Understanding Social Isolation: Theory, Research, and Intervention

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Study of Social Isolation: What is it?

What is social isolation?

- Social isolation involves physical separation from others

- State vs. Trait

- Isolation ≠ Loneliness

Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker (2009); Valtorta & Hanratty (2012)
Study of Social Isolation: Causes

Isolation by others

Isolation by the self
Study of Social Isolation: Development

Childhood and Adolescence

Adulthood
Social isolation affects nearly 1 in 5 older adults.

Learn more about staying connected.
Example Study: Alcaraz et al., 2019

Social isolation is a bigger problem than you may know.

Nearly 1 in 5 adults over age 50 is at risk of social isolation.

Subjective feelings of loneliness can increase risk of death from 26% to 45%.

The health risks of prolonged isolation are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.
Study of Social Isolation: Causes

Isolation by others

Isolation by the self
Social Isolation by *Others*

13. Someone who is left out of group activities.


21. Someone who is hit or kicked by others.

26. Someone who is very shy.
Social Isolation by *Others*

- academic difficulties
- internalizing problems
- externalizing problems
- physical health difficulties
- social problems

Peer victimization
- repeated peer abuse
Study of Social Isolation: Causes

Isolation by *others*

Isolation by the *self*
Social Isolation by the *Self*

Social withdrawal refers to the behavioral tendency to remove oneself from familiar and unfamiliar peers (Bowker, 2020; Rubin et al., 2009).

- due to fears and anxiety
- temperamentally-based
- relatively stable over time
Social Withdrawal Risks

Child and adolescent social withdrawal is associated with:

- depressive symptoms
- anxiety
- loneliness
- negative self-perceptions
- internal blame tendencies
- academic difficulties
- social isolation by others

e.g., Caspi et al., 1988; Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2009; Coplan et al., 2009; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Gazelle & Rudolph, 2004; Markovic & Bowker, 2017
Spending too much time physically separated from others, for whatever reason, confers significant risk (Rubin, 1988; Rubin et al., 2009)
Why? Theory

• Miss out on important opportunities for the development of social-cognitive and social skills (Piaget, 1932; Rubin et al., 2009)

• Social needs for acceptance, intimacy, and belonging may not be met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sullivan, 1953)
Intervention

Isolation by *Others*
- social skills training
  (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996; Bierman & Furman, 1984; Ladd, 1981; Lochman et al., 1993)
- anti-bullying programming (e.g., KiVa; Salmivalli et al., 2009; Salmivalli et al., 2011)

Isolation by *Self*
- parent intervention
  (e.g., “Cool Little Kids”: Rapee et al., 2010; “Turtle” program: Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2015)
Influence of Parents

Toddler: Behaviorally inhibited

Parent: Overprotective, Not encouraging of independence, Intrusive

Preschooler: Socially anxious and reticent in the company of peers

Kennedy et al., 2004; Rubin et al., 2001; Rubin et al., 2002
"... emergency pager, air bag, ABS, running lights, horn, helmet, pads, cup, seat harness, roll bar, mouth guard. Okay, now go have a good time!"
Study of Social Isolation: COVID-19?

Isolation by others

Isolation by the self

Isolation by the *self*
Risks of Social Isolation during COVID-19

- COVID-19 isolation is causing psychological distress, especially for those with pre-existing mental health difficulties (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Courtet et al., 2020).
- Focus on social, but not physical, connections with friends (e.g., Bagwell, Newcomb & Bukowski, 1998; Gest, Graham, Berman & Hartup, 2001; Markovic & Bowker, 2017).
Thank you!

Any questions?
Development of Social Withdrawal

Infancy  Toddlerhood  Preschool  Childhood, Adolescence, and Young Adulthood

Fox et al., 2001; Bowker, 2020; Henderson, Fox, & Rubin, 2001; Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009