

Supporting Children & Families' Mental Health through COVID-19 & Beyond

Rose Perry, Ph.D.

Founder/Executive Director, Social Creatures

<https://www.thesocialcreatures.org/>

rose@thesocialcreatures.org

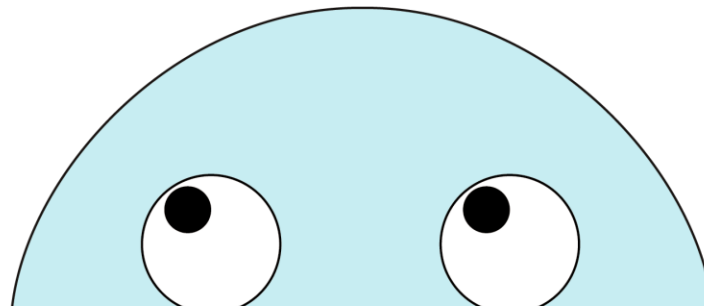
 **Social Creatures** 

Social Creatures

An applied research nonprofit bridging science education, advocacy, and innovation to ensure any individual can socially connect with others, no matter the circumstances.

Social Connection:

“The opposite of loneliness, a subjective evaluation of the extent to which one has meaningful, close, and constructive relationships with others (i.e., individuals, groups, and society).”



Who We Are

- We are an interdisciplinary team of research scientists, clinicians, educators, writers, and creatives
- Dr. Perry:
 - Ph.D. Neuroscience & Physiology from New York University School of Medicine
 - 14 years of research experience
 - Short- and long-term impacts of early-life adversity
 - Social connections as sources of resilience



Our Origins

- Formed in April 2020 with funding from the National Science Foundation, in rapid response to COVID-19.
 - Grave concerns over ‘psychological fallout’ of social distancing/school closures on children & families’ health
- Launched science communication & advocacy newsletter to raise public awareness on importance of social connection.
- Rapid mobilization of computers, WiFi, tech support, & software to families and children without tech in the home.

Over \$60,000 worth of technology deployed within first two months of operation



Why Social Connection?

- Social isolation is associated with increased risk of depression, anxiety, suicide, and cognitive decline.
- ...and a greater risk of chronic inflammation, heart disease (29% increase), stroke (32% increase).
- Individuals with weak social relationships are 50% more likely to die prematurely than people with strong social relationships.

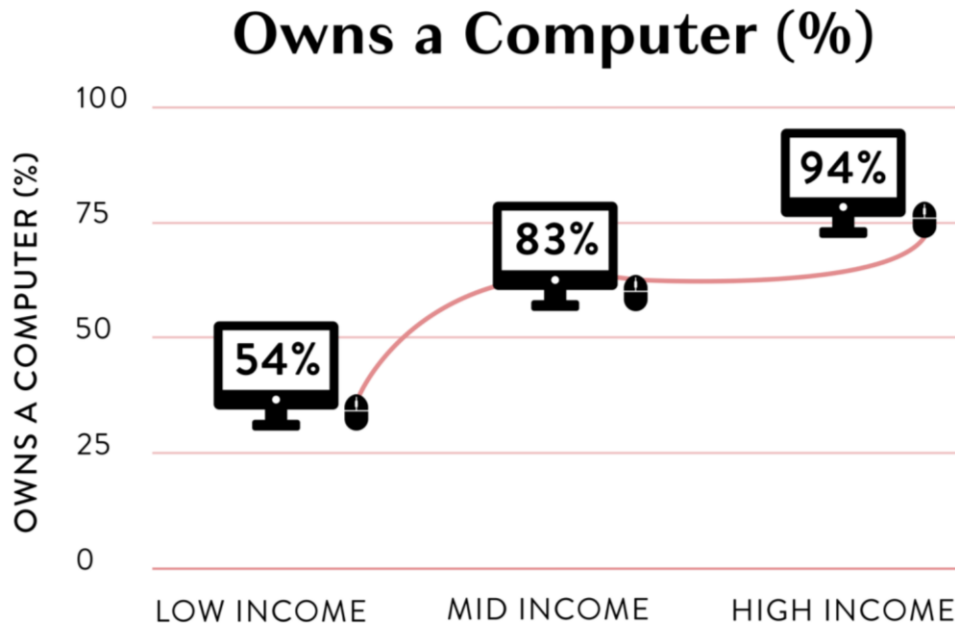
We are facing a loneliness epidemic:

- National survey in Oct: 36% of Americans reported “serious loneliness.” (61% for Americans aged 18-25.)
- 88% of Americans surveyed said they were practicing social distancing “always” or “very often”.
- Recent meta-analyses indicate that quarantine/isolation heightens risk (2-3x) of depression, anxiety, stress-related disorders, and anger.

