

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND MATTERING, WHAT DO WE KNOW?

by Maxime Fernandez Reiff on behalf of Only7Seconds

What If Mattering Were an Overlooked Driver of Youth Wellbeing?

WHAT WE KNOW

Mattering refers to the fundamental human need to feel significant and valued by others. Beyond the need for social connection itself, we need to feel that we matter to the people around us. We assess it through three primary cues: whether others pay attention to us, care about us and would notice our absence, and ultimately whether others rely on us (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Seeing proof that we matter is essential to our well-being. Longitudinal research indicates that higher perceived mattering predicts lower depressive symptoms over time (Etherson et al., 2022). Moreover, in school, students who felt that peers and adults cared about them and their well-being were significantly less likely to report suicidal ideation or attempt suicide (Marraccini & Brier, 2017).

Despite this evidence, schools don't seem to foster a sense of mattering for all students. Based on a survey administered to 1,105 students in Grades 4 through 7 from the Waterloo Region in Ontario, only 60% reported feeling that they mattered at school (Region of Waterloo Public Health, 2010, as cited in Flett, 2018).

This means 4 out of 10 students were unsure or felt they did not matter, exposing a systemic challenge in creating school environments where all students feel valued. contribute and make a difference, they report greater purpose, stronger identity development, and higher well-being (Fuligni, 2019).

Luckily, mattering is a potential within every youth that emerges naturally when they are given the chance to make a difference for others. Mentoring, helping at home, or volunteering allow young people to experience mattering actively (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007). Moreover, research suggests that helping others is a crucial aspect of adolescent development. When young people are given meaningful opportunities to

TLDR;

Mattering is an untapped reserve of energy present in every young person, waiting to be activated through real contribution. During early adolescence, young people can take on meaningful responsibilities, often without supervision, in contexts where others genuinely rely on them. Volunteering provides such roles and brings well-documented benefits for mental health, social development, and civic engagement.

Call to Action for Youth:

- **Start by noticing where you already matter.** List the people who rely on you at home, at school, or among friends, and note what you do for them: helping, listening, supporting, or simply showing up. Then ask yourself: What is one small thing I could do to make a difference for them? In this way, you can grow the positive impact you make each day.
- **Look for opportunities to be needed beyond your current circle.** Volunteering can be a powerful option, such as helping at an animal shelter, tutoring younger students, or assisting in community activities. Choose opportunities that involve regular, ongoing commitment. Long term involvement will build your skills and multiply the impact of your contribution.
- **Actively recognize the people you rely on.** Mattering grows in both directions. Make a habit of letting others know when they are important to you by thanking them, acknowledging their effort, or telling them they were missed. These small signals help others feel seen, cared for, and relied upon.

Call to Action for Caregivers:

- **Teach young people to recognize that the need to matter is universal.** Help them notice when others want to feel seen, valued, and needed. Encourage them to contribute to others' sense of mattering by showing appreciation, offering help in ways that support someone else. When youth understand that they can strengthen another person's sense of worth, they begin to experience their own.
- **Recognize a young person's search for mattering.** As children grow, their sense of mattering must be tested and affirmed in peer groups, schools, and community spaces. When adults acknowledge this shift, they remain a secure base while serving not as gatekeepers, but as guides, helping youth access real-world contexts where they can safely discover their competence, contribution, and impact.
- **Prioritize access to environments where youth can make a difference.** When supporting decisions about activities, commitments, or time use, favor contexts in which young people have real responsibilities and in which others depend on their presence. This may include volunteering, peer mentoring, community involvement, or roles within teams and organizations where follow-through truly matters.

ABOUT MAXIME FERNANDEZ REIFF:

As a Tech Product Manager specializing in early-stage startups, Maxime Hernandez Reiff leverages his seven years of experience to deliver innovative and user-centric solutions to complex business challenges. His expertise sits at the intersection of cutting-edge SaaS solutions and startup dynamism, supported by an MBA and CSPO certification that strengthen his strategic approach. Maxime has successfully led four full product development cycles from ideation to launch, including a B2B SaaS platform that grew to more than 30,000 users.

ABOUT ONLY7SECONDS:

Only7Seconds is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization on a mission to end the youth loneliness epidemic by inspiring intentional, meaningful connection.

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR WORK & CONNECT WITH US: www.only7seconds.com

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Authorization disclaimer: This article was authored by Maxime Fernandez Reiff, who currently serves as a member on Only7Seconds' Scientific Advisory Board.