

CONNECTIONS 2023

Connections 2023 Portfolio – Self-Care Guide

What is Connections 2023?

Connections is the National Theatre's annual, nationwide youth theatre festival. The programme has been established for 27 years with a celebrated history of championing the talent of young people from across the UK.

Every year, we commission ten new plays for young people to perform, bringing together some of the UK's most exciting writers with the theatre-makers of tomorrow. We work with 300 youth companies and over 6,000 young people annually from every corner of the UK.

In our 2023 portfolio we have ten plays which cover a range of themes and ideas. The kit will take you through each of the plays, and give you more information about what to expect when you see them.

What is the Self-Care Guide For?

This toolkit has been designed to offer support to anyone engaging with any of the ten 2023 Connections plays, especially anyone who might be impacted by any of their content. We hope this toolkit provides you with specialist resources and tools.

This kit goes through the portfolio play by play, and includes:

- Self-Care suggestions
- Further reading and resources about self-care
- A synopsis and content guidance for each play – if you would like further details about the full plot of any play, please email connections@nationaltheatre.org.uk.
- Helplines and support

This toolkit takes inspiration from the work of [20 Stories High](#), [Clean Break](#) and the [Survivors Trust](#).

Further reading and resources about self-care

[The Mix](#) – a support service for young people aged up to 25.

[Anna Freud Self Help Hub](#) - a resource hub created for young people, which contains lots of self-help tips and suggestions.

Self-Care Suggestions

Watch with someone

Bring a friend to the theatre or watch the livestream with someone you trust.

Talk to someone

If you find any of the content distressing, try talking to someone you trust or contacting one of the organisations we list below.

Read the Summary

If you think the content warnings suggest that you might find the play difficult to watch, read the full synopsis. This will help you prepare for any difficult bits or decide if the play is right for you.

Breathe

Breathing is a great way to help you feel calm. Try breathing in for four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, exhaling for four seconds and holding again. Repeat this for as long as you need.

Get some fresh air

Going for a walk or even just standing outdoors can help.

Know if you need to step away

There is nothing wrong with deciding this isn't for you or it's too much. Walk away or turn it off, do what feels right for you.

***(Circle Dreams Around) The Terrible, Terrible Past* by Simon Longman**

Synopsis

A play about being young in the fields and towns that feel far away from where things might be happening; a play about the expectations of life and the circularity of human existence.

Someone has a recurring dream. It's a bit weird. There are fish, chickens, cows, who all look and sound like people - people who look kind of familiar. And there's a butcher, killing people. And the dream feels like a circle - going round and round and back to the start again. They can't get free of it - it's like a line eating its own arse.

Which means we're stuck in their dream too, watching it with them. We see the fields and rivers they visit in the half light. And raves they've been to with people jumping out of the windows and losing their legs. And the careers advisor from school advising jobs like being a water carrier, or a chimney sweep, or a candlestick maker or a fishmonger. They dream about the past mainly, a past that they don't belong to but the past wants to belong to them. It's forcing its way inside, so that their future looks like the past.

See? It's a bit weird. It always starts with someone selling someone some crabs and it all gets progressively surreal from there. And there doesn't seem to be any way out.

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 14+
- Strong language.
- A brief reference to substance abuse.
- One brief, mildly sexually explicit conversation.
- The following are seen within the context of a dream: a dead body covered in blood, and weapons including an axe, a meat cleaver and a bolt gun.

***The Heights* by Lisa McGee**

Synopsis

This is a play about stories. Lillie is a teenager who lives on the Heights Estate. A place where nothing ever happens, except in Lillie's head. Lillie's not like most people, definitely not. For starters, she never goes out, but sits in her bedroom window on the sixth floor of her tower block, watching the world and the people in it go by – though sometimes some of those same people enter her world. As she sits, she makes up stories. Some of these stories are sad, some are happy, some are funny and some are just wonderful. However, whatever they are, they are just stories. Aren't they? No one would play catch in the middle of the street with a loaded gun, or use the same gun to frighten a stranger as they slept in their bed. And no one could give birth to a baby made of glass, or murder their twin brother over an argument about what they should spend their money on IF they won the lottery... would they? Surely these are all just stories, dark, curious, beguiling figments of Lillie's fertile imagination aren't they?

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 13+
- Strong language.
- Some infrequent moments of violence - these include one character choking another, and a scene where a character is tied up and gagged. In a non-naturalistic scene, there is a description of a glass baby shattering and causing a character's arms and legs to bleed.

