

September 2023

## **Libraries as Social Connectors: Strategies for Deepening Community Engagement**

Brooke Doyle and Jennifer Peterson  
WebJunction

Let's stay connected! **#libsocialconnect**



# Brooke Doyle

Senior Project Coordinator, OCLC

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# Jennifer Peterson

WebJunction Community Manager, OCLC

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# What's your [social isolation] story?



# Factors That Can Shape Social Connection



## Individual

- Chronic disease
  - Sensory and functional impairments
  - Mental health
  - Physical health
  - Personality
  - Race
  - Gender
  - Socioeconomic status
  - Life stage
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## Relationships

- Structure, function, and quality
  - Household size
  - Characteristics and behaviors of others
  - Empathy
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## Community

- Outdoor space
  - Housing
  - Schools
  - Workplace
  - Local government
  - Local business
  - Community organizations
  - Health care
  - Transportation
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## Society

- Norms and values
- Public policies
- Tech environment and use
- Civic engagement
- Democratic norms
- Historical inequities

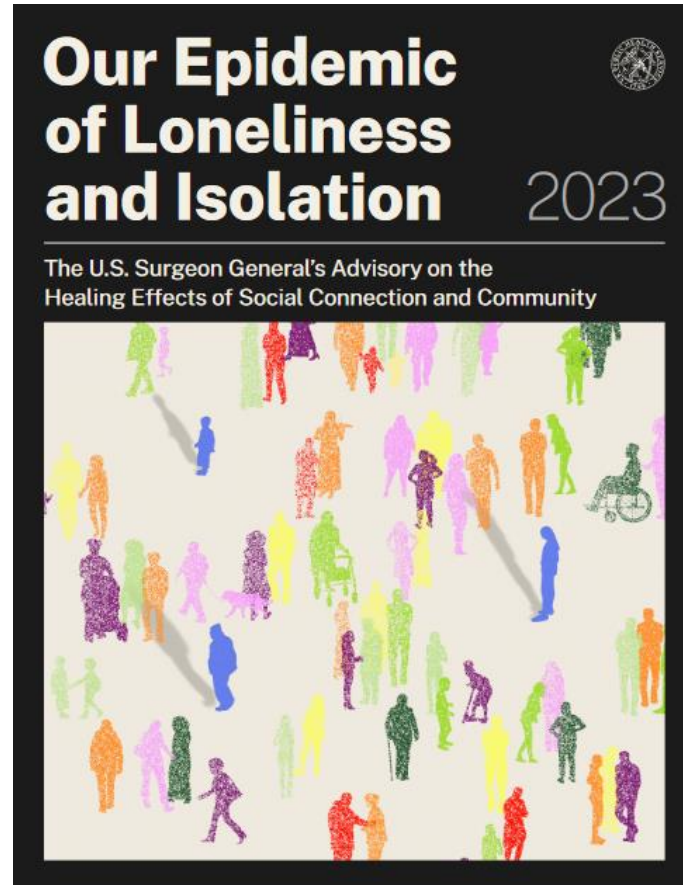
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# WHY FOCUS ON SOCIAL CONNECTION?

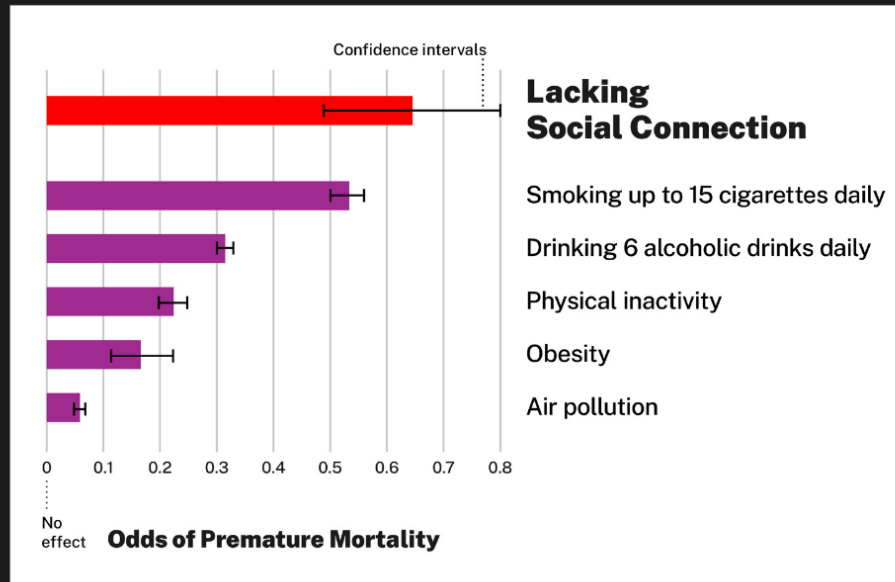
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# Surgeon General's Advisory

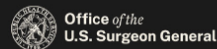
- Social connectedness: one of the fundamental social determinants of health
- Approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness (before COVID!)
- Framework for a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection



# Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General

# Prescription

“While the epidemic of loneliness and isolation is widespread and has profound consequences for our individual and collective health and well-being, there is a medicine hiding in plain sight: **social connection.**”

- United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy



# Results of more social connection

“Social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional and physical well-being.”

