues often in a collaborative, non-judgmental way. Model healthy relationships with your own friends and other family members.</p>
<p>Begins to meet demands of increasing roles and responsibilities of adulthood. At this stage a teen is learning the skills to manage expectations of them, including balancing work and family responsibilities.</p>	<p>By this time, you will find your role shifting to more of a cheerleader. Provide guidance and support for goal setting. Discuss different career paths with your teen. Be supportive and help them keep their goals realistic and attainable.</p>

Build healthy connections

The first and most important adult relationships children will have, will be found at home. Connections with parents, adult siblings and cousins, aunts, uncles, and close family friends will all have a profound impact on youth's long-term health, safety, and opportunities. Other adult relationships are very important too. Teachers, religious leaders, coaches, neighbors, local business leaders, bosses, school advisors, and healthcare providers will also have great influence over a teen's trajectory toward healthy adulthood.

Youth thrive when they are surrounded by a diverse and helpful team of caring adults who model positive, healthy behaviors and help them develop a sense of boundaries and responsibility. Research shows that a child who has at least 1 supportive adult in their life has better mental health, fewer thoughts of suicide, and is less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior or use alcohol and other substances. They are also more likely to complete high school and go on to higher education and career attainment.

In the following pages, we will outline ideas on how to improve youth connectedness at home, school, church, and in the broader community. We'll make recommendations for parents, teachers, youth leaders, policymakers, law enforcement, and clergy. Each and every one of us has a role to play in helping young people feel connected within their homes, schools, and communities.

The majority of Utah teens feel they have healthy opportunities for connections.^{2,3}

71.6%

teens say they eat family meals together 4+ times per week.



58.8%

teens agree that they feel close to people at their school.



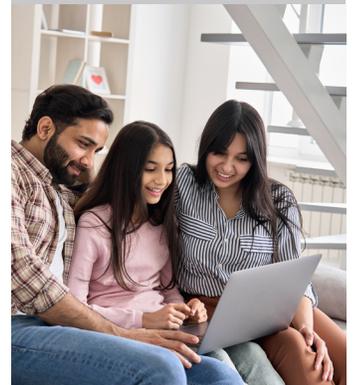
55.0%

indicate they have a friend they can talk to about their feelings all or most of the time.



50.5%

indicate they have an adult in their family or another caring adult they can talk to about their feelings all or most of the time.



Foster connectedness at home

You are your child's first friend, teacher, and most valued support. But just as your child needs your guidance and support the most, it might feel as if they are pulling away. This is normal as your child becomes more independent and navigates new responsibilities, feelings, and experiences. As you begin to spend more time apart, it's important to seek out opportunities to connect. Here are some recommendations on the little and big things you can do to increase connectedness in your home.

The little things:

Not every effort to connect has to be planned. Many of your best opportunities to connect with your teen are found in everyday interactions.

When your teen wants to talk, focus. Give them your undivided attention even if it's just for a few minutes in passing. This communicates that they are a priority. They are important.

Listen without judgment and show interest in their thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes all you need to do is be there. You don't always have to be teaching, advising, or correcting.

Value arguments and disagreements with your teen as learning opportunities to teach and model healthy communication and listening skills. Disagreements are normal. Be patient and listen to what they are saying. Take a break if you're too upset to talk with them in a calm, understanding way.

Be welcoming to new friends. If you reject your child's friends, they may also feel rejected.

Express appreciation. When your teen does their chores or helps out without being asked, recognize the effort. This encourages responsibility and self-confidence.

The big things:

Sometimes you need to make a plan. Especially as your child reaches middle and late teens and begins to spend more time with friends, love interests, and starts to work. Time with your teen at this stage might be harder to come by but is still very important to maintain strong social connections to family and community as they enter adulthood.

Schedule time together. Either 1-on-1 or as a family. Make intentional efforts to connect and check-in. Eat together, watch a movie, play a game, go to the park, or for a drive.

Follow their lead. Let your teen decide what activity you will do together. This will motivate them and make them less likely to reject your offer to spend time together.

It may seem like you are always butting heads over something these days. Try to find connections and bridge your differences by engaging in, or at least showing interest in, the things your teen is interested in. Let your teen teach you about their hobby or topic they are invested in.

Be engaged in school activities and encourage healthy study and homework habits. Talk with teachers and school staff with your teen. Attend parent-teacher conferences.

