

THE LONELINESS PARADOX

Real and *Not Real*

They have a thousand friends and nowhere to land. What a generation raised inside the feed can teach us about the difference between being connected and actually belonging.

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Ask a thirteen-year-old whether her friendships are real, and you might expect a yes. What you actually get is more honest, and more unsettling. When researchers put a version of that question to a room full of middle-schoolers, nearly three out of four gave the same answer: their connections were *both real and not real*. Not real. Not fake. Both, at the same time, all the time.

Sit with that for a second. An entire generation has grown so fluent in a certain kind of relationship that they have a phrase for its strangeness. They can be close to someone and unsure of them in the same breath. They can feel seen and suspect the whole thing is a performance. They have learned to live inside an ambiguity most adults would find exhausting — because for them, it isn't unusual. It's just Tuesday.

I've spent years thinking about why a generation more connected than any in human history is also, by every measure we have, among the loneliest. The easy answer blames the phones. The truer answer is about something quieter and harder to legislate. I've come to call it **brittle connection**: relationships, identities, systems, and social bonds that appear strong on the surface but lack the depth, resilience, reciprocity, and developmental supports necessary to withstand adversity, disagreement, change, or stress. Bonds that look sturdy from the outside but can't actually hold weight. They have the shape of closeness without the substance of it. And no one lives closer to that fault line than the young.



THE SURFACE

Where the friendships are

Here's what gets lost when adults panic about screens: for these kids, the feed is where friendship actually lives. It isn't a distraction from their real social world. It is their social world, and a lot of what happens there is good.

They told us so, plainly. One seventh-grader explained why the apps matter:

"if your friends move away, and you don't got their number, like you can search up their name on any type of social media and find them."

— Seventh-grade student

Another put the appeal of it even more simply: *"you can meet and stay in touch with people who have the same vibe as you."* They find their people. They make things. They learn. One eighth-grader lit up describing a small, ordinary triumph — the kind of moment that, a generation ago, might have happened at a piano recital instead of a phone screen:

"One time, I learned a new song on my keyboard and posted about it. So many people liked it. It was a good feeling. I did the same for other musicians to let them know they did good."

— Eighth-grade student

That is belonging. Real encouragement, real creativity, a real circle of people cheering each other on. If that were the whole story, we could all relax. But it isn't the whole story. It's only the surface — and the thing about a brittle surface is how little it takes to crack.



THE CRACK

And where the cruelty is

The same place that holds their friendships also holds something meaner, and it arrives without warning, often in the comments under the very posts where they were trying to be brave. The kids don't sugarcoat it. When we asked how big a problem online bullying really is, the answers came back in capital letters.

It's a BIG problem. It's the biggest problem out there.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL SURVEY RESPONSES

Nearly nine in ten said it was a problem. And when they described it, you could hear how casually the cruelty lands — how it sits right next to the fun, indistinguishable until it isn't:

"Like there will be kids on the apps just dancing for fun and someone say you cringy... Or someone will go to the comments and be like 'look at her ugly self.' People can be mean on there."

— Focus-group participants

This is the heart of what makes the connection brittle. It isn't that the online world is all bad. It's that the good and the bad share the same address. The applause and the contempt come through the same channel, on the same screen, in the same scroll. A kid posts herself dancing for joy and gets called ugly by a stranger before dinner. Belonging and exposure, bundled together, impossible to separate. You can't take the one without risking the other.

No wonder they've developed a sixth sense for fakeness. One sixth-grader defined it for us without missing a beat — *"they post stuff that's not true, or they do stuff that's not how they really act"* — and described the low-grade vigilance it takes just to be online:

"I try to get to know people that like the things I do. You can't trust the information online — sometimes it's not right and sometimes it's to cause problems. Most of the pictures are fake, but it's sometimes cool to see different looks and things."

— Sixth-grade student, age 12

Read that again and notice how tired it sounds. At twelve. That's the tax of brittle connection — the constant, quiet work of figuring out what's solid and what will give way the moment you lean on it.



THE COST

Everyone wants to be a celebrity

There's a particular kind of weariness that comes from relationships built on performance instead of presence — where the currency is approval, not intimacy. The kids feel it even when they can't quite name it. We asked how their online connections made them feel. One answer cut straight through:

Tired. Everyone wants to be a celebrity.

MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENT

That's a child describing the emotional economy of a place where being liked has become a job. The likes feel good — genuinely good, as that young keyboard player told us. But a connection that runs on being liked is running on the thinnest possible fuel. It can deliver a hit of belonging and leave you lonelier than before. Validation isn't intimacy. It just rhymes with it.

And here's the part that should stop us cold. The people who are supposed to anchor these kids — us, the adults — often can't see enough to help. The young people know it. They said it with a clarity that lands like a verdict:

"They are doing what they can, but they won't know until we tell them something is wrong. They don't see everything we do."

— Middle-school survey respondent

That's not a complaint about bad parents. Most of these kids have adults who love them. It's a description of a gap — a thinning of the one bond that's supposed to be the sturdiest of all. When the tie to a trusted grown-up depends entirely on a kid deciding to speak up, in a world moving faster than any adult can track, that tie has gone brittle too.



THE TURN

What they actually want

If you've read this far expecting the part where I tell you to ban the apps, here's the twist: the kids think that's a fantasy, and they're right. They were almost unanimous about it. More than three-quarters had no faith in bans, age limits, or phone pouches, and they explained why with the weary patience of people who've watched adults try the obvious thing and fail:

"Too late. Taking it away won't help. I'll use someone else's phone or change my age. Everyone does it."

— Middle-school survey respondent

Another asked the question that should reframe the entire debate: *"Why take away something that can bring us together? Just teach people how to act."* They're not defending the worst of the internet. They're pointing out that you

cannot ban your way to belonging. Brittleness is a problem of *depth*, not access — and you don't fix shallow by locking the door.

What's remarkable is what happens when you ask them to imagine a world with less of it. They don't describe loss. They describe something that sounds a lot like relief:

I'll probably be more social, because it's more communication in person than over text or online.

EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENT

And when one girl thought about giving it up, she surprised herself with how quickly the grip would loosen: *"At first, I'd be upset, but probably like a week after, I just... I don't care no more."* These are not children addicted to endless connection and fighting to keep it. These are children asking, in their own way, for help building something sturdier. They can feel that what they have is brittle. They just need the adults to stop confiscating and start constructing.

73%

said their closest online connections were "both real and not real."

So what would the sturdier thing look like? Not a ban. A rebuild. The opposite of brittle connection isn't disconnection — it's what I think of as **connected flourishing**: relationships with enough depth, reciprocity, and trust to actually hold a person up. Belonging that doesn't double as exposure. Friendship that isn't a performance. Ties to adults strong enough that a kid doesn't have to be the one to raise the alarm.

The young people in this work showed me the cracks with a candor most of us have lost. But they also pointed past them. They told us that what they want isn't more connection — it's better connection, the kind you can lean your whole weight against. They're ready to help build it. The only real question is whether the rest of us are listening closely enough to pick up the tools.

A thousand friends, and nowhere to land. It doesn't have to stay that way. But the blueprint won't come from us alone. It's already in their words — *real and not real* — if we're willing to hear what they're actually telling us.



ABOUT THIS PIECE

The student voices in this essay are drawn from doctoral research by Dr. Tysha Hardy-Sellers, conducted with the youth participatory action research team at KIPP Legacy High School in Indianapolis (2024). Every quotation comes directly from the young people in that study. The concepts of Brittle Connections and Connected Flourishing are the original work of Dr. Hardy-Sellers, Groundswell Communities (2025).