

FIT TO
BELONG



ARE WE
DOING ENOUGH
TO ADDRESS LONELINESS
IN ADOLESCENCE?

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Purpose and Aims of the Fit2Belong Project

1.1.1 Inspiration for the Fit2Belong project

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

1.1.2 About the Fit2Belong project

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

The Fit2Belong project comprises 3 phases:

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

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

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

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

1.2 Phase 1. The Guiding Principles Underlying Output 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 Phase 1. The Core Guiding Framework

1.3.1 Structure of the Framework

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

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

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

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

Quick Guide to Fit2Belong: The Core Guiding Framework

Dimension 1: Aim of loneliness interventions

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

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

Dimension 2: Designing Loneliness interventions

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

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

Dimension 3: The Focus of Loneliness Interventions

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

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

Role of Community

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

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



2. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LONELINESS AMONG YOUTH?

To develop the Fit2Belong Guiding Framework, we had to establish the core guiding principles that underpinned it. We did that by reviewing the academic and grey literature on youth loneliness. In the following sections we have provided details of our findings from that desk research. We have included the most relevant information that helped us develop our core principles.

2.1 What is loneliness?

Loneliness is an unpleasant experience that most people will have at some point in their life (Qualter et al., 2015). Research specifically focusing on adolescents shows that they describe loneliness as a painful and sad experience that is often accompanied by a perceived lack of belongingness or disconnection to their peers (Yang et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2018; Korkiamäki, 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Rönkä et al., 2018). In more severe cases, adolescents describe their loneliness as a darkness, feeling as though they have no one who cares about them; a sense of hopelessness that their situation will get any better (Verity et al., 2021). Along with dark feelings, some adolescents describe suicide ideation, self-harm, and suicide attempts as a way of coping with the negative emotions that characterize loneliness (Yang et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2018; Rönkä et al., 2018).

Theoretical accounts generally converge on the idea that loneliness occurs due to perceived discrepancies between a person's actual and desired quantity or quality of their social relationships (Russell et al., 2012). Therefore, loneliness is a subjective experience that occurs when someone feels that their relationships (e.g., with their friends or their parents) are lacking in some way (Cacioppo et al., 2006). For example, someone may experience loneliness when they feel they have too few relationships (quantity) or if they perceive that their relationship(s) are not sufficiently close (quality). Of course, someone may want both more friends and better-quality relationships.

2.2 Lonely or alone?

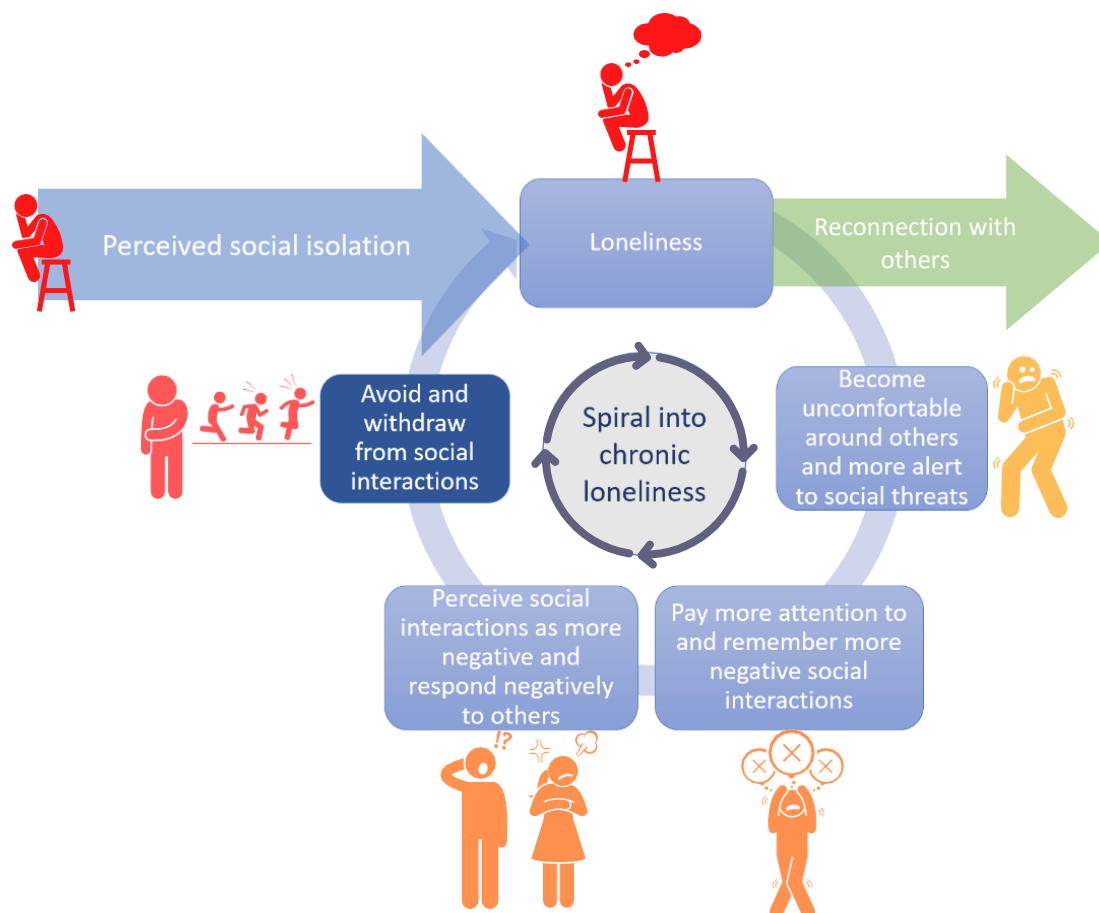
Loneliness is not the same as being alone. In contrast to loneliness, aloneness (or solitude) is an objective state: it is about having no one else

around. In that sense someone can be alone (or physically isolated) but not feel lonely; on the other hand, someone could be surrounded by people yet feel lonely. Aloneness is neither viewed negatively nor positively by adolescents (Buchholz & Catton, 1999), although it is viewed in a negative way by primary school-aged children (Cole, Bond, & Qualter, 2021). By contrast, adults often see aloneness as a positive experience - a time for self-reflection and regeneration - unless it is unwanted aloneness, in which case it becomes a risk factor for loneliness (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2016).

2.3 How long does loneliness last?

Loneliness is a painful experience, but the negative and uncomfortable feelings that accompany it (sadness, anger, frustration, etc.) are thought to encourage reconnection, or the formation of new social contacts to satisfy our need to belong (Qualter et al., 2015). Essentially, we try to manage those negative, uncomfortable feelings by finding others to engage and connect with, reducing that negative affect and overcoming loneliness. So, if experiencing loneliness encourages us to seek social connection and is successful in doing so, loneliness will be a temporary or transient experience for most of us. Research evidence suggests that problems arise when people who feel lonely do not have a chance to reconnect (Loades et al., 2020), and it is important to note that this is sometimes linked to a lack of opportunities, confidence, or support from peers.

If perceived social isolation and loneliness become prolonged (otherwise known as chronic loneliness) it can be particularly difficult for young people to reconnect with others. In fact, prolonged loneliness can lock people into a vicious cycle of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that undermine the functional value of loneliness (i.e., to alert us that our need to belong is not being met). This process is represented below:



2.4 How many young people feel lonely?

Research that includes samples that are representative of specific countries shows that loneliness is a common experience from early adolescence to young adulthood. Prevalence rates across those ages vary across countries, as illustrated by the statistics below.