Encourage your teen to be engaged in their community. Volunteer with them, help them to get ready to vote, or support their participation in a youth council. Help them see how important they are as a member of their community.

Utah Adolescent connectedness with mom and dad⁴

According to the 2019 Utah Prevention Needs Assessment, Utah youth have good relationships with their parents.



92.2% enjoy spending time with their mother.

88.7% feel very close to their mother.

87.8% enjoy spending time with their father.

81.1% indicate that if they had a personal problem they could ask their mom or dad for help.

80.0% feel very close to their father.

62.2% share their thoughts and feelings with their father



Giving connects two people, the giver and the receiver, and this connection gives birth to a new sense of belonging.

- Deepak Chopra

Create connectedness at school

For youth, school is a home away from home. Outside of the home, school is the most steady influence in a child's life. This is especially true for children who come from families experiencing adversity, such as parental substance use and mental illness, family violence, or financial instability. Relationships developed and nurtured between students and school staff is at the very heart of school connectedness and an essential building block for positive long-term health and opportunity outcomes for youth.

Students who feel a sense of connection at school are more likely to stay focused, and are more motivated to achieve, leading to higher grades and improved test scores. This same sense of connection can reduce the likelihood students will engage in risky health behaviors like drinking, smoking, experimenting with drugs, early initiation of sexual activity, experiencing depression and anxiety, or considering or attempting suicide. Strong social cohesion in the school setting has also been shown to improve school safety by decreasing disruptive and violent behavior and the likelihood of a student carrying a weapon on school grounds.⁵

The following recommendations can improve social connectedness in 2 areas of the school setting:

- Individual – What individual students and staff can do to influence positive social connections for all students.
- Environmental – Addresses school culture and efforts to improve social cohesion and bonding within the broader school and individual classroom setting.



By the time they are in high school, as many as 40–60% of all students—urban, suburban, and rural—are chronically disengaged from school. That disturbing number does not include the young people who have already dropped out. What is behind this serious disengagement, and what can be done about it?

- John Hopkins University

Individual recommendations

When we talk about individuals who play a role in improving connectedness at school, we often focus on teachers, and students. But every adult has a role in creating a culture of connectedness at school, from office and janitorial staff to administrators and counselors. Research shows that having a strong bond with at least 1 supportive adult role model outside of the home greatly improves a child's health and wellness trajectory across their lifespan.



First we must recognize that people connect with people before they connect with institutions.⁵

- Make sure discipline is fair, equitable, and effective for all students.
- Be aware of drastic changes in a student's behavior or school performance. Intervene appropriately and promptly to provide additional support when this happens.
- Provide students with opportunities for cross-age, peer-led tutoring efforts.
- Engage in collaborative learning by having students with high academic performance work with those who may be struggling.
- Ask parents and other community members to serve as mentors to students.
- Use school space to provide opportunities for parents to also learn new skills. Partner with community organizations, universities, or corporations to provide courses on parenting, social emotional competency, financial literacy, English as a second language, citizenship classes, and other adult learning opportunities.

Environmental recommendations

School culture often predicts whether a student feels connected to their peers and staff. Research shows that when students feel a sense of belonging at school, they have far lower incidences of delinquency and truancy, and are at a much lower risk for serious violent behavior than students who do not feel like they belong.⁵ The school environment must be one where healthy, positive social bonding can take place. A school environment which encourages social connectedness provides students a sense of empowerment, choice, safety, collaboration, and trust.



In any organization, there is no substitute for capable, motivational leadership. Schools are no exception.⁶

Administrators:

- School administrators should strive for an authoritative leadership and educational approach, focused on limit setting and connection rather than strict discipline and control. Be willing to collaborate and negotiate with students on matters that impact their education and school experience.
- Encourage staff to serve on committees and in leadership roles focused on improving social cohesion between staff and students.
- Make sure school rules are fair and equitably applied. Consequences for breaking school rules should be clear, fair, and equitable. Have students, parents, and teachers review school rules annually.
- Ask students, teachers, and parents for their ideas and feedback on an academic mission for the school. Post the academic mission in every classroom.
- Implement social emotional learning practices to help students acquire and apply the skills to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective/community goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. It is vital to engage parents in social emotional learning as well, so the principles can be applied at home and at school.
- Create an orderly school environment and involve students in school projects like campus or community clean-ups and planting of vegetation.
- Improve civic engagement through school-sponsored volunteerism, community service, and service learning. Engage students and faculty in school-wide community service projects such as planning and planting a community garden, community clean-up days, planting trees, revitalizing a community park, or other school-sponsored community events.
- Assign an adult "buddy" to new students. Attempt to make personal contact with that student before their first day at school, greet them on the first day, introduce them to their first period class, and check in on them periodically.
- Encourage team teaching. Teachers and parents should work together to help address the learning and behavioral needs of struggling students.