(Evans et al. 2019; Henssler et al. 2020; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010; Leigh-Hunt et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2020; Valtorta et al. 2016; Vaux & Kluch 2021)

Equity Concerns

- Research shows that low-income and unemployed individuals stand to suffer the most from isolation.
- Viewing the digital divide through a social infrastructure lens: Low-income families have decreased access to school, work, community, medical care and resources.
- Concerns realized:
 - Low-income individuals reporting significantly higher loneliness, stress and worse mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, insomnia) during COVID-19.
 - 36% of low-income students had difficulties accessing school because they do not have a computer or internet in the home (versus 18% of higher-income).



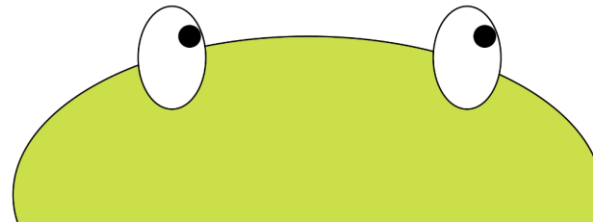
Child & Adolescent Concerns

Breakdown of typical social-emotional supports:

- Nearly 60 million children in U.S. impacted by school closures.
- Youth and young adulthood represents a period of increased vulnerability for the emergence of mental health disorders.
- The social-emotional losses that children are experiencing as a result or as important than cognitive losses.

Rising caregiver stress:

- Can't talk about children's mental health without considering caregivers' well-being.
- Studies show stress can be readily transmitted from caregiver to child.
- Conversely, caregivers can strongly reduce or even eliminate their child's physiological stress response if given enough support.



Mental Health Impacts

Current:

- Pregnant mothers and those with young children are experiencing three- to five-fold increases in self-reported anxiety and depression symptoms.
- A recent survey of children and parents revealed that 70% of children are more overwhelmed, worried, and sad because of the pandemic. (2x higher in children from families learning under \$50,000 a year).
- Since the onset of the pandemic, emergency rooms have seen a 24% increase in mental health visits from 5 to 11-year-old children and a 31% increase in mental health visits from adolescents.

Possible Future Impacts:

- Research shows that loneliness and disease containment measures is associated with future mental health problems up to 9 years later for children, adolescents, and young adults.
- The length of loneliness appears to be a predictor of future mental health problems.
- Support of positive adult/older peer imparts resilience.

How We are Responding

Digital Safety Nets Initiative

Our foundational program, providing digital devices, broadband internet, video conferencing software to households without them.

949 donations made (and counting)

New Parent Support Program

Creating social infrastructure & connection for expectant and new parents.

Partners: Mount Sinai

Generational Youth Mentorship Program

Creating social infrastructure & connection for children, adolescents & young adults.

Partners: Mount Sinai & STEAMpark

Sitness Program

Creating social infrastructure & connection for adults of all ages. (Our oldest participant is 93!)