- Lowered anxiety and depression
- Stronger immune system
- Faster recovery from illness
- Increased chance of longevity
- Higher self-esteem, greater empathy

Source: [Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection](#); Dr. Emma Seppala; Stanford Medicine; May 8, 2014

# National Strategy to Advance Social Connection

Surgeon General's Advisory lays out a framework based on six foundational pillars:

1. **Strengthen Social Infrastructure:** physical elements of a community (parks, **libraries**, playgrounds)
2. **Enact Pro-Connection Public Policies:** National, state, local, and tribal governments
3. **Mobilize the Health Sector:** Because loneliness and isolation are risk factors for several major health conditions (including heart disease, dementia, depression) as well as for premature death
4. **Reform Digital Environments:** critically evaluate our relationship with technology
5. **Deepen Our Knowledge:** A more robust research agenda
6. **Cultivate a Culture of Connection:** the norms and culture of how we engage one another

“Surgeon General's Advisories are public statements that call the American people's attention to a critical public health issue and provide recommendations for how it should be addressed. **Advisories are reserved for significant public health challenges that need the American people's immediate attention.**”

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# WHY LIBRARIES?

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# Libraries as social connectors

By applying an **intentional** focus on opportunities for deeper social connections, libraries can play a critical role in helping to counter social isolation.

# Libraries foster social cohesion

- People forge bonds in healthy infrastructure
- Open and inclusive
- Safe space
- Nurture civility
- Cultures of learning, improving self and society

[Palaces for the People](#), Eric Klinenberg, 2018

# Service Environment, Healthy Infrastructure

- Patron/staff interactions
- Welcoming and trusted spaces
- Compassionate policies
- Equitable access
- Key partnerships



Photo: Cornwall Public Library Smart Space, used with permission

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**WHAT ARE YOU ALREADY DOING  
TO FOSTER SOCIAL  
CONNECTION AT YOUR LIBRARY?**

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# Relationships for Social Connection

- Staff
- Trustees/Boards
- Local officials/community partners
- Volunteers/Friends
- Teens
- Youth
- Parents and caregivers
- Older patrons
- Non-English speakers or Multilingual Learners (MLL)
- People experiencing homelessness
- People experiencing grief
- Who else?



# What Organizations and Communities Can Do to Promote Social Connectedness

- Community-based exercise and physical activity
- Technology and phone-based programs
- Health education, skill development, support groups, and peer support
- School connectedness
- Intergenerational programs
- Animal-based interventions
- Built environment

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# ADDING INTENTIONALITY

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# Tips from Priya Parker

“The way you structure and invite a conversation can be transformative and meaningful, and can build community wherever you are.”

- Priya Parker

“One of the most transformative books I’ve read in years.”

– DANIEL H. PINK, author of *When and Drive*

## THE ART OF GATHERING

HOW WE  
MEET AND  
WHY IT  
MATTERS

PRIYA PARKER

# Adding intention: Why are you gathering?

- What is your 'why'?
- What is your desired outcome?



Image by [Steve Buisinne](#) from [Pixabay](#)

# Adding intention: Make the invitation work for you

- Who should extend the invitation and in what form to reach the intended audience?
- Does the invitation match people to purpose?
- Do people know what to expect from the invitation?
- Does the invitation have emotional resonance?



Photo by [Katie Moum](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Adding intention: A checklist for gatherings

- Have you designed for connection?
- Does your opening maximize the audience's captured attention?
- Have you helped people feel comfortable and safe enough to participate?
- Have you provided some time for reflection at the end?
- Does your closing elevate what you want people to remember most?



Photo by [Jamie Street](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Lessons on intentionality in planning today's session

- Made time for engagement in a 1-hour session
- Assessed our space for engagement
- Leveraged other spaces, even outside the library, and allowed for self-directed engagement
- Icebreakers and other question prompts (being inclusive)
- Added resource and action guide to support you moving forward

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# LIBRARY EXAMPLES USING DIFFERENT STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTION

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# Meeting Makeover

- Staff meetings
- Board and trustee meetings



Photo by [airfocus](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Caregiver groups and circles

## Expectant & New Parent Circle

A community group for expectant & new parents to develop a support system, share stories & stresses, and create meaningful connections.