***Innocent Creatures* by Leo Butler**

Synopsis

A play about the future, both imminent and far, far away. Soon, very soon, Big Ben will be underwater surrounded by ice floes - which is where we meet Enid and Mia at the start of the play - they each have an ice floe each, as they wait to be rescued by the robots in helicopters and taken to the Holiday Inn - to be re-programmed -but on second thoughts, that's not for Mia, she'd rather die than be rescued/captured and have a chip implanted in her neck and proceeds to plunge into the icy water and sink to the bottom of the ocean. This is a world where the robots are in charge and humans are made from recycled laptops, kindles and i-pads. All the men were killed long ago - they were far too hairy. No one is allowed to refer to having had parents at the pain of an electric shock - that's how the re-programming happens.

Fast forward another thousand years and Enid is still going strong, living in the rainforest that is overflowing with animals - tigers, monkeys, horses, bears, trap-door spiders and earwigs - you name it, it's there in abundance - but the people only eat the vegetation, well you wouldn't kill an innocent creature for food would you? Fast forward thousands and thousands of years more and the sun is scorching hot as it's about to explode and emit it's last ray signalling the end of planet earth along with it, and Enid is still going strong, she's happy, she's got her pet hamster for company and Mia's suddenly dropped in to say hello, after being brought back to life a few hundred years earlier by the robots. The last sunset will be beautiful, worth hanging around for to see.

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 15+
- This is a sci-fi play set in the near and distant future, and features characters who are robots or part android. Within this context, the play features discussion of characters being "exterminated" and "gas chambers"; violence to an animal (which is revealed to be robotic); a character cutting open their wrists to reveal wires; and a character's eyes being gouged out and replaced with implants.
- Strong language.

***Is My Microphone On?* by Jordan Tannahill**

Synopsis

How do we move forward from here? Young people will no longer be able to avoid the consequences of climate change. They speak to the adults in the audience, holding them to account, questioning the choices that have not been made, the ones that children will be forced to make, and what kind of future they stand to inherit.

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 13+
- The play concerns the climate emergency.
- Includes the use of a homophobic slur.
- Strong language.

***Is This Good Enough?* by Avaes Mohammad**

Synopsis

A contemporary take on The Conference of the Birds (a 12th century epic Persian poem by Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar) meets '70's cult film classic, The Warriors. Young people from all over the city, all the different tribes, the Rudeboys, the Party Girls, the Footballers, the Chess Players, the Skateboarders, the Drug Runners and the Uniformed Schoolkids are all converging in the park one cold winter's midnight: Summoned there by the mysterious and enigmatic Cyroe. No one really knows who Cyroe is, or has ever really met him. All they do know is that when Cyroe calls, you answer. Eager to learn Cyroe's message for them, what they don't know, but are about to find out, is that far from having the 'answer' to what they might all be looking for, Cyroe is going to send them on a treacherous quest - across deserts, up mountains, over frozen wastelands and long dangerous rock faces - where they will face their worst nightmares and darkest fears in an attempt to find the answer for themselves and discover the true meaning of leadership.

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 13+
- Includes references to drug use.
- Features the death of a character (unseen, off stage).

***Model Behaviour* by Jon Brittain**

Synopsis

A fast-paced comic, white-knuckle-ride through the rollercoaster of personal (playground) politics played out against the backdrop of the world stage.

When Mr. Smallwood announces that his Politics Year Group are going to spend an entire day role playing what it's like to be a delegate at the United Nations, the keenest pupil in the class, Ronni is of course delighted. Everyone else in the class isn't and (with perhaps the only exception being Sarah, who never says anything) they all quickly exhibit their contempt for the project, as they take it in turns at adopting varying degrees of cynicism. This manifests as a rainbow of negativity including: disinterest, disdain, and the desire to destroy, disrupt and to liberally undermine everything at will.

What should be one of Ronni's most memorable days at school – a personal triumph as she displays her diplomatic and intellectual prowess, for the benefit of the whole of humanity – instead looks set on course to explode into a thermo-nuclear car crash of a day – in outer-space and cyber-space – all thanks to her typical and totally predictable classmates....who have never ever taken anything seriously in their whole lives. Apart from Sarah that is, and perhaps if people paid a little more attention to her and took the time to discover that she does actually say things, just very quietly and if Ronni could perhaps learn to follow as well as lead.....well perhaps, maybe the future could be bright - glowing with hope and not radiation.

