

## Lesson Plan: Social Connection and Support for Teens

### Background for Teacher

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the late chief Rabbi of England, writes, “Community is the human expression of Divine love. It is where I am valued simply for who I am, how I live and what I give to others. It is the place where they know my name. Community is a society with a human face – the place we know we’re not alone.” We lead with this quote because we know how valuable it is for each of us to have connection and community.



In May 2023, the U.S. surgeon general released a new advisory on the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation and lack of connection in our country. Lack of social connection has been determined to be as hazardous to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. On the other hand, having stable and supportive connections leads to better physical and mental health outcomes such as longer life, better health and increased ability to cope with stress, anxiety and depression. As U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy says, “Our relationships are a source of healing and wellbeing hidden in plain sight – one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled and more productive lives.” Social connections also affect community health in a positive way by increasing a community’s resiliency. Supportive and inclusive relationships in a community can lead to increased community health and safety.

With this public health crisis at hand, we must ask what our responsibility is to support ourselves and each other and how we can foster meaningful connection. The Jewish value, or *middah*, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh* - כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה, all Jews are responsible for one another, is a reminder of our responsibility. It helps us understand we are interconnected and must be invested in the well-being of others.

*This lesson plan offers different options for activities that can be used together in a longer session or broken up into different sessions. Of course, teachers/youth leaders can use their discretion to select activities in any combination that work best for their setting.*

**Materials Needed for Lesson:** Flip chart paper, or whiteboard, whiteboard markers, pens/pencils, sticky notes. If teens choose to create social media content during the Hevruta activity, they will need a phone or a tablet for this part of the lesson.

### Goals for Lesson:

- Teens will learn about the importance of connection and support for health and well-being.
- Teens will create connection goals for themselves.
- Teens will create goals for reaching out to those who may have challenges with connecting to others including people with visible disabilities (e.g., physical disabilities, some intellectual and developmental disabilities, etc.) and invisible disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, chronic health conditions, autism, depression, anxiety, etc.).
- Teens will discuss ways to build a supportive classroom/environment/community.

### Opening Activity (10-15 minutes)

#### Head, Heart, Hands Ice Breaker

This activity will help the group connect to each other and see what they have in common with others regarding their passions, knowledge, and the gifts/talents they have to offer.



#### Directions

Put the following prompts in a place where all participants can access them and ask them to consider the following:

- **Head:** What do you know? If you were asked to teach us something right now, what could you teach us about?
- **Heart:** What are you passionate about?
- **Hands:** What are you really good at doing? What are your talents or skills?

Ask the participants to take two to five minutes to write a response for each of the Head, Heart and Hands prompts.

#### Sharing with each other:

**Option 1:** Have participants move into small groups and share what they wrote for each. Have each group determine what they want to share with the larger group; this could be themes that emerged, things that surprised them, commonalities, etc.

**Option 2:** Have participants write their responses on flip chart paper labeled “Head”, “Heart” and “Hand”. Then give students time to do a gallery walk and notice the different skills and talents within the classroom. Bring the group back together and ask about any themes they noticed, anything that surprised them, commonalities, etc.

## Discussion: What Do We Mean by Social Connection and Support? (10 minutes)

1. Ask students, “What does the term social connection mean to you?” Write responses on white board/flip chart paper. A definition you can share, if desired: “Social connection is the experience of feeling close and connected to others. It involves feeling loved, cared for, and valued.”
2. Ask students “What does support mean to you? What does it feel like to be supported? How do you like to be supported?”
3. Ask students “Where do you find support? Who offers you support?” Students may bring up friends, family, coaches, mentors/teachers.

