BETTER TOGETHER
Joy in Community

GEM EINSAMKEIT

Friendship course Children (8-12)

Commentary for foreign teachers and parents in Germany

Stand V0.2

This document is currently a draft / Request for Comments.

It is NOT a friendship course or a reflection course for adults. Instead, it is a simulation or reflection tool designed for parents, teachers, and educators to consider the level of difficulty that exercises from the Friendship Course for children and adolescents might present.

If you are feeling lonely yourself, there are other resources, such as the book "Stop Being Lonely" by Kira Asatryan, to help reflect on those feelings. This booklet is (currently) not suitable for that purpose.

Introduction

We have designed the booklets "Friendship Course for Children Aged 8-12" and "Friendship Course for Adolescents Aged 13-17" to make it easier for children and adolescents, especially those struggling with social problems, to establish connections and build friendships.

These booklets are provided as tools that can be used by parents to facilitate structured discussions with their children, or by teachers who want to dedicate a substitute lesson to a topic like social relationships. Perhaps a daycare center or youth club might choose to focus on this topic for an afternoon.

However, even adults often struggle to clearly describe what is good about their friendships and why they are important to them (Rath 2006). This limitation in expressive ability is even more pronounced for children and adolescents, who do not yet have the full vocabulary of an adult—let alone that of a specialized academic.

This booklet is intended to guide an accompanying adult through the exercises—simplified and with reduced demands for the phrasing of answers—that are included in the respective booklets for children and adolescents.

In this way, parents, teachers, or other educators can use their own personal experiences to assess whether they can and want to responsibly present the material to children and adolescents.

To complete the exercises, a non-transparent sheet should be available to cover "solution pages" initially.

For the best simulation, the exercises should be completed in pairs to allow for an immediate evaluation of the potential for parallel discussions.
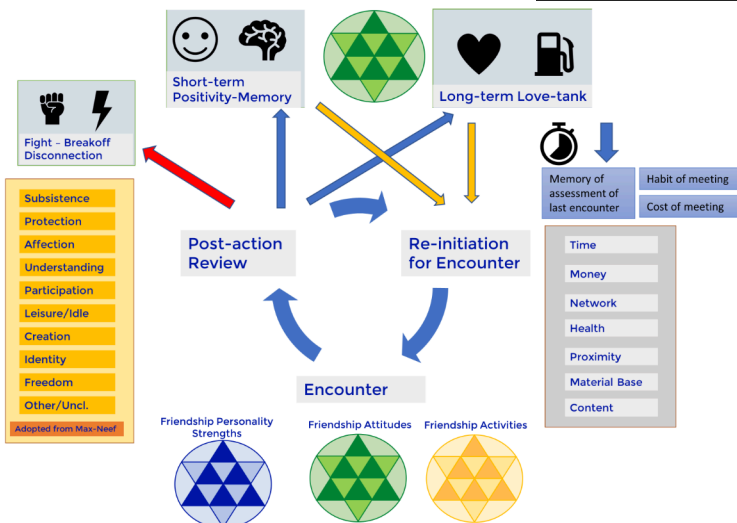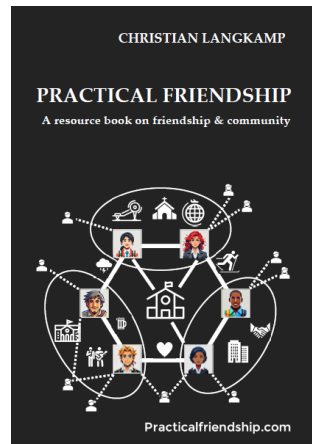
Christian Langkamp

Initiative GemEinsamkeit

Theoretical Basis

The material is largely based on the theory developed and elaborated in the book „Practical Friendship" (English) or „Freundschaft Leben" (German). This online book is available as a free PDF, though it is quite extensive (410 pages) and not necessarily recommended for quick reading unless there is a specific interest in the topic. However, for in-depth discussions on individual topics with children who are genuinely curious, this book provides a wealth of material to enrich these conversations.

A key element is a process model for building and maintaining friendships, which places special emphasis on personality strengths, relationship attitudes, and activities. Additionally, it outlines resources (and the absence thereof as obstacles) as well as the social needs based on Max-Neef's framework.