Classroom teachers:

- Establish high academic and civic expectations. Create an environment that allows all kinds of learners the ability to meet those expectations.
- Provide consistent, equitable classroom management. Use conflicts as learning opportunities. Make sure rules and consequences are clear.
- Strengthen parent-teacher relationships. Let parents know when their student has done well, rather than only reaching out when there is a problem.
- Create opportunities for parents to share their needs and expectations for their child, respective of their cultures and experiences.
- Provide interpreters and classroom information in multiple languages, including ASL, to parents who don't speak English or who prefer to communicate in a different language. This helps all parents stay involved and know what is happening in the school and classroom.
- Recruit community and parent volunteers to help with classroom activities, teach a new skill, or provide tutoring support. Community senior centers are a great resource for classroom volunteers. This improves both student and adult connectedness.
- Employ cooperative learning. Team assignments, peer tutoring and small group activities give students opportunities to build social connections and work collaboratively toward shared goals and outcomes.
- Create democratic classrooms. Give every student a job on a rotating basis. Involve students in curriculum development, choosing group assignments, and provide choices in learning.
- Develop positive classroom rituals that encourage social bonding and connectedness such as weekly reward or recognition time, good news minutes to share accomplishments or other exciting news, anonymous student compliment box, etc.

Many students do not feel connected to school and have limited, if not, shallow relationships with adults at school. This exercise, suggested by Search Institute trainers, is designed to illuminate which students at your school are "connected" to adults and which may be "at risk."

In a very private and completely confidential space (students should never see or hear the results of this activity), tack large sections of paper across the walls - enough paper for every student's name in your school, or topic area (English, history, math, science, etc.). Write every student's name on the paper-covered wall with approximately 12 inches of blank space after each student's name. Ask every faculty member within the school or department community who interacts with students to go around the room and draw a star next to each student's name that they feel connected to or have a relationship with beyond an administrative, staff, or faculty level.

During this exercise it quickly becomes apparent which students are "connectedness rich" and which students are "connectedness poor." A debriefing session and action plan should be implemented immediately following the activity to address your school's specific connectedness challenges and opportunities.⁶

Connectedness at school

Below are the percentage of Utah students who said yes to the following questions on the 2021 Prevention Needs Assessment.⁴

89.8%	There are lots of chances for students in my school to talk with a teacher one-on-one.
89.4%	I feel safe at my school.
88.5%	I have lots of chances to be part of class discussion or activities.
87.6%	There are lots of chances for students in my school to get involved in sports, clubs, and other school activities outside the classroom.
81.7%	Over the past year in school, I enjoyed being in school sometimes, often, or almost always.
73.8%	I am given opportunities to participate meaningfully in important activities at school.
69.5%	My teachers notice when I am doing a good job and let me know.
64.1%	In my school, students have lots of chances to help decide things like class activities and rules.
63.0%	I am recognized and rewarded for my contributions at school.
58.1%	My teachers praise me when I work hard in school.
50.9%	Teachers ask me to work on special classroom projects.

Strengthen connectedness through faith

Faith settings have traditionally been an important place for building connections and a sense of belonging. This is as true for teens as it is for adults in your community. Faith organizations not only provide a sense of social connectedness and civic engagement, but often help connect parishioners with necessary emotional and support in times of need. Places of worship can have a unique and important role in building strong, healthy, connected youth.

Unfortunately, in the age of technology, building meaningful individual and community connection is increasingly challenging for youth. This is of particular concern because social connections are such an important protective factor against poor physical and mental health outcomes, including teen pregnancy, substance use, and suicide. Here are some examples of how faith communities can help the youth in their congregations feel connected to one another and the communities in which they live, learn, work, worship, and play.

