Loneliness is a painful and distressful experience. It signals the existence of a failure in the valued area of personal perceptions and interpersonal relationships. It affects children’s and adolescents’ quality of life and represents a developmental risk for future adjustment. In *Lonely Children and Adolescents: Self-Perceptions, Social Exclusion, and Hope* I seek to synthesize more than 15 years of research with my students. This book addresses the core experience of the emotional and social life of children and adolescents: feeling lonely at home and in school among classmates. Some children keep their loneliness distress to themselves, but many others share their agony and expect to receive support and help from preoccupied and worried parents and teachers. The book proposes a reconceptualization of the children’s distress not as a dichotomy model (lonely/not lonely) but as a dynamic multidimensional understanding of movement along continuums between loneliness, connectedness, and solitude within developmental paradigms.

At this time, the constantly growing connectedness opportunities and choices through communication paths such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) and cells’ oral and written communication, in addition to face-to-face contacts, increase the importance of focusing on children’s loneliness. Nowadays, young people keep contacts most of the time with family, friends, classmate peers that they know, as well as “friends of friends,” and total strangers. At the same time, they play collaborative games on the computer, update their positions and activities online, send text messages on their mobile, and check who is looking for them on social sites. Social networking is growing in magnitude and importance, enabling diverse routes to challenge social isolation. Yet many youngsters continue to feel alone, even among friends and family members. Parents share anxious concerns when realizing their children’s social suffering, feeling helpless and unsure regarding what they can do. Educators express frustrations when they identify children’s social exclusion, yet often feel unprepared to provide meaningful help.

The goal of this book is to examine in depth the loneliness experienced by children as related to their individual characteristics and contextual conditions at home and in school. In line with current psychology trends, the book presents loneliness as a risk factor and also discusses protective factors and social-emotional resilience. It concludes in proposing therapeutic implications of the hope theory,
empowering strategies for coping with childhood loneliness as well as preventive and intervention approaches.

In this book, loneliness conceptualization as an outcome of a mismatch between children’s needs and motivation for connectedness and their perceived social realities is presented. The book is divided into nine chapters that start with clarifying conceptual approaches. Personal characteristics of children are presented, including genetics, psychoanalytic theories of attachment, social learning constructs’ self–perceptions, and developmental factors, which may predispose children to the loneliness experiences, or predict their resilience (Chapter 2).

The loneliness construct deals with personal and interpersonal relations within different contextual conditions, and the third chapter discusses the children’s first social environment – the family – detailing relations inside the family with parents and siblings, including parenting styles and periods of instability, such as divorce, and their relations to the experience of social isolation. Discussions of the family and school environments as promoting or challenging loneliness and interacting with personal characteristics, including children with special needs, have theoretical importance with educational and parenting implications.

The fourth and the fifth chapters introduce the school environment, including the important roles of teachers and peers for children’s connectedness, companionships, and alienation. The sixth chapter presents the Internet environments and the predictive role of virtual connections on children’s well-being. Nowadays, children and adolescents feel a strong urge to keep connected most of the time, and the social exclusion as well as their experience of alienation predict a more profound risk to their well-being and development.

The seventh and the eighth chapters display empowering and resilience trends in the discussions of coping with loneliness as an alternative to deficit approaches, with clinical and educational implications. The inclusion of a wide range of classic and innovative therapeutic approaches provides supportive examples to the empowering possibilities. The conclusions and future directions in the last chapter offer future opportunities for research, intervention, and prevention, raising challenges and dilemmas.

In conclusion, I believe that, currently, childhood loneliness is a neglected topic, and I hope that the book meets the unanswered need for a comprehensive updated research-based conceptualization on this significant developmental risk. By proposing the salutogenic (health promotion) paradigm and the hope theory as well as by introducing the possibilities of technological developments, I believe that it has a special value for prevention, counseling, and intervention planning. In the current cultural trends that highlight the significance of social connections and the protective and risk paradigms related to the impacts of friends, I trust that it will extend knowledge that will help bridge social or interpersonal space and empower children, their families, and schools in their struggle with social exclusion and alienation.

Tel-Aviv, Israel

Malka Margalit
Lonely Children and Adolescents
Self-Perceptions, Social Exclusion, and Hope
Margalit, M.
2010, XIV, 303 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4419-6283-6