



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Feeling connection and belonging outside our families

Social connection

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for finding and sustaining threads of connection.

What does connection and belonging outside of family look like?

Beyond our immediate family we form connections to other people, communities, places, cultures and things. It could be with extended family, friends or neighbours. It might be with people in school communities, workplaces, interest groups, faith groups, support groups, or a friendly interaction in the grocery store. Or we may find connection with Country, nature, spirituality or social movements.

Moments of connection don't always need to be a big deal or cost money. Sometimes they can grow into longstanding relationships of care – of giving and receiving.

Definition of 'parent'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

What difference can connection and belonging make?

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A sapling tree that's pushed around by the wind all the time can find it hard to grow – but a tree with strong connections can withstand the winds, spread out its branches, be part of the forest, and provide shelter.

EMI, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY

Connecting beyond our families can add to our support networks and create a sense of belonging in the world around us. And it can provide a safe haven when connection and safety within might not be possible.

Like the tree, connection can help children and families feel they have solid ground to stand on during tough times when it might otherwise feel like things are constantly shifting. Having a sense of steadiness helps with the decision making necessary to get through difficulties.

Connection can also open up possibilities for practical support like sharing meals, babysitting or passing on clothes or toys that children have outgrown.

All these things can help us in tough times and when we're really struggling to parent.



AMELIA, 10 YEARS OLD

What can get in the way of connecting outside of family?

The families we talked to generously shared their stories and ideas for finding and sustaining threads of connection and a sense of belonging outside of our family. They also told us about some of the things that can get in the way...

Anxiety, shame, stigma and worry

Anxiety, shame, stigma and feelings of unworthiness can make it hard to reach out, especially when we've had experiences of rejection, violence, exclusion and discrimination. It can feel a lot harder to make new connections when we're feeling down, even though that's often when we need it most.

Poverty and financial stress

Financial barriers can be big. Many people might want to connect by going for coffee. It can feel embarrassing to say, 'I'm going to sit and watch you drink a coffee because I can't afford it,' or 'I can't meet you there because I can't afford petrol.'

Being apart

Location can isolate us too. Living away from family, in a rural and remote area, or in places with limited public transport can mean we have fewer opportunities for connection or support.

Communication styles

Many of us communicate differently than is expected of us because of disability, language barriers, culture or not having had access to education. When others don't make the effort to adjust their expectations or ways of communicating, it can make it harder to connect.

Mobility and access

Getting out of the home can be a lot harder if we're carers or are dependent on others for mobility. And for some bodies, we can't always guarantee that we'll be able to get in the building or have somewhere we can safely use the toilet.

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When I was in a difficult time, I had been in violence and difficult situations. So I couldn't trust people. I couldn't trust my old friends even because they were in contact with my ex. I was trying to keep myself safe. I couldn't trust police. I couldn't trust doctors, I keep having this fear of 'If I say something and they find out that I'm a bad mother – they might take my own child away from me.'

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For me, spirituality was very helpful. And connection with nature. I would put my child in the pram, cover the pram and go out for a walk, no matter rain, sun, cold – just walk. Sometimes I pray, I cry. When I got back home, I was like empty, clear, I could breathe, I could eat. I could look after my baby. Later I joined a mother’s group. I built that trust little by little. Now I have a lot of friends, I know a lot of people.

M, KAURNA COUNTRY

Families can be up against a lot, but no matter the circumstances, we try, we reach out. In big, small and sometimes unseen ways. And we hope our stories and ideas might spark something that helps you in some way.

There’s no ‘right’ way of connecting

There are lots of ideas and opinions around what connection should look like or what’s a ‘real’ connection and it can be difficult when your idea of connection is different to these. Instead of concentrating on what connection means for others, just do what works well and feels safe for you.

Take a moment



Before you read on, take a moment to think about...

- What are you and your children already doing to build connection outside your family, despite difficulties you might be facing?
- Why is it important to you to build connection with people and things outside of family?
- Who or what are the things that support you with sustaining these connections when times are tough?

Ideas for building connection and belonging outside our families

So how can you build and sustain connections outside your family? Let’s hear from some of the families we worked with to create this resource about what helped them with creating and sustaining connection beyond their families.

Calling on extended family

‘Our extended family, so for us it’s grandparents, are challenging in lots of ways. But luckily they do care for the kids, and they have their own relationships with the kids. Relationships that are different but still special. So even though they can be hard work, I try to keep those connections. Then when times are tough, if I ask, they might be able to help, and if I am struggling, those small moments of connection between grandparent and child can be important.

‘Many of us don’t have strong relationships with our extended families though ... our relationships might be fractured, unsafe, or we might be separated by distance. For some of us, finding a chosen family has helped us get through.’

Finding a chosen family

‘For some of us, family is biological. But there are all kinds of families and family doesn’t have to be blood. It can be the people you choose or those that play a really significant role in your life, maybe people who’ve been there when you’ve gone through tough times. You care about them, they care about you. You know, if you have a disagreement, it’s not going to be the end of the world. We’re talking about our people, our team, our crew. The people we have a deep bond with. Those we want to stay connected to, through storms and times of smooth sailing.’