Volunteering

Organize volunteer and service projects for youth. This helps youth connect with others, increases pride in their community, and fosters a lifelong attitude of civic engagement. Ideas for volunteer and service projects may include:

- Help community organizations that serve people who are homeless or in transition with housing.
- Assist at a soup kitchen, food bank, or shelter.
- Organize drives to provide hygiene kits, clothing, bedding, or food to those in need.
- Volunteer time at a local Habitat for Humanity or similar group that helps connect lower-income families with affordable housing.
- Community revitalization projects like picking up litter, updating a local park, or starting a community garden.
- Work with city officials to create a community mural. Invite youth from different faith groups to collaborate on a unifying message of hope, community, and acceptance.
- Offer free childcare and preschool services to low income families within the community. This will help youth build healthy parenting skills for the future.
- Host youth-led community meals.
- Connect older parishioners with youth to provide free tutoring and after-school programs.

Building a culture of connectedness

- Nothing is more important than creating an environment focused on love and acceptance. LGBTQIA+ youth are at particular risk of feeling disconnected or isolated from their faith community due to perceived attitudes within the congregation regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Be intentional in addressing this and creating a welcoming atmosphere for all.
- Invite youth to participate in choral and music groups. This helps combat loneliness, develops new talents, and builds self-confidence. It can also help connect young people with older mentors within their faith community.
- Provide classes to youth on financial literacy hosted by older parishioners. Teach about budgeting, saving, and tax filing. Collaborate with local nonprofit organizations such as taxhelpputah.org to support these events, including free tax filing.

- Donate church space to provide community support groups; substance use, grief and loss, divorce, etc.
- Create a church environment based in cultural humility.
 - Provide cultural competence training for church leadership.
 - Recognize the benefits of developing connections within multi-ethnic community networks.
 - Utilize prayer and reflection to analyze the demographics of the congregation and in the creation of inclusive policies and opportunities for parishioners and the community at large.
 - Be deliberate in planning and developing a culturally sensitive vision for your congregation.
 - Actively engage with migrant populations within your area and make sure church leadership reflects the cultural makeup of the congregation.

Encourage connectedness through policy and protection

Policymakers—from the local mayor and city council members, to the governor and state legislators—are interested in solutions that improve youth wellness. Policymakers at all levels are essential to sustainable community change. Vibrant, healthy communities in which youth thrive are beneficial at the individual, family, community, and societal levels.

Youth want to feel heard and seen. Policymakers should take into account what is most important to youth when developing laws, policies, and programs. Youth want to be involved in decisions that affect them and have autonomy over making their own decisions. When developing policies that affect youth, ask yourself:

- Adult attitudes toward youth in public spaces. Are youth welcomed at public places? Or do they feel discriminated against? Are youth seen as a nuisance or treated with suspicion?
- Are youth involved in the policy making process? Do youth feel that they are a valued constituency? Even though they can't vote, are their voices heard in matters that impact their lives?
- Are police interactions with youth positive or adversarial? Are local police engaging in community policing efforts and building bridges with at-risk youth populations?



...from a youth perspective, the process of becoming a citizen of their community in their own and others' eyes, is often rarely acknowledged or addressed by adult community members and leaders.⁶

- Places to Be and Places to Belong
Youth Connectedness in School
and Community

How can policymakers and leaders at the local level play a role in improving youth connectedness within the community?

- Allow youth to play meaningful roles in community matters that impact them.
 - Help youth plan and maintain a community garden, especially in “food desert” areas.
 - Provide paid youth internships within city and county government to encourage engagement.

- Establish robust youth leadership councils to address community issues important to them such as safe driving, teen pregnancy, safe dating, substance use, mental health, food insecurity, etc. Consider young people for these roles not based solely on academic attainment or leadership ability. **Often the youth who would benefit most from participation in these activities are those who are too often overlooked.**
- Provide opportunities for creative youth engagement.
 - Involve youth with diverse backgrounds to design and install a community mural with positive youth-centered messaging.
 - Sponsor community art and talent contests with specific themes relevant to youth. Provide scholarship opportunities or prizes to encourage participation.
 - Fund after school programs that provide youth safe, healthy places to go until parents get home from work.
 - Fund community infrastructure projects such as clean, well-lit walking paths; parks; improved access to mass-transit; and discounted or free fares for youth who use mass-transit.
 - Educate youth on the importance of civic engagement, voting, and making their voices heard.
 - Support policies that improve broadband infrastructure. Wi-fi access needs to be affordable and available to everyone in the community. This is essential to help youth and families succeed in school, apply for jobs, and access community resources.