Partner: Mount Sinai

Providing equitable social infrastructure across the lifespan

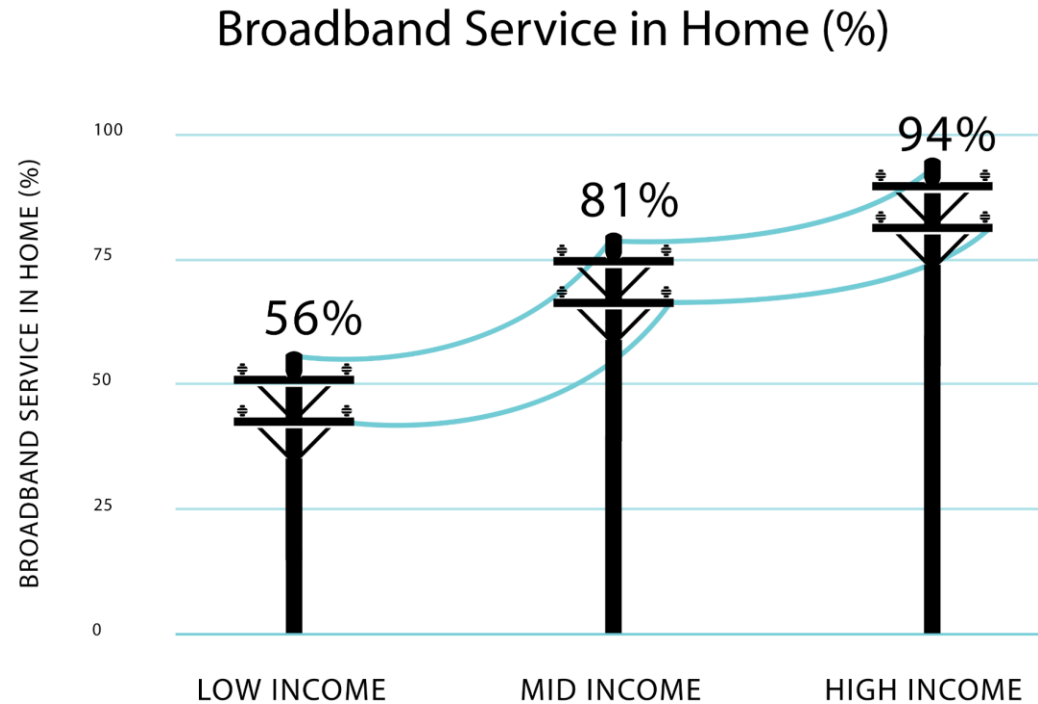
Community-Based Partners



Rapidly mobilized by working closely with communities, and leveraging the trusted relationships that CBOs provide

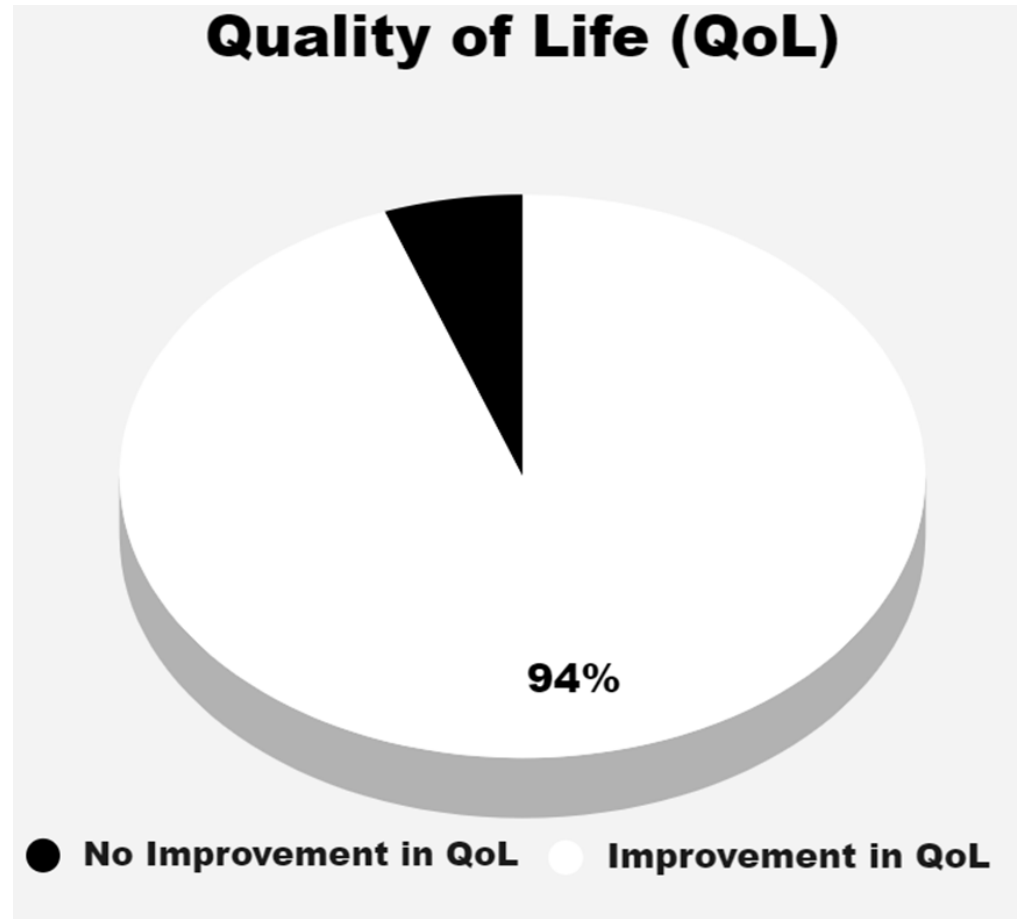
Barriers

- Ensuring equitable access to broadband internet
- Caregiver buy-in – dependent on trusting, established relationships & caregiver-convenience design
- Need for social-emotional supports for children & caregivers outsizes existing infrastructure (we need more resilient infrastructure and centralized, top-down support)



Silver Linings

- Finally addressing longstanding inequities (some receiving tech for first time)
- Tech-enabled programming/services improving accessibility
- Virtual social infrastructure is improving social connection & quality of life



Our Program Design Principles

Grounded in science of social connection

Backed by social neuroscience & developmental psychology

Universal Design

Services are made accessible to all people, regardless of age, background, disability or other factors

Culturally inclusive & safe

Designed with and for historically underrepresented communities

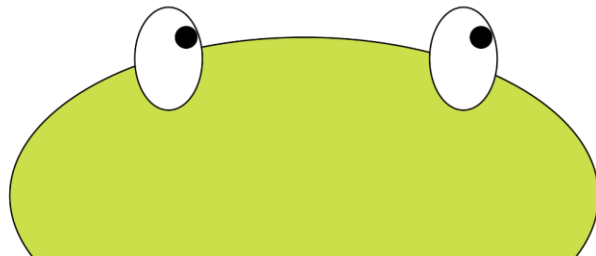
Caregiver-forward

Designed to support, not burden, caregivers (i.e., parents, teachers, healthcare providers/aids)

***Contextualizing program creation from the ground up:
designing for inclusion, convenience, and flexibility***

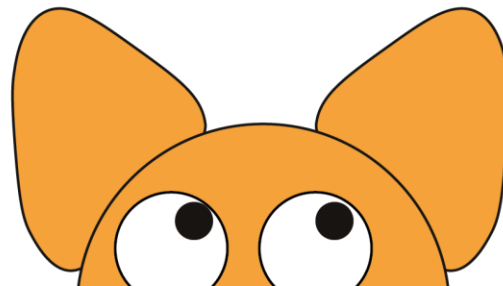
Takeaways

- Supporting the social-emotional well-being of children **and caregivers** is critical to mitigating short- and long-term effects of COVID for children & adolescents.
- Robust social infrastructure (physical *and* virtual) = resilient communities
- Providing equitable social infrastructure requires coordinated “top-down” (e.g., government) & “bottom-up” (e.g., community-level) initiatives.



Recommendations

- Make design of caregiver-forward programs & policies an utmost priority (e.g., feasible, convenient, intuitive, flexible)
- Lower barrier to entry for “top-down” programs/policies (e.g., parity laws; repeal laws that restrict cities from providing their own internet)
- Invest in and collaborate directly with historically underrepresented communities and grassroots organization to create and strengthen social infrastructure.



Acknowledgements & Contact Info

Our Team

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Emma Hooper, PhD	Claudia Ye
Annie Brandes-Aitken	Jen Sainsbury
Stephen Braren	Sarah Buder
Sarah Vogel	Katie Malone
Jill Gandhi	Lily Cooke
Ashley Greaves	Xinlin Bai
Andrea Fields	

Get in touch

Email: rose@thesocialcreatures.org

Websites:

<https://www.thesocialcreatures.org/>

<https://www.genyouthmentors.org/>



Twitter: @socialcreaturz



Instagram: @socialcreaturz

Partner/Supporting Organizations

Charles Lazarus Children's Abilities Center, Mount Sinai
STEAM Park, Inc.
The Family Room
Logitech
Red Hook Initiative
Sunset Spark
SNAP (Services Now for Adult Persons)
Carter Burden Network
Union Settlement
Blooming Health
United Spinal Association, New York Chapter
National Science Foundation
BCID (Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled)

 **Social Creatures**

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