



How Family Resource Centers Can Combat the Epidemic of Loneliness and Mitigate Parental Stress

The Central Perk in Friends, Monk's Café in Seinfeld, the Caltech Cafeteria in The Big Bang Theory, and Poor Richard's Pub in The Office all share something in common. They are all third spaces. A third space is a public, community space, outside of home and work environments, where people can go regularly to talk and connect with others. Examples of potential locations for third spaces include parks, libraries, faith communities, bars, coffee shops, restaurants, street corners, dog parks, and swimming pools.

Third spaces are casual, social environments where people enjoy spending time with others, generally at no or low enough cost that price is not a barrier to participation. These spaces are welcoming and structured to encourage interaction among friends and acquaintances as well as people who have not encountered one another previously. These social hubs elicit a sense of belonging for those who frequent them. Psychologists have found that third spaces promote social well-being, enhance the sense

of community connectedness, and reduce loneliness. Unfortunately, due to factors such as the prevalence of social media use and the impact of social distancing measures brought on by COVID, the availability and use of third spaces is declining. This is especially problematic for parents. Parents are expected to prioritize their children's needs over their own, resources are often more limited, and it can be hard to find third spaces that are appropriate for and accommodate children. At the same time, parental loneliness, isolation, and stress levels are increasing.

In previous generations, moms would meet at one another's houses for coffee, parents would chat as they kept an eye on children played on neighborhood sidewalks in the evening, parents would connect while volunteering with their children's sports, clubs and school and families were more likely to regularly attend and actively participate in a faith community. Parents today are spending more hours at work, and yet, they are still struggling financially. Childcare costs alone have increased by more than 25% over the past 10 years. Parents feel intense social pressure to overschedule children in structured activities. The norms around time-intensive parenting are compounded by concerns for children's mental health, the threat of gun violence, and anxieties about overexposure to technology.

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) have the ability and the opportunity to help parents build community and support, which can combat loneliness and mitigate the impact of stress upon parents. They create third spaces that are specifically designed to meet family needs. They are welcoming of all types of families, including families that might not otherwise feel a sense of belonging in their community, and they purposefully provide opportunities where caregivers and children feel engaged, build connections, and have fun. They seek to be accessible, taking their programming into family-friendly community gathering spaces, such as schools, libraries, or parks. They provide safe, low-risk, low- or no-cost, developmentally enriching activities and opportunities for learning that require no preparation or planning on the part of the parent.

FRCs also promote social norms that support families and challenge mental frames that undermine families. They take a strengths-based approach toward families, believing that every family has assets that can offset difficulties and that every caregiver's journey involves continual learning about children and parenting. [FRCs build social capital](#). They connect with other community organizations to provide a broader spectrum of resources and opportunities for families. They facilitate connections between families that might otherwise not meet and provide time for parents to share their lived-experience and knowledge of resources with one another.

Escalating loneliness and stress are negatively impacting parents and, therefore also, a significant threat to the well-being of children. Parents are aware of the burden, but they may not know how they can address it. FRCs are in a unique position to combat that loneliness and stress by emphasizing the need for third spaces in their service structure and communicating that need to families. To learn more about FRCs or find one near you, visit: FiveforFamilies.org.

The information in this brief is drawn from the following sources:

Institute for Family. (June 2024). Light Paper: Combating the Epidemic of Loneliness in the US: Creating More Connected Communities. https://instituteforfamily.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Light-Paper-Loneliness_IFFJune2024_FINAL.pdf

U.S. Surgeon General. (2023). Our Epidemic of Loneliness: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

U.S. Surgeon General. (2024). Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents. [hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf)

January 30, 2025