Many young people, especially those from disadvantaged areas, are distrustful of the police. Consider the following strategies to improve relationships between police and young community members.

- Coaching and mentoring
 - Start a police athletic and activities league (PALS). These programs promote juvenile crime prevention by building positive, collaborative relationships between youth and law enforcement. There is technical assistance available from the [National Police Athletic Activities Leagues Inc.](#) (NPALS). Activities should vary and include options such as:
 - Sports and outdoor activities like football, basketball, baseball, lacrosse, or soccer.
 - Education and arts programs, cooking, music, photography, and performing arts.
 - Leadership development events and activities.
- Fund and mandate trauma-informed community policing efforts. Law enforcement need to understand the impact that exposure to trauma, household instability and community violence has on young people and their behavior.
- Train police on developmentally-appropriate, racially-equitable interactions with youth.
- Law enforcement should partner with youth-serving organizations to support youth in need.

When considering ways to improve youth connectedness within the community, avoid the “caretaker mentality.” When deciding which community activities and programs to provide to young people, ask them what they want. Failing to understand the needs and desires of youth can lead to programs that are poorly attended by the population you are hoping to reach. Give them a role in decision making. Re-imagine the way young people are engaged in their community. Don’t only provide recreational activities, but also encourage service-oriented opportunities that give youth a sense of pride and ownership in their community.

Embrace connectedness in the community

Young people are a vital, often misunderstood segment of the population. They represent our future workforce, government representatives, leaders, innovators, and caregivers. But a 2004 focus group study indicated that 1 in 5 youth did not feel they had opportunities for meaningful engagement in their communities. Even more concerning was the broader feeling of being treated with distrust and suspicion by adults within the community, especially within businesses. Young people expressed a greater need to be heard, seen, valued, and respected while being given a role to play within their communities.⁶



Young people have a yearning to be part of the community, to belong, to be recognized, and appreciated in public places instead of being looked down upon or merely tolerated.⁶

- Whitlock 2004

The following are some general recommendations to help youth feel valued and seen within their community. When they feel engaged to connect and contribute, it benefits the young person and the community members around them. Youth feel valued and seen within the broader community and social context so that they feel engaged to connect and contribute to their benefit and to the benefit of community members around them.

- Invite youth to participate in decision making processes. Town halls and youth or teen advisory councils are ways to gather feedback from youth on how to improve opportunities for connection. Make sure less traditional teen representatives are invited to participate or selected to serve on youth councils. **Often those who struggle with academics or leadership skills will benefit the most from participation in youth engagement efforts.**
- Provide community opportunities to highlight youth talents and interests.
- Avoid making assumptions about youth based on age, appearance, or skin color.
- Challenge and reject social norms that portray youth as troublemakers.
- Recognize that all youth are individuals and resist the temptation to treat them all the same way. Each has specific strengths and challenges that should be appreciated and considered.
- Rather than defaulting to negative stereotypes and social norms, give young people the benefit of the doubt in public spaces.
- Practice safe bystander intervention if you see young people being harassed or discriminated against in public.
- Model respect by treating young people with the same courtesy and respect that you would an adult. Make eye contact and exchange pleasantries. Help them feel seen, and let them know they matter.

Connectedness in the community

Below are the percentage of Utah students who said yes to the following questions on the 2021 Prevention Needs Assessment (PNA).⁴

83.2%	I think it is okay to seek help and talk to a professional counselor, therapist, or doctor if you've been feeling very sad, hopeless, or suicidal.
78.6%	I like my neighborhood.
75.4%	If I had to move, I would miss the neighborhood I now live in.
59.1%	There are people in my neighborhood who encourage me to do my best.
55.0%	I felt recognized and rewarded for my contributions in the community.
53.8%	There are people in my neighborhood who are proud of me when I do something well.
50.7%	I volunteered to do community service 1 or more times in the past 12 months.