7.3% -
10%

of adolescents aged 15-29
years report feeling lonely
“often”

AUSTRALIA
FINLAND
GERMANY
UKUS

(Nyqdist et al., 2016; ONS, 2018; CIGNA, 2018; Australian Loneliness Report, 2018; Luhman & Hawkey, 2016)

3% -
16.3%

of adolescents aged 11-15
years report feeling lonely
“very often” or “always”

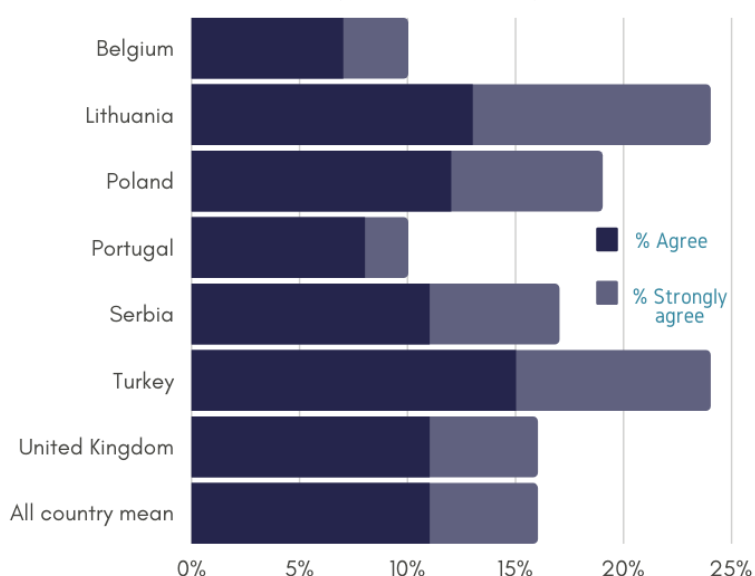
CAMBODIA
CHILE CHINA
DENMARK FINLAND
INDONESIA IRELAND MALAYSIA
MYANMAR NAMIBIA
THE PHILIPPINES RUSSIA
THAILAND UKUS
VIETNAM

(Rich-Madsen et al., 2018; Lyyra et al., 2018; Ronka et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2020; Murphy & Shevlin, 2012; Stickley et al., 2014; Page, et al., 2011; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2019)

2.4.1 Loneliness in the Fit2Belong partner countries

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial survey that assesses the extent to which 15-year-old students around the world have acquired the key knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society.

Percentage of 15-year-old students who felt lonely at school (PISA, 2015; 2018)



Within this assessment, students are asked whether they “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “agree”, or “strongly agree” to the statement “I feel lonely at school”. Between 9-25% of young people in the Fit2Belong partner countries agree they feel lonely at school, with between 7-15% strongly agreeing with this statement. Turkey and Lithuania, in particular, stand out with the highest levels of loneliness reported by 15-year-olds in the partner countries (OECD, 2017; 2019).

2.5 POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF LONELINESS

EDUCATION



NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS SCHOOL

WORSE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

INTENTION TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

PHYSICAL HEALTH



HEADACHE, BACKACHE, STOMACH ACHE

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

MENTAL HEALTH



LOW SELF-ESTEEM

STRESS

ANXIETY

DEPRESSION

SELF-HARM, SUICIDE

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS



SHYNESS

LACK OF TRUST

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

The literature illustrates the harmful impacts that loneliness can have on a young person's education (Bayram-Ozdemir et al., 2017; Frostad et al., 2015; Benner, 2011; Gest et al., 2005; Guay et al., 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996), physical and mental health (Yang et al., 2020; Stickley et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2013; Ladd & Ettekal, 2013; Qualter et al., 2010, 2013) and their social relationships (Qualter & Munn, 2002; Nowland, Balmer, & Qualter, 2019). Most research has focused on prolonged loneliness due to the assumption that only prolonged loneliness is problematic. That assumption has also led the focus for interventions, so interventions tend to focus on helping those who are 'stuck' in their experience of loneliness. However, all loneliness starts off as temporary, and there is now emerging evidence that suggests temporary and situational loneliness (e.g., that experienced by people self-isolating for health reasons; Loades et al., 2020) is also associated with negative health outcomes, or can trigger inadequate coping responses, which in turn can eventually lead to chronic, prolonged loneliness. Therefore, attention should be focused on helping young people cope in positive ways with their experience of loneliness regardless of how long they have felt lonely for. That way we can help reduce loneliness in those chronically affected, but also attempt to prevent loneliness becoming prolonged for young people who have just begun to feel lonely.





2.6 RISK FACTORS FOR LONELINESS

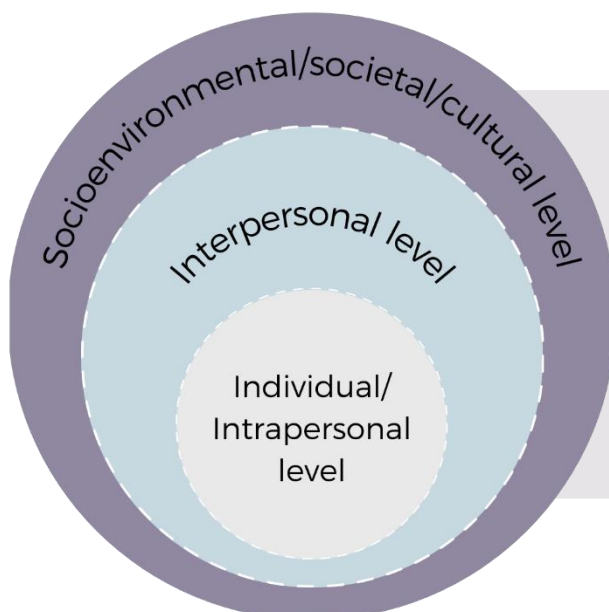
Loneliness occurs when there is a discrepancy between the social relationships we want (desired) and those we have (actual). As such, the factors that make people vulnerable to loneliness are those that affect the following:

- What we want of our social relationships (desired)
- Our ability to develop or maintain relationships (actual)

2.6.1 Why are young people at risk of loneliness?

During the teenage years, relationships with peers and social status become increasingly important for young people and at the same time, skills that will help them to develop and maintain friendships are still developing, creating a mismatch between desired and actual relationships (Laursen & Hartl, 2013; Qualter et al., 2015). Young people are also developing their identities; they are finding out who they are, their interests, and their values, which is associated with fluctuation in relationships. The pressure of wanting to fit in with, and be liked by, their peers can also put young people at risk of viewing their friendships to be lacking in some way and therefore may increase their risk of experiencing loneliness (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

The factors that are identified in the literature as increasing young people's vulnerability for loneliness can be categorized at three levels:



Risk factors for loneliness can operate at different levels: the individual level, interpersonal level, and socioenvironmental level. While those levels are presented separately in this report, all co-occur and are likely to interact to contribute to a person's risk for loneliness and their experience of loneliness.

2.6.2 Intrapersonal factors

Most of the research on loneliness has focused on personal characteristics that might make people more likely to experience loneliness. Some of those are represented below. These characteristics are linked to loneliness partly because they are commonly associated with a tendency to engage in self-defeating thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Vanhalst et al., 2013; Gaucher et al., 2012; Perlman & Peplau, 1982).

Loneliness has been linked to self-defeating tendencies such as....

LOW SELF-ESTEEM	LOW ENTHUSIASM
NEGATIVE SELF-TALK	SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL
SELF-BLAME	LOW ENERGY
LOW CONFIDENCE IN SOCIAL SKILLS	UNDERDEVELOPED SOCIAL SKILLS

These characteristics can affect how willing someone is to socially interact with others, especially in new social situations (e.g., starting high school, moving class). When they do interact with their peers, they may give the impression that they are not interested in talking to or making friends with them. Therefore, it can increase the risk of loneliness by causing social interactions to be more negative (actual or perceived) and unpleasant (Hawkey, Burlison, Berntson, & Cacioppo, 2003; Dandeneau et al., 2007).

Self-defeating tendencies are often linked to chronic loneliness and can feed into the negative cycle presented earlier (see page 8), strengthening those characteristics, and leading to distorted ways of viewing social information (Vanhalst et al., 2015; Qualter et al., 2013). Having low self-esteem is believed to be particularly damaging when it comes to alleviating and coping with loneliness.



2.6.3 Interpersonal factors

Some people feel lonely due to interpersonal experiences that might occur independently of their personal characteristics. These experiences might affect people's self-views (see characteristics discussed in the prior page) and their willingness to enter new social interactions, or even how they behave in subsequent social interactions. Importantly, these experiences in themselves push individuals aside, making it hard for them to establish or maintain satisfying relationships. Some interpersonal experiences that have been linked to loneliness are noted below:

1 Peer acceptance or rejection. Being accepted by peers has been found to link to lower levels of loneliness overtime (Maes et al., 2016), whereas being excluded, or bullied by peers is associated with higher levels of loneliness (Qualter, Brown et al., 2013; Matthews et al., 2020). Also, due to the stigma associated with loneliness, young people might be bullied precisely because they are perceived "to be lonely" by their peers (Matthews et al., 2020).

