

THE LONELY CHILD

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

I am sure we all understand the difference between being lonely and being alone. To be 'lonely' or 'lonesome' means to feel sad because of a lack of friends or sympathetic companionship, where being 'alone' purely means to be separated from others. There are times when I love to be alone. It allows me time to think, plan and just rest from external stimulation. I sure do not like feeling lonely.

When we first moved to the USA from New Zealand, we only knew a couple of families. It was hard work creating new friendships and establishing our identity here in a new country. As mature adults, we knew what we needed to do to escape any long-term feelings of loneliness and, as extroverts by nature, we persisted until we created a strong foundation of friends around us. Through all this though, I must confess there were times I felt lonely, fretting for the loss and comfort of lifelong friendships back home.

There are many reasons why children become lonely. Even in a large family a child can feel lost in the middle. Children become lonely when they do not feel accepted by parents or a group, when they feel they have no value or have nothing to offer. They may have lost a parent through marriage breakup or have lost a beloved pet. They may feel shunned, picked on, put down or ignored. Consequences may be that without friends or feeling loved, children often withdraw, making themselves unavailable or unappealing for friendships, participation in games, clubs and invitations to events such as camping or parties. Through their frustration of not being accepted they may develop a dislike for themselves and everyone else around them causing them to act out. The result is a negative reputation.

When a child feels they have no value and are of no interest to anyone, they may lose all hope and may even try to self-destruct. There has been an alarming rise in teen suicides in recent years. As parents we must watch our children's moods and actions carefully. Loneliness and withdrawal may well become a pattern throughout life unless they are taught how to avoid it in the first place or correct it as it occurs.

By establishing strong communication links we should be able to detect when a child is troubled. If they do not want to participate in family or school activities, go after the cause. Keep in close contact with their teacher and discuss changes in behavior. Explain to your children the value of friendships and the fun in being a team member. Invite other kids their age on outings and show your child how to be a friend. Make sure all your children get your attention and that you encourage them in their everyday efforts. Anticipate times when they might feel lonely, such as going to camp, or moving house. Explain how loneliness is natural when leaving the ones you love or the places you know,

even for a short while. Encourage them to keep the links with their childhood friends. If you are worried that your child is becoming withdrawn, is lashing out at others or hurting them self, then get professional help quickly.

Don't let your child drift into seclusion by assuming they are just 'shy' or 'not needing others to make them happy'. All children need to develop a purpose, direction and focus in their lives. Parents are their first and most influential role model. They also need to know their contribution within their family, at school and in their social life makes a difference and that their presence is truly valued.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.