Recommendations to improve connections with youth have been provided throughout this toolkit. However, if youth feel misrepresented, disenfranchised, or disengaged from their community, these recommendations may not have as big of an impact as they could otherwise. Parents, school staff, faith leaders, law enforcement officers, policymakers, and community members have a responsibility to make sure each young person has fair and equitable opportunities to live a healthy and safe life. Together we can create a Utah where for every child it's great to be a kid.

Appendix A

Cognitive development 0–18	Social development 0–18 months
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remembers people and objects that are not present. • Imitates and learns from other people’s facial expressions, sounds, and actions. Imitates what they see on TV, even if they don’t understand it. • Understands what they hear before they can speak. • Makes noises to communicate satisfaction or displeasure. • Recognizes their own name and follows very simple instructions. • Understands several phrases and words for familiar objects. • Has a very short attention span. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cries and flails arms and legs when in pain, tired, hungry, cold, thirsty, wet, lonely, in a new situation, and or with new people. • Smiles, babbles, and coos to show pleasure, joy, and excitement. • Friendly and strongly bonded with familiar people, a parent, or other adult. Shows anxiety when separated; afraid of strangers and new situations. • Can play alone for brief periods of time. • Becomes angry when frustrated.
Cognitive development 18-36 months	Social development 18-36 months
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can use imagination and begin to play. • Recounts events of the day and imitates actions and events that occurred in the past. • Still confuses the meanings of the today, tomorrow, and yesterday. • Has vocabulary of several hundred words. • Can use 2-to-3-word sentences, repeats words. • Generally has a short attention span and can be easily distracted. • Is just beginning to remember rules and doesn’t really understand right from wrong. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is developing a strong sense of themselves as separate individuals. • Thinks they are the center of the world. Are possessive with strong notions of territory (“this is mine” mentality.) Has difficulty sharing. • Begins to show signs of independence. • Can be stubborn and contrary. • May have trouble waiting and wants things right now. • Plays side-by-side with others more than cooperatively with them. • Is more aware of the feelings of others, enjoys an adult’s attention.

Appendix A

Cognitive development 3-5 years	Social development 3-5 years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although less than before, they still think they are the center of the world and have trouble seeing things from someone else's perspective. • More able to use words to express thoughts and feelings. • Talks to themselves out loud as a way to control their behaviors. • Begins to think ahead and plan their actions. • Starts to see the relationship of cause and effect. • Asks a lot of why, how, when question. Learns by imitation, observation, exploring, creating, and doing things. • Begins to understand before and after; up and down, over and under; today, yesterday, and tomorrow. • Can't play or do something for too long unless there is adult guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can read and interpret emotions. Can tell when someone is angry or upset. • Uses different ways to control their own emotions. • Develops their first true relationship. Friends become very important. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Age 3: Plays near friends; finds it difficult to take turns and to share. ◦ Age 4: Begins cooperative play; starts to understand turn-taking and sharing. ◦ Age 5: Enjoys playing with other kids, often cooperates well. • Uses less physical aggression than when younger. Uses more frequent verbal aggression (insults, threats, teasing) and begins to understand rejection. • Understands social rules and can act in accordance with them. • Is eager to carry out some responsibilities; offers to help. • Understands that praise or blame happens because of what they do. • Begins to understand the difference between "on purpose" and "by accident." • Has a more active imagination which can lead to fear and nightmares.
Cognitive development 6-10 years	Social development 6-10 years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becomes more able to understand the viewpoints of others. • Can concentrate on what they do for longer periods of time. • Has increased problem-solving ability, but not yet like an adult. • Capable of planning activities in advance. • Can begin to understand time and the days of the week. • Has improved short-term memory. • Can speak and also write. By age 10, children have a vocabulary of 20,000 words and learns an average of 20 new words per day. • Can communicate better, express themselves, and understand things. • Can better understand and internalize moral rules of behavior, (right from wrong, good from bad, and wonderful from terrible). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to base self worth on how well they do in school, how many friends they have, and how they look. • Is intensely interested in peers, prefers same-sex friends. Develops friendships marked by give and take, mutual trust, and shared experiences. • Begins to feel that belonging and acceptance by peers is very important. • Play is no longer just fantasy play. Begins to play more rules-based games where winning is the objective. • Is concerned with justice and fairness. What is fair or equal is important. • Continues to develop social skills like empathy and compassion. • Becomes more able to do things by themselves, changing the parent-child relationship.

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We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say, 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then, there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.

- Fred Rogers