2 Prejudice and discrimination. One particular reason why some individuals are rejected by their peers is prejudice and discrimination. This happens when people have an identity or characteristic that is unusual in that environment—also called 'minority status'—and their peers do not value those differences.

Stigma involves negative attitudes (or prejudice) towards a person because of a characteristic they may have (e.g., mental illness, loneliness, health conditions, living in foster care etc.)

The characteristics that are most often associated with minority status include the following:

- Minority ethnicity
- Low socio-economic status
- Living in group residential homes
- Physical illness
- Physical disability
- Mental illness
- Sexual & Gender minorities
- High weight
- Autism
- 'Alternative' identities

Young people being looked after in children's homes (also referred to as group homes) may also be exposed to stigma from both within the group homes (i.e., from their carers) and in their wider social world (e.g., from their teachers and peers at school; Wood & Selwyn, 2017). Whilst loneliness has not been researched in young people living in children's homes, the stigma they face due to their life circumstances is likely to contribute to difficulty in forming and maintaining social relationships and, thus, promote feelings of loneliness (Kools, 1997).

While exclusion due to prejudice operates at various levels, it can have very clear consequences at the interpersonal level. It can cause those who are prejudiced not to engage with, or to engage negatively with those who have minority identities. It can also lead those who are 'minoritised' to fear and avoid social interactions. This can make young people more likely to feel lonely (Barreto, Doyle, Bhattacharjee et al., in prep; Doyle & Barreto, in prep). Feeling different to their peers can also prevent young people from asking for help (Farmer & Edwards, 2014).

3 Friendship. Although people can have friends and still feel lonely, having at least one friend can make people less likely to experience loneliness. Findings from the literature suggest that having at least one good quality friend can be protective against loneliness and the effects of peer rejection; having one friend can provide some individuals with a sense of belonging (Korkiamaki, 2014; Woods et al., 2009).

2.6.4 Socio-environmental factors

Factors at this level are much less researched, but are increasingly considered important (e.g., Matthews et al., 2018; Morin 2020). One example is prejudice, which, as discussed, can have effects at the level of interpersonal relationships, but which is an inherently cultural and environmental problem. Even factors that are often considered individual level factors, like being autistic, have environmental aspects: For example, rather than regarding autistic children as having poor social skills, one might consider that if peers and teachers have a better understanding of a wider range of ways of being social, they might be better able to include autistic children. Two other factors that are important to mention are:

1 Social media. Social media receives a lot of negative publicity when it comes to young people and loneliness. However, the research shows that social media can have both positive and negative associations with loneliness (e.g., Allen et al., 2014).

The way we use social media seems to be important, for example, people experiencing loneliness tend to use social media in a passive manner rather than as a means for interaction (Verduyn et al., 2020). In other words, young people who feel lonely are likely to scroll through their newsfeed where they will see their peers having fun with friends; without them. However, if social media is used to extend communication and support of face-to-face friendships this can increase the perceived closeness of that relationship (Nowland et al., 2018).

Social media can also be used to find support/interest groups to help those who are feeling lonely to cope with their feeling and help them feel like they belong (Allen et al., 2014). Social media can also be used for cyberbullying and may leave young people feeling like there is no escape from bullies. Cyberbullying has been found to increase loneliness and decrease self-esteem especially if the young person is being bullied both at school and online (Matthews et al., 2020).

The infographic consists of three main elements: a red smartphone on the left, a central collage of images, and a teal smartphone on the right. The red smartphone contains text about harmful uses of social media. The central collage includes a woman with a laptop surrounded by social media icons, and a group of young women, one of whom is looking down sadly at her phone. The teal smartphone contains text about beneficial uses of social media.

Social media can be harmful if:

- used passively
- it replaces face to face social interaction
- being cyberbullied

Social media can be beneficial if used to:

- interact with friends
- join support groups
- join interest groups

2 **School, youth centre and group home climate.** Young people spend most of their time at school, making the school environment important in influencing their experience of loneliness. Yet, there has been little empirical attention to loneliness and social factors that go beyond the direct relationships between peers. A handful of studies have highlighted that the more positive young people perceive their classroom environment to be, and the greater sense of connectedness to their school they have, the less likely they are to be experiencing loneliness. (Morin, 2020; Cava et al., 2010; 2007; Pretty et al., 1994). Relationships with peers and support from teachers can affect the social climate of the classroom and of the school, potentially impacting a young person's experience of loneliness (Moring, 2020; Pretty et al., 1994). Creating a sense of community within classrooms and schools may also have an important role for promoting sense of community beyond the school gates (Prati & Cicognani, 2019).

School Belonging

Feeling like they do not fit in at school can make young people feel lonely. School belonging can be increased by schools by promoting the value of diversity and inclusivity, offering supportive relationships with teachers and other school staff, promoting engagement and collaborative peer learning in class (e.g., Allen et al., 2018).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Attachment like relationships between teacher and student, where a teacher provides academic support, compassion, empathy, and is open to difference can help to build a positive social classroom environment (Morin, 2020). Being able to trust their teachers to keep secrets may help young people seek help to alleviate their loneliness. In contrast, teacher-student conflict is linked to lower feelings of school belonging (e.g., Tillery et al., 2013).

Peer Relationships

We know that relationships with peers can affect loneliness. They can also affect young people's sense of belonging to their school. Being disliked or rejected by peers can make school an unpleasant environment. Being alone at school, when others are with their friends can lead to further rejection and exclusion as they may be labelled by their peers as a 'loner' (Jenkins et al., 2018). School could be an important place to encourage positive and supportive peer relationships.



School Ethos

Distorted views of social interaction that can occur as a result of prolonged loneliness could mean that it may only take one negative relationship or interaction with a teacher or peer to lose trust and feel like the school is not for them. Therefore, a whole school ethos promoting cooperation, compassion and support may be needed rather than just changes to classroom environments (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The available research is very much focused on the school environment, but the social contexts of other places are also important for understanding loneliness in the lives of young people. For example, young people may spend time outside of school at youth centres, at home with their parents or guardians and, for adolescents in group care, in their residential group home. Aspects outlined in the school climate graphic above - belonging, peer relationships, relationships with adults and an ethos of compassion – are also relevant to those other social contexts and can affect the ‘climate’ of these environments.

For young people living in group care, their situation is quite different to other young people living with their family. These young people are exposed to peer environments more often as they live with peers and spend their time at school with peers. Therefore, the ‘climate’ of these environments may be especially important. Young people living in group homes are subject to stigma from inside the group home and from outside the group home within schools and in communities. This stigma is usually in relation to how young people in care are expected to behave (i.e., in an antisocial manner) and so they are treated as though they will behave in that way (Wood & Selwyn, 2017; Kools, 1997). This stigma and expectation towards young people in care can create a non-inclusive and harsh environment where they may be excluded and bullied by their peers, putting them at risk of loneliness. But also, if they do not have adults or peers to confide in where they live, they will have no support and no one to share their feelings with. So, creating an environment where young people have inclusive spaces, in school, youth centres, or group homes will be important to allow open conversations, reduce stigma, and to provide support for young people.

2.7 CULTURE AND LONELINESS

A societal factor that is worth considering in more detail is the cultural level. Cultures are complex sets of beliefs and practices that characterize social groups, ranging from neighbourhoods to families and countries. While no culture is homogeneous, cultural values influence what people hear about, what they value, what they aim for, and what is possible, for example, regarding social relationships (Triandis, 1994). Importantly, individuals from different cultures might have different understandings of what loneliness is, they might see loneliness as emerging for different reasons, and culture might affect the ways in which people cope with loneliness (e.g., Ishaku et al., 2018; Rokach et al., 2001).

Research on culture and loneliness has mainly focused on the differences between individualistic and collectivistic countries. For example, in recent work, individuals from individualistic cultures reported higher levels of loneliness than individuals from collectivist countries (Barreto et al., 2020).