CHRISTIAN LANGKAMP

PRACTICAL FRIENDSHIP

A resource book on friendship & community

Practicalfriendship.com

What is Friendship

The following definition forms the foundation of our understanding of friendship:

„Friendship is a free relationship of two or more people,

1. who bring into the friendship some personality strengths conducive to forming a relationship and attractive to the respective other,

2. who develop an attitude to, appreciation and understanding of each other through past interactions,

3. who repeatedly act out their friendship with and towards each other through a variety of activities."

This definition at large determines the content of this booklet.

Now select, for the experience, two good friends and one close acquaintance who is not yet a friend. For the purposes of this exercise, it may not be ideal to choose your current partner, even if a strong friendship exists, as this does not correspond to the comparable experience of the children.

The "cheat sheets" / solution or help pages should remain covered for 5–10 minutes and only be uncovered afterward to assist with the subsequent categorization and clarification.

A _____

B _____

C _____

This is what I like about you

Personality Traits
Character Strengths: X is ____

A
_____   _____

_____   _____

B
_____   _____

_____   _____

C
_____   _____

_____   _____

After 5–10 minutes, look at the first "solution sheet" or formulation aid to see if the general categories were addressed. Then discuss whether the other categories were overlooked but are important or were consciously not considered.

This is fun with X

A _____ _____

       _____ _____

B

       _____ _____

       _____ _____

C

       _____ _____

       _____ _____

After 5–10 minutes, look at the first "solution sheet" or formulation aid to see if the general categories were addressed. Then discuss whether the other categories were overlooked but are important or were consciously not considered.

Thus ___ and I developed ... together

A   _____   _____

_____   _____

B

_____   _____

_____   _____

C

_____   _____

_____   _____

After 5–10 minutes, look at the first "solution sheet" or formulation aid to see if the general categories were addressed. Then discuss whether the other categories were overlooked but are important or were consciously not considered.

What I admire about you – Virtues and character traits

Here, children should name character traits and personality features that they admire in their friend. This idea traces directly back to Aristotle, who emphasized that for a true friendship, there should be something admirable about the friend.

1. Honesty and authenticity (trust, integrity, confidentiality, groundedness)

2. Acceptance and tolerance (accepts me as I am, does not want to change me)

3. Humility and interest in others (is not commanding, good listener, can take a seat back, modest, remembers details about others)

4. Reliability and consistency (Follows through on commitments, keeps promises)

5. Fun and humor (Funny, jokes, amusing ideas)

6. Kindness, warmth, and love (Kind, caring, nice, warm)

7. Virtue and good character (Knows the right thing to do, does the right thing)

8. Intelligence, knowledge, and curiosity (Good advice, enjoys discussions, puzzles, investigations)

9. Positivity, hope, and seeing the good (Optimistic, encouraging, builds confidence)

10. Proactive behavior (Selfless, altruistic, puts others first, willing to compromise, not domineering)

11. Energy, excitement, and adventure (Ideas, courage, creativity, boldness)

12. Sociability, agreeableness, and connection-building skills (Friendly, invites me, introduces me to others, includes me)

13. Patience, peace, and calmness (Lets me finish speaking, calm, patient, relaxed)

It is not essential for the children to come up with everything. However, if you are familiar with these categories, you can better guess and ask about what the children want to express. Especially in the earlier years, children likely lack the vocabulary and ability to articulate their thoughts.

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This activity with ___ is fun - Activities

Here, the children should name activities that make them so happy and glad to be friends with the other child.

1. Being together and playing (Spending a lot of time together, doing things together, being in the same club, seeing each other often)

2. Working and creating together (Doing sports, art, music, volunteering, or helping together)

3. Deep listening and sharing (Telling each other stories or thoughts and listening well)

4. Support and assistance in difficult times (Standing by my side, supporting me when I'm not doing well)

5. Practical help (Helping me with homework)

6. Connecting and merging friendship circles (Introducing me to others, letting me join in, making others my friends too, inviting me to parties)

7. Sharing meals and hospitality (Sharing their food with me, inviting me home)

8. Encouragement and challenges (Telling me when I could do something better, motivating me, encouraging me)

9. Achieving change (Helping me improve, making me a better person)

10. Guidance and advice (Giving me good tips, asking good questions, being wise)

11. Exploring and discovering (Exploring the area, having adventures, trying new things)

12. Teaching and learning (Learning together, teaching me things, showing me things, helping me study)

13. Generosity and giving gifts (Giving me something, letting me play with their toys/computer)

14. Verbal or visible support (Defending me against criticism, agreeing with me, helping me in verbal arguments)

It is not essential for the children to come up with everything. However, if you are familiar with these categories, you can better guess and ask about what the children want to express. Especially in the earlier years, children likely lack the vocabulary and ability to articulate their thoughts.