Meetings are held at the  
**Pike County Public Library-Milford Branch**  
the first Saturday of the Month  
at 10:30am.



For more information contact:  
programs@pepl.org

HEALTH  
LITERACY



## Autism Family Cares Family Support Group

When: Wednesday, September 12th, 2023

9:30 AM –11:30 AM

Where: Grayslake Area Public Library

100 Library Lane, Grayslake

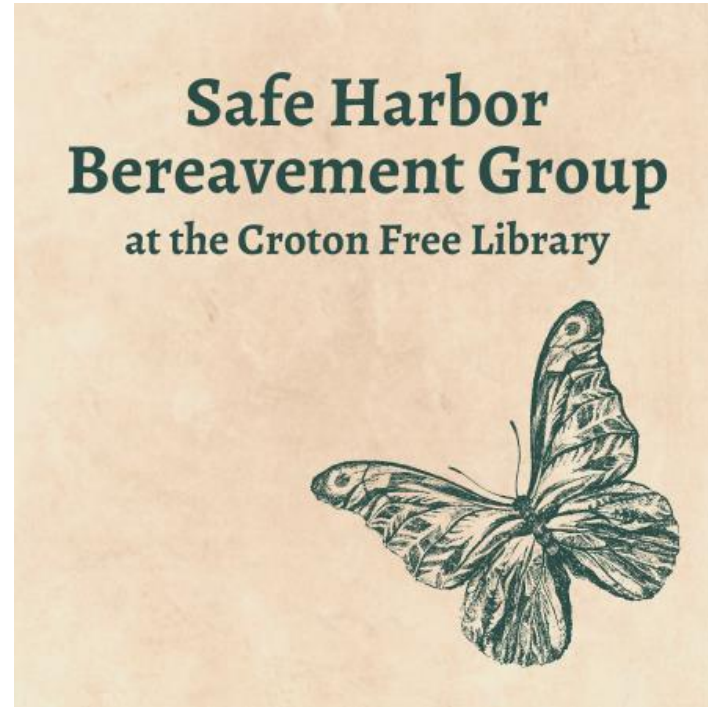
Come and join us for informal discussions on raising a child on the autism spectrum. Come late or leave early if needed. No RSVP is required.

<https://www.autismfamilycares.org/supportgroup>

# Grief Support and Death Cafes



<https://www.berkeleypubliclibrary.org/events/death-cafe-west>  
<https://deathcafe.com/>



<https://www.crotonfreelibrary.org/event/safe-harbor-bereavement-group-30>

# World Café

## World Café Method and Hosting Tool Kit



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/webjunction/albums/72157600629661750/>

### I'm a Table Host, What Do I Do?

- Remind people at your table to jot down key connections, ideas, discoveries, and deeper questions as they emerge.
- Keep the conversation and pens flowing.
- Encourage everyone's participation.
- Remain at the table when others leave and welcome travelers from other tables.
- Briefly share key insights from the prior conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their previous tables.
- Summarize conversations and share with entire group.

## *Rural Cafe*

### THE QUESTION IS:

**What does it mean to have a library that is the hub of the community?**

Think about what this means for:

- 1) Library staff
- 2) Patrons
- 3) Entire community



<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webjunction/Rural-Cafe-Menu-@-ALA-Rural-Forum-2007.pdf>

# Coffee & Conversation

**Humanize** those experiencing homelessness

**Reduce** misunderstandings

**Create** a space for open dialogue

**Connect** on commonalities

**Address** library concerns

**Have a good time!**

Program Model: Coffee & Conversation

from Dallas Public Library on the  
*Programming Librarian*



Learn more in WebJunction webinar:

<https://www.webjunction.org/events/webjunction/community-connector.html>

# Tell Us: Communities Inspiring Libraries

- Madison Public Library's engagement strategy for Imagination Center planning (6+ year process)
- Over 750 people of all ages and backgrounds gathered at over 50 small conversations

- What are the communities represented in this room?
- What do you need to feel supported by your community?
- What local organizations or groups directly improve quality of life?
- What are the three biggest issues facing your community?
- What are some ideas to address these issues?
- How would you know things have gotten better?