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You need to create your own family. They won’t necessarily be blood. They’ll be the people who love and support you no matter what.

YOUTH GROUP PARTICIPANT,
SOUTHEAST QUEENSLAND, IN *THIS PLACE I CALL HOME*¹

Swapping babysitting

‘When my kids were very little, there was a friend of mine who I met at a mother’s group. We each had our own kind of problems, and we couldn’t help each other with our problems. Hers was financial difficulties and mine was my own personal demons. So we started swapping babysitting and that was how we helped each other. And my young daughter started calling her mum because she couldn’t say her name, so I realised my daughter felt safe with this woman. It made a big difference.’

Letting go if it’s not working

‘Connection is an effort of two or more people. Sometimes you have to keep trying, you never know when it’s gonna work – you could send flowers, a letter, a nice hot meal. But sometimes it’s not possible. If you’ve tried and tried and it’s not working, sometimes it can be important to go, “OK, I’m here if you want to reconnect, but for now I can’t do anything more.” Or to let go as well. You shouldn’t feel obligated to stay connected if you’re not feeling comfortable.’

Supporting children’s social connections

Showing care to our children in tough times is important. But their social connections outside the family are important too, and it can be hard to witness our children struggling with this. Read about how you can help your children with this in [Supporting children’s social connections in tough times](#).

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One time my friend copied my schoolwork and the teacher was proud of her for getting everything right, but she had copied me! Another time she ran away from me without saying why. It made me feel angry. We stay friends because we have been in the same class since reception, and we talk about funny stuff and random stuff. Then we are happy playing with each other, but sometimes I still feel a bit cross with her. But we are still friends because we just really like each other, I don’t know why.

MADI, 8 YEARS OLD, PERAMANGK AND KAURNA COUNTRY

Visiting shared safe public spaces

‘Libraries were a place of connection that was very important for us all throughout when the children were young and when we were homeless. Each new place we went to, we would always find the local library as well. We didn’t always make connections with other people, but it helped to be in that shared public space around other people. Also for that love of books.’

Another perspective on safe public spaces...

‘When I was drinking a lot, I would go into a free community lunch place and connect with other people. My kids had the time of their lives, they had so much fun and met so many different community members. They could run around to everyone’s table and be safe. People talked to them, they got free colouring books. It was actually a beautiful moment for them.’

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What’s good is the community connection where you can walk up and down the street and say ‘hi’ to everyone. But you can’t get away with anything in a small town. If someone sees you do anything, they go and tell your parents.

SECONDARY STUDENT, CENTRAL QUEENSLAND, IN *THIS PLACE I CALL HOME*¹

Finding an interest group

‘My 18-year-old was looking for something to do and found a group that runs an anime club at the library. They go there every Friday afternoon and they meet, watch anime and have a discussion about it. If they want to, they go out for dinner afterwards. It’s really nice for him because he’s got social anxiety. So finding that connection with people that have something in common is great. I think having that external structure helps if you’ve got anxiety or fear or worry about connection – it’s a purpose for meeting. So connection is not the purpose. The connection kind of sneaks in the back door in a way.’

Getting creative

‘Art can create a space for connection. You are creating something out of nothing. So in terms of trauma or all the things that make connection difficult, it kind of creates a space of healing and safety. You are birthing something from nothing. And when you’re doing that with other people something intangible happens.’

‘At our local Vinnies’s hub they do art classes for little kids – they make like little fairy houses or they do paintings for Mother’s Day. So they’re making friends and the parents are making friends and they’re making those connections and it’s all done through art.’

Celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

‘We love attending free local Aboriginal community events as a family to learn about and celebrate the rich history and cultural traditions from the land that we live on. As well as being fun and educational for our kids, I feel that we are taking part in the process of reconciliation and forming important connections that enrich our life and give us a strong sense of belonging.’

Connecting with the help of support workers

‘My teenage son said friends, extended family and support workers were important to him. Because he doesn’t have a lot of communication outside of the home, the support workers are giving him that ability to go out and connect in the community, to go to the shops or interact with staff at the stores. They go out and do stuff together. They are part of his world now.’

Reaching out to neighbours

‘I’m in community housing, so that means I am spread amongst non-community housing. There is a real mix of people. My family landed here hard after leaving DV (domestic violence). There was a lot of fear in our family.

‘We have a couple of tricky neighbours, and two in particular spent a lot of time fighting. A friend of mine suggested doing a community BBQ. I decided to do it. I designed flyers and printed them out. I said I would provide food, but people could bring a plate to share, and that it would be alcohol free. I was going to put the flyers in letterboxes, but I decided to knock on doors. I felt able to do that, but not everyone would feel

that way, letterboxes would be just fine. I did my whole street. I had quite a few people say they’d like to come.

‘When I was organising it I spoke to my community housing provider and they were super happy and offered to help fund it. They lent me a BBQ and a gazebo and gave me a gift card for the supermarket, so it cost me nothing. My kids weren’t actively involved in it much, but they were there. On the day I set it up on my front lawn – it was important it wasn’t in my house so we felt safe.