Thus ___ and I developed ... together – Relationship qualities

Here, the children should name relationship qualities that make their friendship with the other child particularly special.

1.   Shared memories and common experiences (We've experienced a lot together)

2.   Love, affection, and intentional gratitude (Is kind to me, likes me, says thank you)

3.   Prioritizing the needs of friends (I'm important to them, they'd do anything for me, know what I need/want, are attentive to me)

4.   Loyalty (Stands by me, we'll stay friends for a long time)

5.   Enjoyment of each other's company (It's fun, it feels good to be together, I can relax)

6.   Mutual understanding (Understands me, knows what I think, understands how I think, helps me think things through)

7.   Reciprocity and the feeling of being needed (We're important to each other, we help each other, it's important that we're there for each other)

8.   Trust and confidentiality (We trust each other, we don't tell others what we share)

9.   Openness and vulnerability (Tells me their feelings, shares their thoughts, even when it's hard)

10. Respect, appreciation, and pride (We respect and admire each other, think highly of each other, are proud of each other, give compliments, tell each other what we do well)

11. Goodwill and caring for each other (Wants the best for me, takes care of me, wants me to be okay)

12. Shared interests (We're interested in the same things, have the same hobbies)

13. Common beliefs and cultural background (understand each other's parents, rules)

14. Respect for privacy (Accepts when I want to be alone, doesn't need to know everything)

It might be harder for children to think about relationship qualities than about activities or "personal strengths." Teachers or parents will likely need to provide more guidance here, or alternatively, use a method where the six most important aspects can be selected by checking boxes.

It is not essential for the children to come up with everything. However, if you are familiar with these categories, you can better guess and ask about what the children want to express. Especially in the earlier years, children likely lack the vocabulary and ability to articulate their thoughts.

INITIATIVE
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If I talk to ___ about their friends, they tell me the following:

This is meant to be a proper interview. The children should interview three different adults about their friendships. For the purposes of this simulation, it's sufficient to interview one other person, asking them about their friendships. This person should differ significantly from you in at least one category (culture, age, gender) so that reflection on potential differences in attitudes and friendships becomes evident.

X described these three friendships to me

A   _____   _____

   _____   _____

B

   _____   _____

   _____   _____

C

   _____   _____

   _____   _____

How did it feel to talk to another person about their friendships? How easy was it for them to describe these friendships? Where did you have to ask more follow-up questions?

If I talk to ___ about their friends, they tell me the following:

Conversations with legal guardians or caregivers should provide insights into how friendships can change over time. They can also touch on feelings of loss and regret over neglected or past friendships.

When children, especially with their parents, discuss the parents' friendships, it also provides an opportunity for parents to reflect on the example they set for their children regarding friendships.

Since friendships, while culturally diverse in emphasis, are a universal phenomenon, this activity is also well-suited for involving parents of children with German as a second language.

Potential problems

In the case of orphans or challenging family situations, it may be difficult for the child to find an appropriate or suitable caregiver to engage with. Ideally, the teacher can directly suggest someone. In extreme cases, another child's parent might also step in as a possible support person.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

INITIATIVE
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When you meet a new person in a social, non-professional context, what interests you first? What makes you interested in spending more time with the other person?

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

What do I most enjoy sharing about myself when meeting someone new for the first time? Do I have a kind of personal 30-60 second "pitch" or introduction?

What are others most often interested in about me? Which questions challenge me the most in a positive way?

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

What do I need to know to develop sympathy (liking) for someone? Is it similarities in character, preferences for games, athleticism, or something else?

Then, the other way around – improving the process of getting to know someone through reflection.

Getting to Know New Children – Understanding and Building Rapport

Key Takeaways:

1. I must/should at least be interested in something about the other child.

2. This "something" should be based on their personality or who they are, not just the fact that they own a PlayStation or Barbie dolls that I can play with.

