

Canadians are digitally connected yet millions are very lonely

Oshawa, Ontario – Technology means we can connect instantly with anyone, anywhere. And yet, people in Canada are struggling with loneliness. As we spend more time online, this Mental Health Week the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is asking: what does it mean for our mental health? Youth are the loneliest of all age groups: almost 1 in 5 youth (ages 16–24) report feeling lonely often or always. At the same time, they are the heaviest users of social media and digital tools. Young people are at the centre of the issue, but they're not alone in feeling lonely. Nearly all people in Canada are connected to the internet, and about 8 in 10 use social media, many spending hours every day online. Meanwhile about 5 million people in Canada (13%) report feeling lonely often or always. Loneliness is linked to anxiety, depression, substance use, and disengagement. "Connecting with each other is an antidote to loneliness, and it protects our mental

health. But how we connect matters," says Sheryl Wedderburn, Chief Executive Officer, CMHA Durham. "Spending more time online doesn't always mean feeling more connected." Statistics Canada data (2025) show that virtual connection alone is not enough. People who rely only on virtual connection with family and friends are more likely to feel lonely. Nearly 1 in 4 (24%) people who connect only online are frequently lonely, compared to 15% of those who connect both in person and virtually. "While technology can help us to connect, it can't replace face-to-face connection, which is essential for our mental health," said Wedderburn. "We need to create space for real, human connection, both for children and for all of us." For Mental Health Week (May 4–10), CMHA's Come Together, Canada campaign encourages people across the country to connect for real with one another. Because connection strengthens mental health.

New Report Exposes Systemic Failures in Ontario's Special Education System

A new report released today by the Ontario Autism Coalition (OAC) reveals a worsening crisis in Ontario's special education system, with year-over-year analysis showing that conditions for students living with disabilities are not improving and, in many cases, are deteriorating. Drawing on community-generated data, frontline accounts, and cross-sector analysis, the report highlights a system under sustained strain, where chronic underfunding and lack of coordinated supports are leaving students increasingly excluded and underserved. "This report confirms what families have been experiencing for years. The system is collapsing," said Alina Cameron, President of the Ontario Autism Coalition. "Children are being left without access to education, and families are being thrown into a life-altering crisis." The report's year-over-year findings point to persistent and worsening challenges across the province, including:

- Continued & increasing use of modified schedules, exclusions, and reduced school days
- Ongoing shortages of educational assistants and specialized supports
- Growing gaps between identified student needs and available resources
- Rising pressure on families to fill systemic gaps without adequate support

The findings also reveal how the province's failure to deliver timely supports, like the Ontario Autism Program (OAP), is creating a massive service gap that is being offloaded onto schools, shifting responsibility onto an education system that cannot fill those gaps with

more resources, funding, and appropriately trained staff. "When supports don't exist in schools, and they don't exist in the community, families are left with nowhere to turn," Cameron added. "This is how children end up in crisis; not because of their needs, but because the system has failed to meet them." Kate Dudley-Logue, Vice President of the Ontario Autism Coalition and long-time advocate, emphasized the broader implications of the findings. "We are not seeing progress; we are seeing regression," said Dudley-Logue. "Year after year, families are being told to wait, to cope, to make do. Meanwhile, children are losing critical time, and the gaps in support are growing wider. This is not sustainable, and it is not acceptable." Advocates warn that without immediate intervention, the long-term consequences for students, including lost learning, increased mental health challenges, and deeper system involvement, will continue to escalate. The Ontario Autism Coalition is calling on the provincial government to take urgent, coordinated action, including:

- Enforce accountability and transparency: Ensure IEPs are implemented through audits, clear recourse mechanisms, province-wide tracking and public reporting of formal and informal exclusions
- Make inclusion meaningful: Define inclusion by outcomes; with adequate staffing, stable programming, enforceable supports, and a continuum of placements based on student need
- Strengthen system

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capacity: Align funding with actual needs, establish minimum staffing standards, and stabilize the workforce through improved compensation, training, and working conditions

- Protect student safety and rights: Regulate the use of calming rooms with enforceable standards, oversight, and mandatory documentation
- Restore oversight and standards: Protect the role of trustees and SEACs, and implement AODA K–12 education standards with clear timelines and enforcement
- Fix upstream service gaps: Address failures in programs like the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) to prevent unmet needs from being downloaded onto schools

"This is an escalating crisis," said Dudley-Logue. "Every year that passes without meaningful change makes the situation worse. Ontario can fix this; what's missing is the political will."

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