‘I think one or two people came! If you looked at the numbers you would say it was an absolute flop. But it wasn’t. Lots of people drove past and said sorry they couldn’t make it, or tooted their horns. Aside from that, there was a ripple effect. So much of the time we want an immediate outcome, but some things happen slowly, and this was an example of that. Stepping out and welcoming people helped to break down barriers.

‘Since then, over the past three years, my two warring neighbours, instead of yelling at each other, have been laughing with each other. And for my children who had been in trauma, what the BBQ did was that it normalised our neighbours – it brought them into our sphere of belonging. Instead of our neighbours being separate to us, it brought down barriers and helped my kids feel a part of our neighbourhood. It helped me as well – it took an opening of my heart to my neighbours, and just by doing that it brought down some barriers that I had put up out of fear.’

Being friendly to strangers

‘In coffee shops where you get your free coffee after buying five coffees, we’ve always given that coffee away to the next customer that comes up as a gesture. It’s free anyway. So we are not missing out on anything. In a lot of cases, the people that have got that, it’s just made their day.’

“

I like to volunteer at the op shop because it makes me feel happy to do work and they tell me how good I am.

KEELY, YOUNG PERSON LIVING WITH DISABILITY, WURUNDJERI COUNTRY

Volunteering

'I was thinking about volunteering and the rhododendron garden came up on my news feed. I didn't really want to volunteer for Vinnies or something like that, but the rhododendron garden – it was connecting with nature. And you meet people from all over the world and it's never the same, every day is different because of the ways the trees and flowers bloom. So I thought, why not? It's getting me back out into my local community and allowing me to make more connections.'

Speaking up

In many cases the services and spaces that might make us feel safe and able to connect are not available. If you can, you might want to contact your local MP or council to let them know about the barriers you are up against and what kinds of things might make a difference.

You can , or type 'who is my state MP' into Google and follow this guide on how to write a letter to your MP.

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Community is a place where you live. Where you learn from your family and the people around you. It is a place we can be safe and happy and have fun. It is a place where you build your home and where you can have a good life.

PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT, FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND, IN *THIS PLACE I CALL HOME*¹

Keep connecting

Connection can take persistence and courage. It can be a process, taking many months to build a solid connection. And you need to keep showing up. It's a good idea to start small, with a relationship that doesn't need too much effort. Nurture the threads that exist and remember there's no right way of doing it.

Abuse, violence and unsafety

Sometimes we might make new connections that are unsafe or become unsafe. There are some signs to look out for, such as if people start to:

- embarrass or put you down

- act in ways that scare you or make you uncomfortable
- try to control you or keep you isolated
- intimidate or hurt you (physically, emotionally or sexually)
- tell you that you are a bad parent or threaten to harm your children; or
- blame you for their behaviour, or act like it's not really happening.

The Say It Loud website has some more information about [warning signs of unsafe behaviours](#) to look out for.

Resources to help with building connection and belonging beyond family

Online resources

- Try searching online, or ask your local council or library for information on community groups and activities that are relevant to your interests or experience.
- Take a look at [Building support networks](#).
- Social media can be a source of social connection, but it can also be harmful. Check out our ideas for using social media for social connection.
- Read [Are you feeling lonely? Here are steps you can take](#), an article from the ABC with some tips for connection.
- The [Ending Loneliness Directory](#) is a search tool to help people find connection online or in their local communities.
- Raising Children Network has tips for parents to help with [children](#) and [teens](#) feel more connected in their communities.
- The Program for Early Parental Support (PEPS) offers some ideas for [creating a village](#) which families might like to use as inspiration for creating connection in their own lives.

Peer support groups

A peer support group is several similarly experienced people who get together (face-to-face or online) to support each other. You can search online for peer groups with a focus on [disability](#), [carers](#), mental health and more.

Playgroups

- Playgroups can be a great source of connection for families and children from birth to age five years – [find your nearest playgroup](#).
- A variety of supports, including remote supported playgroups, are offered by the [Isolated Children's Parents' Association](#).

Community activities and volunteering

- Children can benefit from [being involved in community activities and volunteering](#), and so can [young people with disabilities, autism or other additional needs](#).
- Find a volunteer role that suits your interests, motivation, availability and location on [GoVolunteer](#).

LGBTQIA+ families

- QLife provides [anonymous, LGBTQIA+ peer support](#) for people wanting to talk about a range of issues including sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.
- Minus18 have an article for young people about [how to make queer friends](#), which includes a link to their closed Facebook group.
- For information, local state-based chapters and closed Facebook groups for parents of transgender and gender diverse children check out [Transcend](#) and [Parents of Gender Diverse Children](#). Or search for your local rainbow families group on Facebook.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families

- The Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) might be able to link you with [local organisations that support relationships for young people](#).
- For personal stories, multilingual information, and links to community organisations that might help with connection and support see [Embrace Multicultural Mental Health](#).

More connection and belonging resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#)
- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#)
- [Skills for connecting through social media](#)
- [When we're really struggling to parent](#)
- [Why are connection and belonging important?](#)
- [Songs for connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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References

1. Queensland Family and Child Commission. (2018). [This place I call home: The views of children and young people on growing up in Queensland](#). Brisbane City East: Queensland Government.