3. I also have something interesting to share about myself.

4. What I most like to talk about may not necessarily be what other children find most interesting. What truly defines me?

5. What characteristics should I pay close attention to? These are generally the personality traits mentioned on the earlier pages/worksheets. However, it is fascinating to note what the child identifies first or what they overlook that might also be important.

Here, too, the question arises – what kind of example do we set for our children when we meet or get to know new people in the city? Are we interested or dismissive?

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

INITIATIVE
GEM EINSAMKEIT

If we like each other, what do we arrange to meet up for?

_____ _____

_____ _____

And do you suggest the next meeting, or does the other person? Or do you need help with it?

- ☐ I set a good example
- ☐ The other person should do the inviting
- ☐ We'll see if we run into each other somewhere by chance
- ☐ We probably won't see each other again

Who initiates, where are the hurdles, what is the process, and what can be done to encourage showing the courage to take initiative?

Getting to Know New Children – Taking Initiative and Building Relationships

Key Takeaways:

1. What is my usual habit or standard suggestion for a first shared activity? What other suggestions exist in my environment or local social circle?

2. How do I handle taking initiative? Can I manage it on my own?

3. How dependent am I on my parents? Are they okay with it—do they want to know and help decide who I meet with? Or do they prefer that I take charge of planning and deciding my activities independently?

4. Do I feel confident enough to take the initiative?

Here, too, the question arises – what kind of example do we set for our children when we interact with acquaintances?

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

INITIATIVE
GEM EINSAMKEIT

Imagine you've had plans for a coffee or a beer with a friend for a week. Then they cancel with a plausible but not entirely convincing reason. How do you feel?

_____

_____

_____

Imagine you've had plans with friend A for a week, but now another friend B, with whom you'd rather spend time, invites you for the same time. What do you do?

☐   I (reluctantly) decline Person B and stick to my original plan.

☐   I accept Person B's invitation and find an excuse for Person A.

☐   I check with Person A and Person B to see if they'd be interested in meeting up as a group.

☐   I don't know what I would do.

What do you think Person A and Person B would feel in each of these scenarios?

And which of these decisions do your children most often observe you making?

Consistency and keeping commitments is probably one of the most important attitudes for building long-term relationships.

Keeping social appointments

Anecdotally, the following pattern is currently being reported among teenagers: They make plans or social appointments and then cancel shortly before, to avoid being canceled on themselves. This is a strategy to avoid the pain of rejection but fails to recognize that this very mechanism creates the feelings of rejection they wish to avoid.

Many children learn from adults a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), the anxiety of potentially missing out on something better, leading to a reluctance to commit to plans.

For relationships and friendships, this is highly detrimental. Friendships can only thrive when spending time with the other person is seen as something explicitly desired by both sides and prioritized over other activities.

Unpredictable and erratic cancellations quickly render this trust meaningless, leading to complete distrust and, ultimately, an inability to build or maintain relationships.

Key message: A social appointment is a commitment. You should only cancel in extreme circumstances, and in such cases, rescheduling (but only once, as further delays seem unreliable) is acceptable but must be initiated by the person canceling.

Another important takeaway: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

A question to the adults in the room

What kind of example are you setting for your children? Do you make commitments to meet others? Do you keep them? Are you more of a postponer or a canceler of plans? Are your cancellations made casually (children pick up on this instantly), or are they truly a last resort?

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

INITIATIVE
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Which of these actions make you really angry?
Use ++ for very angry, + for somewhat angry, and 0 for not angry.

Someone takes a toy from you without asking.

When candy is being distributed, the child next to you gets more than you.

You and another child are racing, and the other child cheats and wins.

Another child breaks a rule that you yourself dislike following, and they aren't corrected or criticized.

Another child takes your seat at school or the dining table.

The adults praise another child more, even though you accomplished the same thing.

Another child says something mean to you or about you.

You are ignored. Nobody pays attention to you.

You and the other children tease another child, but only you get in trouble with the teacher or parents.

Something makes you angry, but the teacher or parents say, without listening to you: "It's not a big deal, calm down."

Which of these has happened to you before, and how did you react?
How do you think your parents perceive it?