**Tell  
Us!**

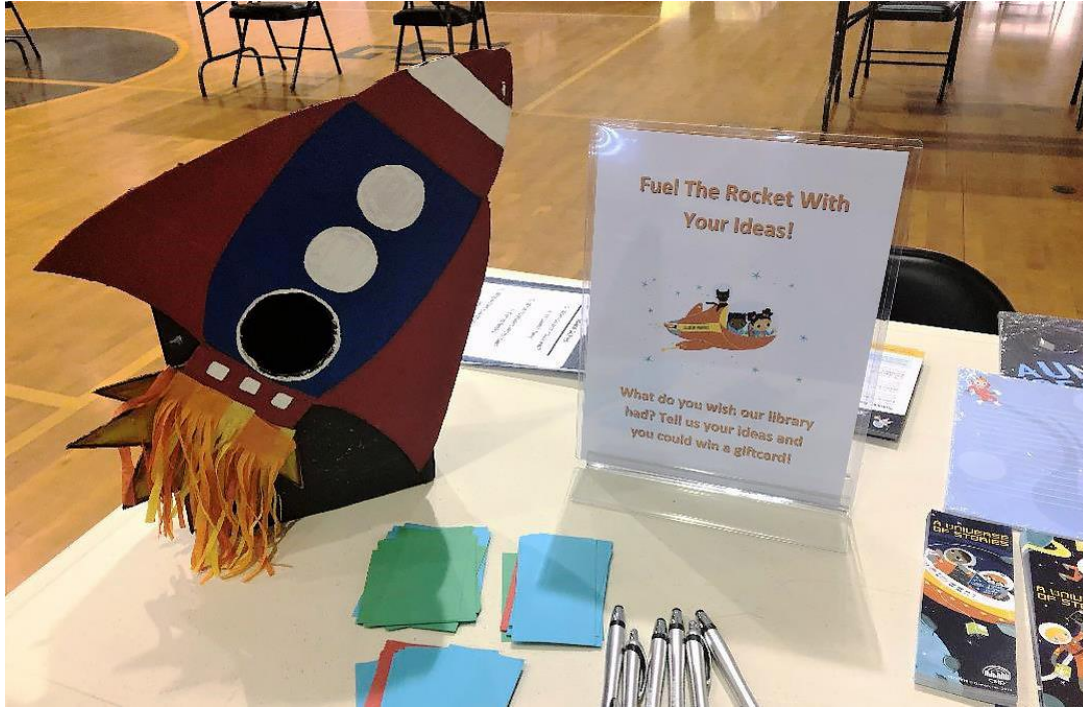
Help us plan for  
library service on  
Madison's west side.

[madpl.org/tellus](https://www.madpl.org/tellus)



[https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/sites/www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/files/media/Tell%20Us%20Packet%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/sites/www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/files/media/Tell%20Us%20Packet%20-%20English_0.pdf)

# Don't forget Passive! (self-directed)



[Beyond the Survey – Basket of Discovery Tools](#) (pdf) and webinar  
[Getting to the Heart of the Community Through Discovery](#)

# Colorful Conversations



[Photo courtesy Shelton Timberland Library on Facebook](#)

See [Adult Coloring Explosion](#)


## Colorful Conversations

**Thursdays**  
6:00 - 7:30 p.m.  
for adults

Back by popular demand! Escape the chaos of daily life and connect with crayons, colored pencils, coloring pages and a cup of tea. Shelly Barnett, owner of Off the Walls! Gallery, will share how you can color your way to calm. There will be a different theme each month, some of which will have custom coloring sheets drawn just for that event!

*Light refreshments will be served. Supplies provided by members of the Retailers' Alliance of Downtown Shelton.*

**December 8**  
**January 12**  
**February 9**  
**March 9**  
**April 13**



Timberland  
Regional  
LIBRARY

Shelton Timberland Library  
William G. Reed Public Library  
710 W. Alder St.; (360) 426-1362; [www.TRL.org](http://www.TRL.org)

[Flyer courtesy Shelton Timberland Library on Facebook](#)





Image courtesy: Johnson County Library

# Explore the Bridgebuilding Resource Hub



[oc.lc/bridge-building](https://oc.lc/bridge-building)

# Time to Connect – Action Planning

With your neighbor consider:

- Your target audience for a gathering
- How to be more intentional with social connection
- Prompts for social engagement in session (e.g., ice breaker)
- Concerns or opportunities

# Remember...

- Strategies will vary by library and/or the different groups you're working with
- Intentionally weaving in social connection may take a few tries
- Your skills in designing for social connection will grow over time, and you'll gain skills and confidence as you go!



Image by [kalhh](#) from [Pixabay](#)

# One word

What's one word that describes how you're feeling about adding intention to deepen social connection in your library's work?

# Intentionality is the secret sauce

“Gatherings crackle and flourish when real thought goes into them, when (often invisible) structure is baked into them, and when a host has the **curiosity, willingness, and generosity of spirit** to try.”

— Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*

# THANK YOU!

Stay connected – Share what you're doing  
to foster social connection!

**#libsocialconnect**



## Brooke Doyle

Senior Project Coordinator, OCLC

[doyleb@oclc.org](mailto:doyleb@oclc.org)

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## Jennifer Peterson

WebJunction Community Manager, OCLC

[petersoj@oclc.org](mailto:petersoj@oclc.org)

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