

Press release

14 November 2011

The Mary Foundation and Ventilen to help lonely young students

The Mary Foundation announced a new project at today's conference on loneliness. In cooperation with Ventilen, the Mary Foundation will work to prevent loneliness among students in upper-secondary and vocational education in Denmark.

Loneliness is a genuine and major problem for many people in Denmark, not least among young people. 6% of all upper-secondary students feel lonely often or always, while 6% of young people surveyed by the Mary Foundation's Youth Think Tank often feel lonely in the company of their peers.

"We need to talk loud and clear about loneliness. We have to pay more attention to those who are lonely. We must reach out, and help them to find solutions. We're all responsible for looking out for each other, just as we're responsible for taking those helping hands," said Chairwoman of the Board of the Mary Foundation, H.R.H Crown Princess Mary, at today's conference on loneliness held by the Mary Foundation in the Black Diamond building in Copenhagen.

At the conference, the Mary Foundation made public its first project within its new focus area of 'loneliness'. In cooperation with the organisation Ventilen (in English: 'FriendZone'), which runs meeting places for quiet and lonely young people all over Denmark, the Mary Foundation will prevent loneliness among students in upper-secondary and vocational education. This is to be achieved by building upon and scaling up a project which Ventilen has piloted successfully at upper-secondary schools in the area of Greater Copenhagen.

The Mary Foundation's and Ventilen's new project will offer schools tools to boost the class spirit of togetherness, thus preventing feelings of exclusion. Teachers are to become better at spotting and helping lonely young people, while methods such as friendship groups and class discussion will be introduced.

"It can be difficult to fit in when arriving at a new school. It's easy to feel at the margin of the school class community. We see that 14% of young people surveyed by the Mary Foundation's Youth Think Tank often feel outside and lonely during the first weeks at their new school, and that 8% often feel lonely in general at their educational establishment. That's why it makes us happy that – together with Ventilen – we're now able to offer courses and tools to upper-secondary and vocational schools aimed at preventing loneliness, focusing on the social wellbeing of each class and, not least, on everyone's responsibility for it," says Helle Østergaard, Project Manager at the Mary Foundation.

The Chairwoman of Ventilen, Maria Bergmann is also pleased with the cooperation:

"From the meeting places of Ventilen and many years of experience of working with lonely young people, and with the adults in their lives, we know how important it is to get on socially in one's education. That's why the goal is to develop methods that enable teachers and counsellors at upper-secondary and vocational schools to help students form communities with room for all. And to give them tools to reach out to those young people who feel outside. Our cooperation with the Mary Foundation is a unique opportunity to expand this project for the benefit of young people all over Denmark. We're very proud of it."

The Mary Foundation and Ventilen project starts in the spring of 2012 with courses for teachers at 20 selected upper-secondary and vocational schools. Here the teachers will learn about processes to be carried out in class, starting in the new school year after the summer of 2012, when the project will be launched for the students.

The project will be continuously evaluated and optimised by psychologist and loneliness researcher, Mathias Lasgaard from the University of Southern Denmark, who is in charge of follow-up research.

Further information

Helle Østergaard, Project Manager at the Mary Foundation, tel. +45-29378922

Rillo Snerup Rud, Head of Secretariat at Ventilen, tel. +45-70208308/40211144

Facts and background

- The Mary Foundation works to fight social isolation.
- At the conference on 14 November 2011, 'loneliness' was officially added to the Mary Foundation's two existing focus areas entitled 'bullying and wellbeing' and 'domestic violence'.
- The Mary Foundation's first project within this new focus area is being carried out in cooperation with Ventilen with the aim of preventing loneliness among students in upper-secondary and vocational education in Denmark.
- The project encompasses teacher training, class discussion and friendship groups, with the aim of enabling teachers to spot quiet and lonely students and improving the social wellbeing of each school class.
- The project has been piloted since 2010. Subsequently, two seminars have been attended by upper-secondary teachers and counsellors, many of whom have chosen to use its methods in their workplace. There has generally been a highly positive response and a great demand for tools to spot and reach quiet and lonely students.
- Ventilen is a social youth organisation based on voluntary work. It runs 14 meeting places for quiet and lonely 15-25-year-olds.
- Ventilen works to prevent and alleviate young people's loneliness.

Facts about loneliness

A survey conducted by the Mary Foundation's Youth Think Tank (among 15-24 year-olds) in September 2011 shows that:

- 6% often feel lonely when in the company of other young people.
- 8% often feel lonely at their school in general.
- 11% characterise the social wellbeing of their class as 'bad' or 'very bad' at the time of starting at the school.
- 14% often feel lonely during the first couple of weeks at their new school.
- 21% missed somebody to be with during the first couple of weeks after starting at their new school.
- 37% consider themselves to be lonely due to a lack of self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy.