



## ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

*To Nurture and Challenge Academically Capable Students*

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**Is it Monday, Yet?** is my once monthly attempt to address developmental and topical issues we confront as we “challenge and nurture” our children. The topics I cover will be drawn from developmental and cognitive psychology, current research, and my own parenting and school administrator experience, and could just as easily be a response to local, national, or world events that have parenting implications. Keep your eyes on this spot in the final Compass of each month, and if you have any great ideas about future topics, please shoot me an email or text me... or, better yet, kick it old school and give me a call.

### **Is it Monday Yet? 4/28**



### **Only Connect**

With this four syllable imperative, EM Forster gives us one of the most iconic moments in British Literature. Although written in 1910, the advice given in this epigraph to [Howards End](#) is startlingly fresh in terms of its relevance in the lives of our children, so disrupted by the COVID pandemic.

As it turns out, research done by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, points to a mental health crisis among teens, related to the COVID pandemic. In the Weekend Edition NPR podcast [The Kids are Not Alright](#), Ayesha Rascoe shares CDC findings that the mental health of our teens has declined significantly over the past few years (my thanks to Board President Tze-Yiu Yong for sharing this podcast with the Board). In this survey, “almost half of teens reported consistently feeling sad or hopeless, with certain groups showing a tougher impact from the pandemic.”

Although this research is based upon surveys completed by high school students, there is little reason to believe that students of any age have escaped some sort of negative mental health impact caused by the pandemic. Indeed, [the section of the NPR page](#) where the above podcast lives is full of other titles suggesting that no one is immune to the psychological and emotional trauma wrought by COVID.

So, what now? The CDC research also pointed to a hopeful moment and a goal for schools to shoot for. Teens who reported feeling connected in school seemed to be the most resilient, reporting significantly less anxiety, despair, and isolation, than those attending schools where they did not feel connected. For students at schools like Ashbrook, where small class sizes in our relatively smaller institution, result in our ability to really know our families and our students. Connecting at Ashbrook takes the form of greeting children by their names, knowing something about their passions and engaging them in casual conversation about

same, making sure we are balancing face time with screen time, and partnering with families on a regular basis. When students feel known, they feel as though they belong.

As I read and listened to this NPR piece, I felt as though I were reading the Ashbrook Family Handbook. For example, Kathleen Ethier, who leads the Division of Adolescent and School Health at CDC, noted that

young people who feel connected to others at their school, so what that means is that there are others at their school who care about them, who are interested in their wellbeing, who are interested in their success... young people who feel that way between 7th-12th grades, 20 years later have better outcomes in terms of their mental health.

Indeed, the sense of membership that comes with being a part of a community that values one's presence has lasting effects. It is a powerful force that acts as a shield against the "slings and arrows" encountered by our children as they leave Ashbrook, travel through high school and college, and grow into young adults. As parents, what better feeling is there than to know that the investment you have made in a school that challenges, nurtures, AND connects your children, has equipped them with what they will need to courageously and competently encounter life on their own terms.

At Ashbrook, this very real link between the human need for connection and mental health, is a moment to recognize the value proposition of

- the importance of the Ashbrook environment as free from behavioral issues, where teachers can spend time establishing relationships with students rather than policing behavior,
- our school culture as defined by a vigilance and zero tolerance for bullying where kids can connect with each other without fear of ridicule or teasing,
- the time our teachers put into thoughtfully and purposely balancing the use of technology in our classrooms, so that students spend an essential amount of time in conversation with their teachers and in face to face encounters with peers.
- teachers who employ methods that encourage hands on collaboration and problem solving between students working cooperatively.
- a smaller school and small classroom sizes, by design, where students can be known and families can be readily partnered with.
- our accessible, present, and open minded school leadership, able to make local decisions in response to local needs, rather than following statutes, collective bargaining rules, or protocols issued from a central office or distant state entity.
- a collegial staff that regularly connects with each other, both professionally and socially, who very much enjoy working together, which ultimately ripples into a positive school ethos and enhanced student experience.

Each of these is an important part of what makes up the student experience at Ashbrook School, and a significant part of the return on investment of the Ashbrook choice.

Ultimately, this urge to connect is not only a great form of pedagogy (after all, we know that children learn best through relationships), but also an act that fulfills a basic human need: membership! For those of us who read Vivek Murthy's Together: the Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World this past summer, this is not new news. Wrote Murthy, "... the human need for social connection is more than a simple feeling or convenience- it's a biological and social

imperative rooted in thousands of years of human evolution. And loneliness... has evolved as a warning signal to satisfy that need.”

Put another way, there is safety in numbers, and safety in all its forms is our top priority at Ashbrook: when a person feels safe, they are better able to express themselves honestly and avoid the trap of becoming part of a herd, be vulnerable and ask for help to avoid the crushing limitations of pride, be innovative and original without fear of ridicule, make a mistake and learn from it, and be open to the thoughts of others and work collaboratively towards reaching shared goals: what a great environment for a school!

Those who quote Forster’s iconic advice about the importance of human relationships most often leave out my favorite part, the final words of the actual dialog spoken by one of his characters: “Live in fragments no longer.” As we peer hopefully towards *what seems to be* light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, these words will provide me with a mantra and a daily reminder of what I took for granted before “social distancing,” fear of the offered handshake, and mandatory masking were things!