The stigma associated with loneliness also differs between countries and cultures. For example, while researchers have documented stigma associated with loneliness in individualistic countries (Kerr & Stanley, 2020), recent research has found that people perceive more stigma towards loneliness in collectivist countries compared to individualistic countries (Barreto et al., 2021). Stigma might make young people reluctant to ask for help when experiencing loneliness, alienating them further (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2018), and making it difficult for them to get the help they need.

Most of the research investigating loneliness among adolescents has been conducted in the US, UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands (all relatively individualistic societies) and cross-cultural explorations of young people's experiences of loneliness are rare. But, as part of our development of the Fit2Belong Guiding Framework, we spoke to young people across five European countries to help fill this gap in the research. Findings from those interviews are presented in Section 2.9 of this report.

Individualistic
societies value
autonomy and self-
reliance

Collectivistic
societies value
interdependence
and connection



2.8 ATTEMPTS TO REDUCE LONELINESS

Attempts to reduce loneliness usually take the form of interventions or are resources that are made available to support improvements in social connection or a reduction in feelings of loneliness.

2.8.1 Interventions for Youth Reporting Loneliness

The interventions aimed at young people that have been studied in the literature have focused on the following aspects:

- Improving social and/or emotional skills
- Enhancing social support
- Psychological therapy
- Learning a new hobby

Improving social/emotional skills and psychological therapy focus on improving factors at the intrapersonal level. They should help young people when it comes to building meaningful relationships. The interviews conducted in this project show that young people feel these can be helpful strategies (see section 2.9.5). Enhancing social support can help young people cope with negative feelings and improve their sense of connection, so it focuses on both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal level. Learning a new hobby can function as a distraction from loneliness, but it can also offer new social opportunities, again operating at the intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

A recent study examined which interventions were most successful at reducing loneliness in young people (Eccles & Qualter, 2020). The authors found that interventions that focused on building both social and emotional skills were most successful at reducing loneliness. However, most of those interventions did not target individuals who were experiencing loneliness, instead targeting people they thought were 'at risk' of loneliness (Eccles & Qualter, 2020). The young people included in the interventions did not have high levels of loneliness (according to the measurements used), but overall loneliness had reduced by the end of the intervention. Therefore, we do not know if these interventions would help individuals who are currently experiencing loneliness. We also do not know whether the social and emotional skills developed during these interventions helped to prevent loneliness from occurring in the future or helped the adolescents cope with future experiences of loneliness.

The interventions that included significant reductions in loneliness for those reporting chronic loneliness included the psychological therapies where there was a consistent positive change following intervention. **This indicates that schools, youth centres, or residential foster centres may need to utilise counselling services for young people experiencing prolonged episodes of loneliness alongside more general loneliness programmes/interventions.** Other successful interventions, evidenced using randomised controlled trial techniques, that have reduced loneliness among young people have focused on (1) building the social and emotional skills of young people to help them manage their negative emotional experiences, including loneliness (Hennessey, Qualter, & Humphrey, 2021), and (2) providing information on support services and centres where loneliness can be addressed and discussed (Lasgaard et al., 2021). **That**

means that providing opportunities to develop the emotional skills needed to manage the negative emotions that accompany loneliness and knowing where to access help when and if needed, are important for improving youth loneliness.



If we think about the characteristics and biases associated with chronic loneliness, those may interfere with how people engage with or benefit from interventions—for example, young people who feel lonely might worry that taking part in an intervention for ‘lonely people’ might make others see something wrong in them, or they might feel anxious during the intervention itself. Thus, it is important to consider whether universal interventions that are focused on all adolescents are the preferred option to focusing the intervention on those who score highest on loneliness. One might also consider the option of having two approaches available at the same time – universal intervention for all, but also special, targeted intervention, for those experiencing chronic levels of loneliness.

In our review, we found only 3 interventions that used technology or were based on online applications.



**3 OUT OF 49
INTERVENTIONS
USED TECHNOLOGY**
(Eccles et al., 2020)

Considering the amount of time young people spend interacting online and using mobile phones (e.g., Scott et al., 2019), this could be a convenient and relevant tool to target loneliness. Technology could also provide a way for young people who do not want to make their loneliness visible to gain help and support that they might need.

It is worth noting that the Eccles and Qualter (2020) study could only examine the interventions that already existed, which meant not all factors identified as important drivers of loneliness have been identified as potential targets for interventions. Attempting to create a toolkit that contains strategies that target the drivers of loneliness at all levels (i.e., intrapersonal, interpersonal, and socioenvironmental; see page for these risk factors) is likely to reach more young people and provide them with a way out of loneliness. Thus, we recommend that all predictors of loneliness are considered in the Guiding Framework.

2.8.2 Online resources

Due to the potential stigma associated with loneliness, with anxiety about joining a physical intervention, a young person may prefer to seek help online. There are vast resources online for people of all ages who may be experiencing loneliness (for example, mind.org, redcross.org, LetsTalkLoneliness.co.uk).

The advice given is similar across charities and websites and is, again, very focused on improving intrapersonal factors. It involves the following:

- Taking small steps to connect to others
- Being kind to yourself/avoid comparing with others
- Trying to open up to those close to you
- Making new connections

- Helping others who may be lonely
- Talking about loneliness with family and friends
- Talking to a professional
- Taking care of your physical health
- Developing positive ways of coping

[Redcross.org.uk](https://www.redcross.org.uk) has activities to help young people develop positive ways of coping including helping them identify what causes them stress and how it affects them, managing worries, figuring out who they can turn to and identifying resources to help them when they are feeling lonely.

These resources aim to help those who are experiencing loneliness. There are also campaigns that attempt to raise awareness of loneliness to try to reduce stigma that is attached to "being lonely". For example, a social action campaign named [#IWILL](#) encourages young people to look out for their peers, ask if they are okay, give them their full attention, and listen to them, avoiding judgement or lecturing. They also try to raise awareness of loneliness by giving young people a way of communicating to others that they feel lonely, by wearing yellow socks (see [this video](#) for more information). It aims to show young people that whilst they may feel lonely, they are not alone.

These campaigns focus on the socioenvironmental level by attempting to make society more understanding and accepting. However, it is not known how effective such campaigns are or have been on stigma towards loneliness.

Online resources could be helpful for young people who do not want to make their loneliness visible to their peers, parents, teachers, or youth workers. Therefore, it would be useful to have somewhere that documents available resources so that young people can access help confidentially. This could be useful for Output 3 of the Fit2Belong project when developing an online service or application.

3. OUR INTERVIEW FINDINGS

3.1 Young peoples' perspectives on loneliness in five European countries

To address gaps in knowledge of cross-cultural perspectives of loneliness, we interviewed 29 young people (14 – 16 years old) about what they thought loneliness is, and how they thought people might cope with it. The young people came from schools and youth centres in Lithuania, Turkey, Serbia, and Poland, and a group of adolescents were from a residential children's home in Portugal. These countries are culturally different from those where most of the previous research on loneliness has been conducted, providing a unique perspective of loneliness in young people, and filling an important gap in the evidence base.

Prior to the interviews, ethical approval from The University of Manchester was sought and gained. This involved developing protocols and documents for the interviews to ensure informed consent was gained from participants, confidential information was stored securely,

that any potential distress would be handled appropriately, and that data collection complied with GDPR. The interviews took place virtually via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were conducted by school counsellors and psychologists already known to the young people. The interviews with Portuguese participants took place face to face within the foster home because it was COVID-19 safe. Each interview was audio recorded using an encrypted recording device.

Thematic framework analysis (TFA; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was used to analyse the interviews. The 7 stages of TFA were followed and involved the following:

1. **Transcription:** Interviews were transcribed in the native language of the participants and then translated using Google translate. The translated transcripts were then checked by a team member of each partnering country for accuracy.
2. **Familiarisation:** Four members of the research team read each transcript multiple times. Each researcher made notes to summarise each transcript and developed a list of potential codes based on the ideas discussed in the transcripts.
3. **Open coding:** The transcripts were split between four researchers who conducted the open coding by assigning labels (known as codes) based on what had been said in response to the interviewer's questions. This led to an initial set of codes for each researcher. These were combined for the whole team and feedback was provided by each team member.
4. **Developing an analytic framework:** The list of initial codes was organised into overriding "categories" and were discussed by the research team until it was clear what each code represented. This became the analytic framework that was trialled three times on randomly selected transcripts. Trialling the framework involved two researchers separately coding two transcripts; those same transcripts were, then, second coded by two different researchers. The coding was compared to highlight any difficulties or inconsistencies in coding and the analytic framework was refined accordingly.
5. **Applying the analytic framework:** The data set was split in half and, using the finalised analytic framework, each half was coded separately by two researchers.
6. **Charting the data into a framework matrix:** The coded data were charted into a framework matrix by the two researchers. Microsoft Excel was used to chart the data; each "sheet" represented a category that was organised by codes and the coded data was inputted underneath each code for each participant.
7. **Interpreting the data:** To interpret the data, themes were developed to provide a narrative about the important issues covered within the data set. Two researchers made drafts of initial themes independently; these were compared and combined, and quotes were chosen to provide evidence for each theme. Additional input was gained from the whole research team and the themes were refined according to this input.

The themes developed from the analysis of the interviews fit with what we already know about the experience of loneliness from research carried out in other countries (see section 2). However, the interviews provide a unique perspective of the causes/contributing factors for loneliness from the young people interviewed. They also provide some insight into potential

stereotypes and stigmas towards people experiencing loneliness from their peers. The key findings are *briefly summarized* below. We have included the information that will be most useful to guide teachers and youth workers in developing activities for alleviating loneliness and that will be relevant to young people. We have *not* included all quotes, nor have we included the gender or age of participants for each quote because this could lead to a breach of confidentiality where teachers are able to identify their students and would violate our ethical approval. The full details and findings of these interviews will be available once published as a scientific paper.

3.2 What is loneliness?

We asked young people how they would define loneliness. The definitions provided were like those in the literature and previous interviews with young people. Students from all countries described loneliness as a negative emotional experience. Some young people also mentioned feelings of anger and frustration when speaking about the experience of loneliness.

When asked how someone experiencing loneliness might feel:



“Alone, sad, misunderstood, not listened to the fullest, as if he has no support for another person, as if something is missing” (P5, Lithuania)



“At first this person has no friends, so he feels frustrated and sad and may start to be afraid because he thinks that no one likes him and has no one to talk to or do day to day things” (P4, Portugal)

Most of the interviewees thought that being alone is distinct from loneliness and not a negative experience if it is voluntary and if they know they have friends there if needed:

“...different definitions completely. Being alone can be a preference. A person may want to be alone when they feel too distressed or stuck/exasperated. Loneliness may not be a choice. They can involuntarily isolate themselves, which may upset them. Being alone is a person’s own choice, so there is a difference” (P1, Turkey)

Some of the adolescents thought loneliness was influenced by different factors:

- Personal experiences of loneliness



for example, I was once feeling lonely, and I couldn't breathe back then. It was hard for me. Such a state when you don't feel like doing anything. Even if you have someone to talk to, someone from your family, you just want to do that. You just feel strange, you don't want to eat, you can't even breathe normally (P4, Poland)

- Media portrayals



Personally, I don't know this feeling, but as far as the books I've read, the many movies I've seen and the many magazine articles there are, the events that lead to those suicides are basically because of loneliness. It seems like there wouldn't even be a meaning to life. (P5, Lithuania)

- Gender stereotypes

I think girls are sometimes a bit more fragile. Girls are more emotional than boys. Boys are more superficial (P1, Turkey)



I think that boys somehow experience it easier, because boys, in my opinion, if I were to ask myself, have a stronger character, and girls can immediately get annoyed or take everything seriously. Boys don't. (P5, Serbia)

However, not all the young people held stereotypical views and there was an awareness of variation between people in how loneliness is experienced.

I think it's different and different not just between boys and girls, but between every person. Everyone understands what it [loneliness] is differently. (P3, Lithuania)

loneliness is loneliness, regardless of gender (P1, Poland)

The literature indicates that loneliness can occur if there is a mismatch between either relationship quality and/or the number of relationships someone has. In the interviews, young people were asked about different scenarios in which someone might feel lonely, and some misconceptions seemed to be present when discussing loneliness in terms of wanting more friends:

“It’s kind of like... not selfish, but somehow... I think it’s enough to have two good friends, who will always be there for you. You don’t have to have many friends [...] I don’t know anyone [experiencing this type of loneliness]. I don’t really hang out with those people” (P2, Serbia).

3.3 What contributes to the experience of loneliness?

Adolescence is a developmental period in which young people’s social expectations are changing and they are starting to develop their identities. Such changes can make young people vulnerable to loneliness. Within the interviews young people spoke about what they thought might cause someone to feel lonely or contribute to someone’s feelings of loneliness. Aspects contributing to loneliness included the following:

- Having no friends
- Not having people who understand them
- Feeling unsupported
- Feeling like they have no one to rely on

“I think loneliness is like having no like-minded people around you and people who understand you. Maybe it’s loneliness when you can’t share, you just have to keep to yourself, and you have nowhere to express your opinion because people don’t really understand, or people care about completely different things.” (P6, Lithuania)

“A person can also feel lonely when he is very different from others or is not respected by society. When you can’t feel belonging to the community. He can feel lonely when he is disconnected from the people he loves.” (P1, Turkey)

“When you don’t have anyone to talk with. You don’t have any people around you. You don’t have anyone to talk about what is hurting you, what is new in your life. And so on. This is loneliness.” (P4, Poland)



Some young people stated that loneliness may be caused by rejection and/or exclusion by peers.

“So people are sometimes excluded because they are ugly and you shouldn't do it. And then people feel lonely” (P3, Portugal)

“For me loneliness means to be abandoned by other people.” (P5, Poland)



“When one person is alienated from others and is afraid to interact with them, and those others simply alienate him.” (P2, Lithuania)

“Well in some situations it happens that even the society doesn't want to have any contact with that person, then that person doesn't want to hang out with anyone anymore [...] they are mostly rejected by society” (P5, Serbia)

“... at school, there is always a grouping and a person is pushed out of the group. He is pushed out because he does not have the same feeling, thoughts, and thus loneliness occurs.” (P1, Turkey)

3.4 Intrapersonal characteristics of someone experiencing loneliness

Young people talked about what someone who is lonely might be like in terms of the way they might behave and the things they might think about. Some young people thought someone experiencing loneliness might be introverted and have difficulty socialising with others.

“Maybe someone lonely may be more timid/shy. After all, if they find a fault with themselves, they act timidly and think about what they should do before going to the root of the fault, so they may be shy and embarrassed. However, if he finds the fault with their environment, they may display more aggressive behaviour” (P4, Turkey)

Some young people thought that people experiencing loneliness might think in certain ways.



3.5 How to help someone experiencing loneliness

The young people interviewed suggested ways in which someone experiencing loneliness could help **themselves** feel better about loneliness and overcome their loneliness. Their suggestions match the foci of existing interventions and online resources for loneliness.

- working on their mindset
- being more open with their peers
- participate in fun distracting activities
- join interest groups to meet people with similar interests
- seek professional help

"As I mentioned, try to find some people who have common interests, or the same common thinking, or similar things. Just try to socialize with them, spend more time. Maybe if you're lonely you could start working on yourself, reading some books and just try to understand that's not the case" (P3, Lithuania)

"We can recommend them a person, such as a psychologist, pedagogue. An expert who can help them and explain some things. How to evaluate their society, how to trust someone, how to behave in certain situations" (P5, Serbia)

At a more socioenvironmental level, the students suggested ways in which adults and young people could help individuals who may be experiencing loneliness. In relation to **adults** (both teachers and parents), it was suggested that they should help by listening to the concerns of young people in a non-judgmental way, being careful not to dismiss their feelings.

"They should not disregard them by thinking they are just an adolescent. They should try to understand him, not judge. They should not be considered silly and childish. For example, they can treat them not necessarily like an adult but as a person of the same age. They can play board games and invite them to drink coffee" (P6, Turkey)

They also suggested that **young people** could look out for their peers and try to include and support those who may not have friends or feel lonely and appear approachable to their peers.