The analogous question for parents, teachers, and other adults here is: What makes us angry enough to argue? What do our children observe? Have friendships been broken because of this?

What are reasons for arguments? For which reasons is reconciliation difficult? Do the reasons come from the child or from others? Has anything ever destroyed a friendship?

Which of these actions really makes you angry?

This overview is divided into two parts. The first half contains statements that children typically notice themselves. This doesn't mean they feel guilty about them, but at least they can observe their reaction somewhat objectively.

Key insights should be:

1.   It is perfectly okay to feel angry sometimes.

2.   The question is whether the anger is proportional to the situation.

3.   Did the situation really happen as perceived, or was it only felt or interpreted that way? While it's important not to doubt the child's experience, in cases of an inflated ego or a strong sense of ownership, things may often be misinterpreted.

4.   Are there circumstances that make the child angry but in which they are often equally responsible for causing another child's anger (e.g., taking a toy but not sharing their own)?

There won't be a quick solution here. Emotional regulation is a skill learned slowly (after all, there are adults with short tempers in similar situations).

The question may be—and it is perhaps difficult to answer in general—whether anger, however it is triggered, leads to impulsive reactions. The question is whether such an intense argument follows that it (unnecessarily) becomes so severe that one of the children ends the friendship.

In general, children argue frequently and often reconcile just as quickly. However, they also notice recurring patterns in the other person and, over time, may lose both interest and patience.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

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Which activities are you most likely to pursue in a social context?

	I	Others General	Others Neighbours
Sports (Fitness, gym, outdoor activities, team sports, adventure sports, yoga)	☐	☐	☐
Cultural Activities (Museums, theater, art, music)	☐	☐	☐
Food and Drink (Dining out, cooking together)	☐	☐	☐
Games (Board games, card games, video games, trivia games)	☐	☐	☐
Travel and Exploration (Day trips, weekend getaways)	☐	☐	☐
Volunteering (Charity work, environmental engagement, neighborhood activities)	☐	☐	☐
Learning and Growth (Workshops, teaching, discussions)	☐	☐	☐
Relaxation/Wellness (Spa day, meditation, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Creative Activities (Photography, writing groups, performances)	☐	☐	☐
Technology and Craftsmanship	☐	☐	☐
Other: _____	☐	☐	☐

And which activities do the other people in your general environment and neighborhood enjoy the most?
++ love the most, + like, o neutral, - don't like much, - - don't like at all
You can only use ++ and + three times per column.

Overlap of interests, possible commonalities, willingness to compromise.

INITIATIVE
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Which of these games and activities do you prefer most?

An old English proverb states: "If you want to have friends, you need to learn to play with **their** toys."

In times of widespread societal self-optimization and egoism—patterns that are modeled for children daily and naturally absorbed by them—this realization is more necessary than ever.

If your child is complaining about a lack of friendships, this can serve as a useful quick check. Willingness to compromise and agreeableness are highly underrated traits, yet they are essential. Elementary school teachers widely report that these qualities are increasingly neglected in upbringing at home.

The key takeaway from this worksheet is for the child to reflect on whether they might need to become a bit more willing to compromise when choosing activities.

The realization that it is not always easy for adults to find partners for their favorite activities within their social environment. While children often have many more potential playmates in their surroundings through school, it is also not always easy for them to find "friendship candidates" with matching interests.

INITIATIVE
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Which places are the best for spending time together?

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

What makes them into that?

_____ _____

_____ _____

What are social places for children? Here, adults can provide more support and ask: "Have you also thought about place X?"

Which places are best for hanging out with friends?

Fifty, thirty, or even twenty years ago, the natural place to be after school (and after finishing homework) was "outside." Playing soccer on the street, games in the woods, fields, playgrounds, and so on.

Parents had significantly fewer concerns about violence from other children and teenagers, speeding cars, and other dangers. And while the first gaming computers emerged thirty years ago, board games, Legos, and imaginative play with toys like He-Man or Barbie still held strong appeal.

This changed with the improvement in console and later smartphone graphics. In addition, there is a perceived or real (we cannot and do not wish to judge) increased level of danger for children in public spaces. Finally, many children's "free time" is so over-scheduled that they simply lack time blocks to arrange outdoor playdates at places like playgrounds or parks.

Nonetheless, it is worth discussing with children which simple locations—such as playgrounds, swimming pools, youth centers, or other spots outside their own home—might be suitable for meeting classmates or neighborhood friends.

Debating the criteria for choosing such places, how parents are informed about their use, and the implications of these decisions is incredibly valuable both for discussions with children and among children themselves.

Which places are best suited for adults?

The "playground" version for adults is called the "Third Place," a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. His book The Great Good Place is unfortunately only available in English.

These places have also become increasingly rare, and we've almost gotten out of the habit of frequenting them.
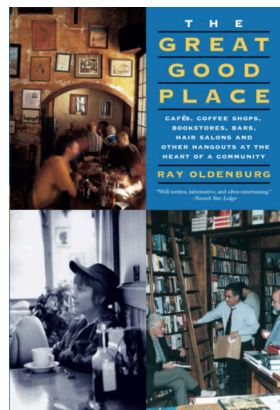
Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

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What were the three most beautiful experiences or moments with friends in the past year? And what made them so special?

1. _____

_____

2. _____

_____

3. _____

_____

And what can you do to make such a beautiful experience possible again?

What was so good that you could initiate, start, or invite people to do it again yourself? Birthdays only come once a year.

Here, too, the question arises: What example are we setting for children? What do we do to make it possible to recreate those good times when we've had them?

Was waren die schönsten Erinnerungen mit Freunden?

The core function of friendships for children is growing together through shared experiences. While experiences with parents and other caregivers are also important, those with peers—same-age children—are crucial for exploring and testing one's personality and boundaries.

It is essential for children to enter a positive cycle of memories. A positive memory of playing together increases the likelihood that the child will say "yes" to the next invitation. Perhaps they will even initiate an invitation themselves and (ideally in coordination with their parents) extend it.

Without suggesting direct manipulation, this process can, of course, be significantly supported by parents asking about positive memories and experiences.

Key takeaway: It largely depends on my own initiative and reactions if I want to create future opportunities to have more positive experiences. And, generally speaking, it is more fun to do things in the company of others than to sit alone in front of TikTok or the computer.

The simple truth is this: Direct and joyful experiences create far more short- and long-term memories than social media or interactions with computer games ever could.

Suggestions and feedback are warmly welcome!

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INITIATIVE
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Was waren die schönsten Erinnerungen mit Freunden?

1. Can boys and girls be friends?

2. What is important for true friendship?

3. Are there traits in friends that are important but rarely seen?

4. In what places can you have the most fun with friends?

5. What's different when you meet and play with friends in person compared to communicating via WhatsApp or online?

6. What's different when you play one-on-one compared to in a group of four or five?

7. Do all my friends have to be the same? What can be different, and what do they all need to have?

You can discuss these and other questions with the kids, but that is for later.

Feedback

This resource is still very much in development; it is an initial draft. It is also written with the situation in Germany in mind, i.e. foreigners living in Germany with little or no command in German, as it has been translated from the German resource for school children and teachers and parents.

The basic model is that parents provide the main booklet to their children and assist them in completing it if reading and writing skills are not yet sufficient. Otherwise, they should remain available as a "lifeline" or background support, allowing the child to work independently or with a friend.

It is also conceivable to use this resource in classroom settings, after-school care programs, youth centers, institutions focused on youth pastoral care, or other supervised environments.

Careless distribution is not intended, especially at the beginning, since the material is still untested. It is also important to carefully consider in which public spaces engagement with this material can take place. For example, a classroom may not be a suitable space for children who are not well-integrated or are in the presence of bullying or mocking classmates. In such cases, safe retreat spaces and a simple exit option must be offered.

We are very interested in receiving feedback and suggestions for improvement. This is by no means a definitive solution but rather an attempt to contribute further to addressing the increasingly widespread issue of youth loneliness.

For inquiries and feedback:

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Vorschläge und Kritik herzlich willkommen !

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Further Material

The Initiative GemEinsamkeit provides templates that can be adapted and used by municipalities, social service providers, local institutions, or even healthcare providers (general practitioners, psychotherapeutic practices, etc.).

The other key english resource is „**Finding ways out of Loneliness**" (Non-German speaking in Germany) - Focus on offers in different languages for expats and migrants.

Other resources on loneliness, connection building and friendship are all in German.