### Share research on social connection and support:

Why social connection and support really matter—Lack of social connection and support is as detrimental to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. On the flip side, social connection has been proven to lead to longevity. Here are links to a few research articles about social connection and teens:

#### [Social Connectedness and Youth](#)

[Adolescent Wellbeing: Adolescent connectedness: cornerstone for health and wellbeing](#)

[Adolescent Connectedness: A Scoping Review of Available Measures and Their Psychometric Properties](#)

## Hevruta or Small Group Activity and Presentation (15-20 minutes)

In pairs or small groups, ask students to discuss what type of social connections and support they would like in the coming year. They may want to think about connections with family, friends, and new connections they may be seeking. New connections might be based on interests, school clubs, activities, summer camp, classes, youth groups, sports, etc.

Each Hevruta pair/small group will create a presentation using social media content, a poster, a blog, a skit, etc. to ask and/or answer one question below that is assigned to your pair/group:

- Group 1: What social connections and support are important to you?
- Group 2: What do fulfilling social connections and/or supports look like/feel like?
- Group 3: How can you express to others what your needs are for social connection or support?
- Group 4: What are some of the ways in which we now connect differently (often virtually) since the pandemic?

*Note: Some students may indicate that they don't need or want social connection. To help them engage, you might ask (or have their group ask) them to focus on the supports that are important to them, not just peer social connections. This might include supports from family, friends, pets, teachers, and other professionals, etc.*

## Large Group Activity: Creating Social Connection Goals (15-20 minutes)

The Jewish value, or *middah, kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh* - כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה - all Jews are responsible for one another, is a reminder of our responsibility. It helps us understand we are interconnected and must be invested in the well-being of others.

**Group Discussion (10 minutes):** In what ways can we make our classroom community more supportive? In what ways can we make our school more supportive? In what ways can we make our community more supportive?

### What classroom norms can we put in place? Examples:

- We agree to reach out to anyone who is sitting alone.
- We check in on classmates who seem to be having a difficult day.
- We create a safe space where everyone can feel comfortable sharing their needs.
  - We respond to all comments with respect and appreciation; we can still challenge ideas, but we do so with respect and value for the other members of our class.
  - We show interest in and appreciation for each person's individuality so they can be their authentic self.
  - We respectfully challenge comments and behaviors that seem hurtful and inappropriate and act as allies and upstanders.

## Making Commitments Activity (10 minutes)

On a white board or two different sheets of flip chart paper, write the following:

- **Personal Commitments to Social Connection and Support**
- **Community Commitments to Building a Supportive Classroom/Setting**

Give out a few sticky notes to each student.

Ask each student to write down at least 1 personal commitment they will make to enhance their social connections with and/or offer support to peers, family members, or even someone they don't know but notice is often isolated or alone.

Ask each student to also write down 1 commitment they will make to building a more supportive classroom or setting.

*Note: You might share that students are welcome to write down a commitment that they don't want to share with everyone – a personal commitment they want to keep to themselves. You can encourage them to write that on a sticky note and take it home to revisit in 2 weeks or a month. However, you can still ask that everyone try to come up with at least one personal commitment they would be willing to share with the group and one commitment to the group environment.*

**Suggestions for Personal Commitments:**

- Smile at and/or talk with someone who you notice is alone.
- Call, text, or email to check in on someone who you think may be having a difficult time.
- Invite someone who you know has challenges with social connections to a party, lunch or to just hang out. (Could be someone you know experiencing depression, anxiety, social anxiety, or awkwardness.)
- Commit to being sensitive and empathic to the challenges with social connection that others may be experiencing.
- Reach out to someone you used to be friends with or hang out with that may be feeling left out. Think about how they might be feeling and find a way to connect with them again.

**Suggestions for Group Environment Commitments:**

- Become an active listener with respect for each person's perspective and experience.
- Respond to all comments with respect and appreciation.
- Invite kids who are sitting apart to join a circle, group, etc. while also respecting that some may need their own space.
- Engage with students you don't always talk to and try to learn something about them.

Give time for students to put their sticky notes on the board or flip chart paper.

Read aloud some of the commitments that were put on the poster and/or comment on the number of commitments the group generated. Ask if anyone wants to share any observations about either the personal or the community commitments or comment on one of the commitments they made.