"Every time they see a lonely person, they could greet him, and therefore he would feel a little better because he would see that others care about him and that others notice him, and I guess he won't feel alone anymore" (P6, Serbia)

"First of all, prejudices should definitely be removed. I mean these people come to the world with features they can't choose. Someone can be overweight, and someone may be weak. Such biases need to be removed. Then he/she can be invited to events. They will probably not accept it at the beginning, it might be necessary to use some coercion. He will socialise with some force" (P2, Turkey)

3.6 Barriers to gaining help

Young people spoke about what might prevent someone feeling lonely from receiving help or engaging in the coping strategies suggested. Some individuals indicated that young people might not help their peers because they think it is rude to help those who do not want to be helped or because they do not see it as their responsibility to help.



"It's rude to help someone who doesn't want help" (P3, Turkey)

"...teenagers are very cruel, and I would consider selfish. Clearly not all, but still. Helping others these days, I think, is a feat because I think everyone just thinks about themselves" (P3, Lithuania)

"They don't really care, honestly. That is not their problem, and they are not interested at all. And then they talk about how they are good, better than other people, and so on." (P1, Serbia)

They also indicated that an adolescent might not always feel comfortable talking to adults about their problems, suggesting that consideration should be made in relation to who young people would feel comfortable talking to about loneliness.



"If they are teachers or experts, I don't think it would have much effect because I think that lonely people are more ashamed and uncomfortable when they talk with older people than when they talk to their peers who they have something in common with. And yet, the adult is there to give some advice that is useful, but a lonely person will feel uncomfortable to open up completely" (P1, Serbia)

"Adult people are different and not all adults understand the problems of young people" (P2, Poland)

3.7 Summary of interview findings

We found significant commonality in the young people's experiences and views across countries. The findings from the interviews are the young people's views of loneliness. These views reflect their experiences, but as we do not know whether these young people were *currently* feeling lonely or had *previously* experienced loneliness, their views also reflect their stereotypes and local discourses in relation to loneliness. **These are the key findings from the interviews:**

- Loneliness is a negative emotive experience which is involuntary, and aloneness is distinct from loneliness if it is voluntary, and they know they have friends if/when they need them.
- There are stereotypes about how people of different genders experience loneliness exist. Misunderstandings about loneliness exist, in particularly in relation to wanting more friends.
- Loneliness occurs if young people are not understood, supported, or valued by their peers
- Young people might feel misunderstood, unsupported, and devalued if their peers exclude them
- Certain personal characteristics and behaviours were associated with loneliness including having a negative mindset towards themselves and others, being introverted, and having difficulty communicating with others
- Individuals experiencing loneliness could help themselves feel better by changing their mindset, participating in activities they are interested or by seeking professional help
- Adults should help by listening to young people's concerns in a non-judgmental way and without dismissing their feelings
- Peers can help by being approachable, offering their support, and trying to include others
- Young people might not help others because they do not see them as their responsibility.
- People experiencing loneliness might not ask for help because they are afraid to open up and be vulnerable.
- The person offering help should be considered as some young people might not want to talk to adults about their problems, some might not want to talk to people they know about loneliness

4. THE GUIDING FRAMEWORK

4.1 Guiding Principles

Through our desk research and interviews with young people across different European countries, we developed our core principles that underpinned the final Fit2Belong Core Framework.

PRINCIPLE 1. The consistency of the loneliness experience among youth across Europe. Our interviews with 14–16-year-olds highlighted loneliness as a negative emotional experience. This matches the findings from previous interviews published in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Finland, expanding our understanding of loneliness, showing that it is experienced in a similar way by youth across the world. Also consistent with previous interviews, young people in our interviews indicated that loneliness would occur when they did not have peers around them who had **similar interests** to them, if they felt like they were **not understood by their peers**, if they felt **different to their peers**, and/or if their **peers excluded them**. To expand on what has already been found in previous literature, we asked young people how they might cope with feelings of loneliness. Similar to the adult literature, young people suggested coping strategies such as seeking psychological therapy or new hobbies. However, they also suggested that adults and peers can help by being approachable, supportive, and inclusive.

PRINCIPLE 2. Youth’s capacity to overcome loneliness. Within the literature review we highlighted loneliness as a common experience during adolescence that is unlikely to be preventable. However, loneliness can have a detrimental impact on wellbeing, mental and physical health, and on educational outcomes, especially if it becomes a prolonged experience or if it is an intense experience. **Whether loneliness becomes prolonged or is resolved quickly depends on a young person’s capacity to overcome loneliness.** This capacity is likely reduced when loneliness is prolonged as changes to thought patterns and behaviours occur which undermine the function of loneliness: to motivate reconnection with others. Therefore, it is important that we help young people develop their capacity to overcome loneliness whether this is before loneliness occurs or during their experience of loneliness.

PRINCIPLE 3. Socioeconomic factors predict and mitigate against loneliness. When reviewing the literature for the potential risk factors for loneliness, we found that intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics, such as social and emotion skills, self-esteem, and peer relationships, had been more thoroughly explored compared to socioenvironmental risk factors, such as social climate and cultural differences. Still, the available literature highlighted that social climate and cultural differences are important for understanding loneliness in young people, and that the factors addressed by existing interventions address only a small part of the variation in loneliness experiences. This suggests that **the context in which loneliness occurs is key to understanding varying experiences of loneliness among youth.**

PRINCIPLE 4. Social and emotional skills improve loneliness, but socioeconomic factors, which have been targeted less in interventions, are likely to be effective. Similar to the literature on risk factors, we found that previous attempts to reduce and prevent loneliness has focused on intra- and interpersonal characteristics, mainly social and emotional skills. These interventions produced small reductions in loneliness in young people. Only one intervention that utilised a societal or whole school approach to target loneliness showing that despite its influence on loneliness, socioenvironmental factors are rarely included as the focus of interventions. We argue for the need of loneliness interventions that incorporate a societal or whole school/whole youth centre approach and challenge the current focus on individual characteristics. Approaches to reduce loneliness focusing on the social context that young people live and work in are likely to be especially effective. They should have the capacity to reach more young people as well as reducing the stigma associated with loneliness by increasing awareness and openness. We use evidence for interventions taking a whole school approach to establish a sense of community and prevent prejudice and bullying to guide our recommendations.

Using these guiding principles from our literature review and the interviews with adolescents from different European countries, we have developed a Guiding Framework for use in the development of interventions for youth reporting loneliness in Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project.

4.2 Structure of the Framework

The Framework comprised three dimensions that should be considered by the Fit2Belong team in Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong project. The dimensions are focused on the key areas of consideration for the interventions and constitute the major conclusions of our report.

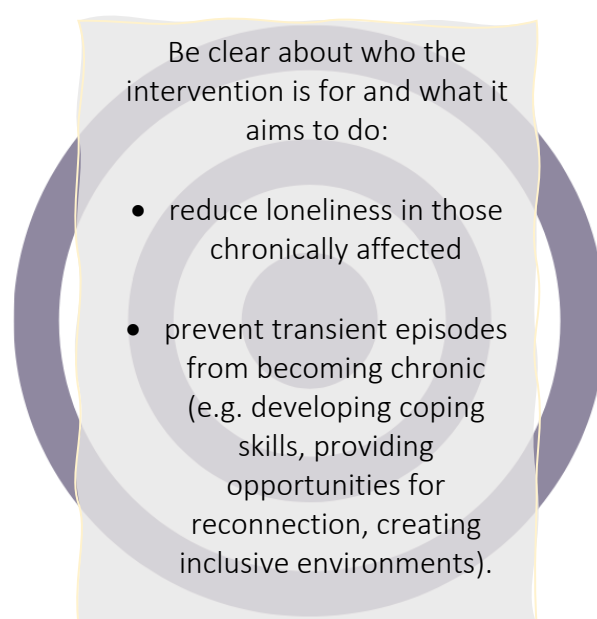
Dimension 1 describes the importance of detailing the rationale and foci for the intervention.

Dimension 2 highlights the need to consider the barriers to intervention success, including stigma attached to loneliness and preconceived ideas about who is likely to report loneliness.

Dimension 3 describes the core ideas about prevention/intervention practices for adolescents reporting loneliness, and how to ensure applicability across different European countries.

4.2.1 Dimension 1: The Importance of Detailing the Rationale and Foci for the Intervention

Loneliness is a common experience during adolescence, so we need to reach and help as many young people as possible. To do this we need to acknowledge that all young people's experiences of loneliness are important and valid whether their experience is transient or prolonged. Because loneliness starts as a transient experience, focusing only on those who have been feeling lonely for a prolonged time will not help those who are not currently feeling lonely, who may experience loneliness later on. Therefore, we need to help young people who are already experiencing prolonged loneliness, but we also need to support young people and help them to develop positive ways of coping with transient loneliness, to prevent loneliness from becoming prolonged (see page 31 for recommendations for the focus of interventions). It is likely that an intervention for young people experiencing chronic loneliness would look different to one targeting transient loneliness, so it is important, when designing interventions, that it is clear who the intervention is designed for, what it targets, and what it aims to do. While existing interventions have been shown to produce some reduction in loneliness, most existing interventions have not been specifically designed to target loneliness or to develop positive ways of coping with loneliness. Focusing on both transient and prolonged loneliness should reach and help more young people.



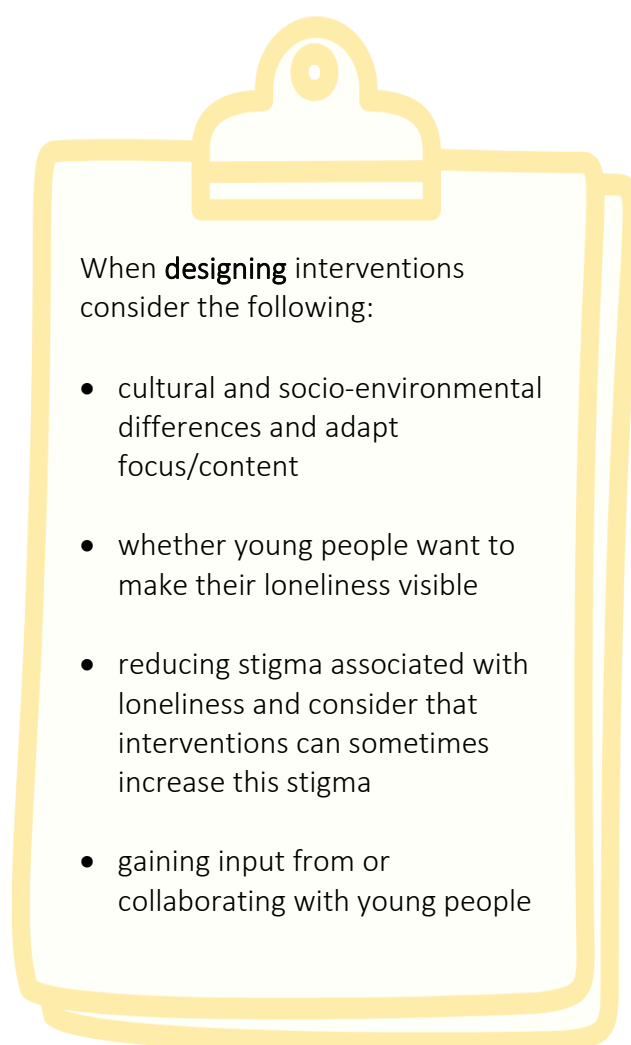
4.2.2 Dimension 2: Consider the Barriers to Engaging with the Intervention

When designing interventions or programmes to help young people cope positively with loneliness, we need to consider factors that might affect their willingness to participate and their experience of the intervention. We have seen (both in the literature and in the interviews with students) that loneliness and certain personal characteristics can put young people at risk of victimisation from their peers. This can affect whether young people want to make their loneliness visible. So, we need to consider whether some young people might prefer to keep their feelings of loneliness 'anonymous'. The use of social media/technology could be considered to bring anonymity to young people who do not want to make their loneliness visible but want to seek social connection and support.

Cultural differences in relation to, but not limited to, stigma, inclusion, and gender stereotypes might also affect whether young people want to make their loneliness visible. So, considering and addressing any cultural and socioenvironmental differences that might affect willingness to participate and programme success is important.

We should also consider how we can reduce stigma and promote a more accepting and inclusive attitude among young people so they feel like they can ask for help when they need to. The interviews with young people highlighted differing perceptions of loneliness based on gender stereotypes and media portrayals. However, it was clear that some young people were aware of how loneliness can vary between people and seemed to have more understanding towards people who may feel lonely. Young people with more understanding attitudes might be key to creating a more accepting and inclusive environment.

We also need to consider how interventions might contribute to stigma. For example, using stigmatising language (e.g., 'lonely person') and focusing solely on individual risk factors brings the assumption the individual is responsible for feeling lonely and end up with young people being labelled as 'lonely'. We want to avoid such situations.



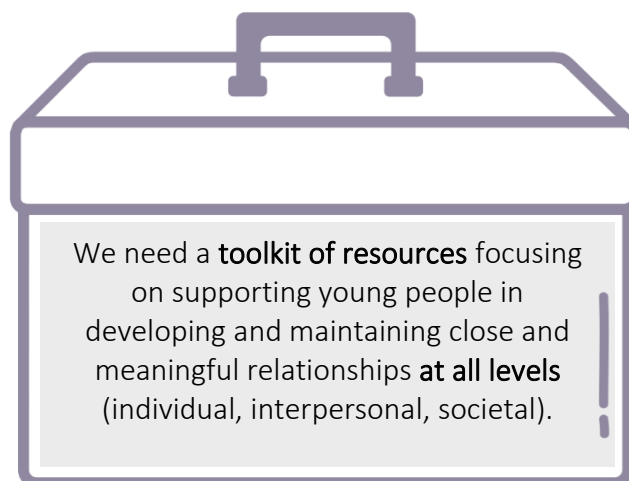
4.2.3 Dimension 3: The Focus of Loneliness Intervention

There are many risk factors for loneliness, ranging from the intrapersonal and interpersonal level to the socioenvironmental level. Interventions that have been evaluated have focused on intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (e.g., social and emotional skills) to attempt to alleviate loneliness and have shown some success. However, the focus on individual characteristics of the person reporting loneliness contributes to stigma and does not address potential socioenvironmental contributors to loneliness. There seems to be very few interventions that incorporate socioenvironmental aspects (e.g., whole school interventions, changes to school ethos and/or classroom environments), but they are likely to be successful given the descriptions of the social environment by the young people interviewed. Therefore, further consideration is needed to socioenvironmental influences on loneliness and belonging.

We argue that there is a small set of core ideas that should be applied to interventions for young people reporting loneliness. Specifically, a core idea for consideration for a loneliness intervention should do the following:

1. Be of broad importance for those reporting loneliness, having been reported in either academic literature or by young people themselves.
2. Provide a key tool for helping young people understand or manage their loneliness
3. Relate to the interests and life experiences of adolescents
4. Be teachable and learnable over multiple grades at increasing levels of depth and sophistication. That is, the idea can be made accessible to younger adolescents, but is broad enough to sustain continued exploration over the adolescent years.

Given the fact that different factors are related to loneliness, we believe we need to build a Toolkit of resources that (1) supports young people in developing and maintaining close and meaningful relationships, (2) promotes belongingness and integrates them into their wider community of their peers and school, and (3) helps them manage the negative emotions that come with episodes of loneliness. So, the toolkit would need tools that address loneliness at the intra-, inter-personal level (which existing interventions have focused on), but also at a socio-environmental level.



In Phase 2 of the Fit2Belong project, the development of activities and strategies to reduce loneliness and improve belongingness should attempt to cover the following areas:

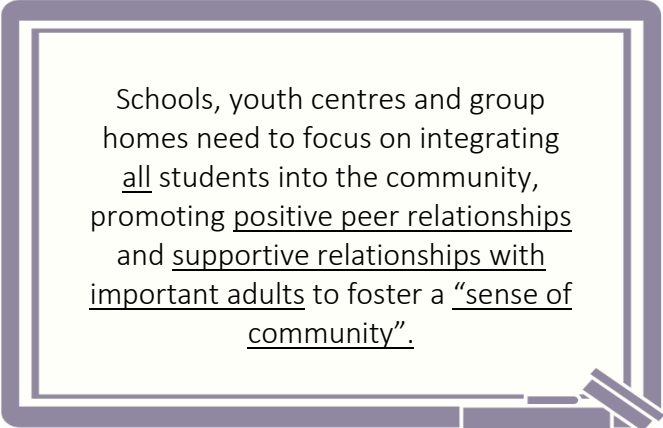
Intrapersonal/Interpersonal	Socioenvironmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make young people aware of distorted views they may have • Support young people in overcoming distorted views (e.g., Class based group CBT or even through an app) • Increase presence of factors shown to protect against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

Given the current gaps in the evidence base, we need more interventions that are community-based, which means they are structural and integrated in daily living. In Phase 2 of the Fit2Belong project, teachers, and youth workers should consider and discuss how they can incorporate such recommendations into their work.

4.3 Role of schools, residential group homes, and youth centres

Adolescents spend a substantial amount of time at school and so schools are key settings for building social and emotional skills and fostering a sense of connectedness with their peers, school, and beyond. While there is little research evaluating the impact of whole school interventions on loneliness and belonging, social and emotional learning approaches that are integrated into daily practice and school climate in the classroom and outside of the classroom (e.g., in the hallways and playgrounds) produce the most successful outcomes on social and emotional development (Goldberg et al., 2019; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Focusing on integrating all pupils into the school community through positive student-teacher relationships and by encouraging peers to support and look out for one another regardless of friendship circles may improve the school climate and young people's sense of belonging. Schools and teachers should also attempt to promote belongingness in all activities (a belongingness check) rather than hoping for it as a side effect or automatic effect of bringing young people together. There may be activities or teaching practices already being utilised in schools that promote belongingness between students and so consideration by schools and teachers needs to be taken. For example, collaborative learning has been found to aid social and emotional learning and could promote positive peer relationships as the students work together and learn from one another (Laal & Laal, 2012). Another possibility could be to create an environment where we have inclusive spaces that allow young people to have conversations in which they can share their feelings or worries without judgement. This is not limited to school environments, because this concept can also be utilised in youth centres and group homes. To derive the best way to incorporate this would be to gain insight and preferences from young people to understand what they want and need out of a support system like this.



Schools, youth centres and group homes need to focus on integrating all students into the community, promoting positive peer relationships and supportive relationships with important adults to foster a "sense of community".

It should be noted that there is little research focusing on alleviating or preventing loneliness in young people at this community/ethos level, and so our recommendations do not come from the literature on loneliness in young people, rather they come from gaps in the loneliness literature and evidence from work on social and emotional learning.

4.4 Recommendations for Using the Fit2Belong Guiding Framework

The use of The Fit2Belong Guiding Framework in Phases 2 and 3 of the Fit2Belong should follow these principles:

- **Co-production** of materials by bringing together expert knowledge from teachers, youth workers, carers in children's homes, and youth. Such an approach increases the likelihood

that the developed materials will meet the needs of the community, are relevant to real-world contexts, and can be scaled up when appropriate.

- **Precision** in the development of materials. This involves having a clear understanding of what each session of a program entails, what it targets, and what the ultimate goals are. An example activity planning sheet used in the Fit2Belong project can be found in *Appendix A*.
- **Shared Learning** across the partners involved in the project, with clear communication of those ideas to others wishing to work with youth reporting loneliness. To help facilitate cross-project learning, Fit2Belong will centralize information in a shared repository, allowing for careful monitoring of session materials and then, their trial across different contexts. Learning from failure as well as success is an essential and valued aspect of Shared Learning. Discussion of how the resources work across contexts and across countries is important for understanding whether the interventions can be scaled up in the future.

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APPENDIX A: ACTIVITY PLANNING SHEET

Title

1. Author(s)

(Who created this entry and is responsible for maintaining its information? Please add name(s), institution(s) and e-mail address(es) as far as available.)

2. Date of last version

(Date)

3. Theme

(Is there a special theme related to this activity? E.g., Christmas, holidays, animals...)

4. Aim/objective

(Is there one or more concrete aim or objective connected to this activity?)

5. What is the activity?

(Write a very short description of the activity, tool, intervention, material... – max 5 lines)

6. Are there any specific concrete objectives for acquiring learning or for attitudinal changes?

(Write a very short description of the learning or change objective that you hope to see or that you expect from the activity – max 5 lines)

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7. Who is this for?

(Write a very short description of the target audience, the participants or users... this is aimed at, what is their age, special interests, how many persons can participate, minimally? Maximally? Are teachers, trainers, supervisors, guides needed? ... – max 5 lines)

8. How is the activity, tool, intervention, material ... organised?

(Write a very short description of how the users, participants ... will be using the event, activity, tool, materials, will this be individually, in group, in the classroom, in school, at home, outside school, supervised or unsupervised, is it part of a formal classroom or lesson activity, is it extracurricular, is it compulsory or free to join, what are the specific roles of the different participants, etc ... – max 5 lines)

9. Who will make it happen?

(Write a very short description of who will make this possible, who will organise it or facilitate it – max 5 lines)

10. What does the organiser, support person or facilitator need to do?

(Write a very short description of what the organiser(s), facilitator(s), designer(s) need to do to organise it or facilitate it – max 5 lines)

11. When do you best use the activity, tool, intervention, material?

(Write a very short description of what is the best moment to use this or to organise it or facilitate it, Is it time dependent? – max 5 lines)

12. How much time do you need for this activity?

(Write a very short description of the timeline for the activity or event from idea and first preparation to closure and post-evaluation, describe the duration of the event or activity itself... – max 5 lines)

13. How long is the activity itself?

(Can you indicate a duration – only if applicable)

14. What do you need to carry out this activity successfully?

(Write a detailed description of the materials both physical and virtual that are needed for the activity or event, what hardware or tools are needed? Do you need software or online services? Do you need materials to create something during the activity itself?)

15. Are there any specific conditions with regard to the participation in this activity?

(Do you need special permissions? From the participants? From parents? From the school? Are there ethical issues? Are there privacy issues? Are there security or safety precautions to take? Are there financial issues? Are there issues about supervision? Age issues? ... – max 5 lines)

16. Do you have a detailed scenario, running order, plan, timeline, step by step guide on how to carry out the activity?

(Write here your detailed step by step guide on how to run the activity. If you have a separate document with the activity description, please attach it as an annex to this document.)

17. Have you carried out the activity described here?

(Write here your experiences. Write here the reactions of the participants, organisers, and support people. What are your recommendations for others who want to implement this?)

18. Did you do a formal evaluation?

(Did you do a formal evaluation? Which are the evaluation criteria used? Write here what and how you evaluated and what the results are if you did not describe them above. What were the conclusions of the evaluation? If you have a separate document with the evaluation description, please attach it as an annex to this document.)

19. Did the activity have the impact you expected?

(Check the objectives in question number 4: what impact did you expect or desire? Did that impact come true? Why do you think it did or did not? ...)

20. Media documentation

(Please add photographs, videos and other artefacts that resulted from the activity as annexes to this document or provide here the download links where they can be found on a cloud storage of your choice. Please make sure that you have the permission of all people who appear on screen for their appearance.)

21. What is the relevance of the research outcomes for this activity? Select all recommendations that apply to this activity:

1	<i>Make young people aware of distorted views they may have</i>	
2	<i>Support young people in overcoming distorted views</i>	
3	<i>Increase presence of factors shown to be protective against chronic loneliness (self-efficacy, competence, self-esteem)</i>	
4	<i>Enhance social and emotional skills and confidence in skills</i>	
5	<i>Educate young people about the effects of rejection, exclusion and victimisation</i>	
6	<i>Promote an inclusive attitude among peers</i>	
7	<i>Support youth in developing and maintaining close and meaningful friendships</i>	
8	<i>Provide young people with the opportunity to gain connections, make friends, and maintain friendships</i>	
9	<i>Promote a supportive and inclusive school ethos</i>	
10	<i>Promote positive student-teacher relationships</i>	
11	<i>Encourage supportive peer experiences in schools</i>	
12	<i>Explore the use of social media in a school environment</i>	
13	<i>Educate young people about the effects of cyberbullying</i>	
14	<i>Explore cultural differences in loneliness and social relationships</i>	
15	<i>Take into account differences and adapt focus/content</i>	
16	<i>Explore whether young people want to make their loneliness visible</i>	
17	<i>Explore with young people how to reduce stigma</i>	
<i>(Write here your comments and/or additional thoughts if any...)</i>		



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



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