Content guidance

- Suitable for all ages
- Some moderate language.

***Old Times* by Molly Taylor**

Synopsis

A play about stigmatism, friendship and justice. Stefi and Zafer are twins about to turn 18, they have finally reached adulthood. However life is throwing up complications; Zafer is fighting illness, and Stefi is scared the past is about to turn around and bite them. Five years ago, when they were 13 years old, their old school crew were involved in a crime. Except only one of them was accused and convicted, well-known trouble-maker and 'bad kid' Tom Joy. The rest of the gang kept stum and weren't even implicated, but it tore their friendship group apart, and the town has never forgotten the notorious crime. So when Stefi hears Tom Joy has been released from prison, and she starts receiving spooky calls from an unknown number, she knows it's time to get the group back together so they can get plan strategy, talk survival, and get their story straight. Stefi has a plan to protect them all. But when she gathers the seven friends back together under false pretenses, the ghosts from the past are reborn. Who was really responsible for the crime? Who betrayed who? Do they deserve retribution? And will they ever be able to move on?

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 14+
- References to cancer.
- Moderate language and two instances of strong language.
- Reference to the stabbing of a character (unseen, offstage).
- A brief reference to substance abuse.

***Samphire* by Shamser Sinha**

Synopsis

A play about school, special educational needs, love, independence and life in rural Suffolk. Alicia is neurodiverse due to her mother's substance abuse when she was pregnant with Alicia. However, she does not want her neurodiversity to define her. Alicia now lives in a children's home, and Jake lives in a shed. They are a couple, though Jake shows way more affection to his dog (a lurcher) than he ever does to Alicia. They rob farms for animals to eat. But when they steal a piglet from Chelle's dad's farm it's a big mistake - a bridge too far and their dreams of a house share in Leiston and working in the local nuclear power station are put in jeopardy. A Suffolk story. A rural story. A story with dogs, marshlands, prejudice, detention, emotional blocks, frustrations, neo-fascists, flirting, fallings out, threats of police action and a demon dog. Jake and Alicia are no ordinary couple - they're special and they don't belong...allegedly.

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 16+
- One instance of strong language.
- References to masturbation.
- Violence against an animal, portrayed in a non-naturalistic way.
- Reference to the death of a child (unseen, offstage).
- References to drug and alcohol abuse.
- Discussions around consent.
- Within the play there is a brief scene featuring an extremist group, who use some Islamophobic language.

***Strangers Like Me* by Ed Harris**

Synopsis

A play about grief, masculinity, relationships and friendship. Elbow's best friend Hamster has died, suddenly, unexpectedly. So Elbow is now grieving... right? But what is grieving? How do you do it? And what happens if you get it wrong? On top of which, privately, Elbow is beginning to feel they weren't even as close as everyone makes out. So it would be better if everyone just left Elbow alone – mum, dad, his stupid big brother Donut, but especially all those annoying kids at school pretending they really care... writing poems, singing songs and holding a vigil at Elbow and Hamster's favourite meeting place. Who do they think they are? Come to think of it, who do any of us think we are... deep down? Elbow doesn't know. Elbow just knows there's a strange feeling inside, or the absence of a feeling, or the feeling of horrible, horrible nothingness - which can only be dealt with through anger.

Content guidance

- Recommended for ages 14+
- Play explores responses to the death of a friend of the lead character (unseen, offstage).
- Strong language.
- In a non-naturalistic scene, one character - who is the embodiment of part of the lead character's psyche - has their tongue ripped out. It is then reattached later in the play.

***Tuesday* by Alison Carr**

Synopsis

Tuesday is light, playful and nuanced in tone. And a little bit sci-fi.

The play centres on an ordinary Tuesday that suddenly turns very weird indeed when a tear rips across the sky over the school yard. Not only that, but it starts sucking up pupils and staff while at the same time raining down a whole new set of people. But then, that's what happens when parallel worlds collide!

Confusion reigns as the 'Us' and 'Them' try to work out what is going on. How are Ash and Magpie identical? Can Billy cope with having his sister back? Who is Franky?

Eventually, though, cracks appear between the two groups. As the air here starts to disagree with the 'Them', the race is on to try to get things back to how they were and safely return everyone to the Universe they came from.

The play touches on themes of friendship, sibling love, family, identity, grief, bullying, loneliness and responsibility. And in the process we might just learn something about ourselves as well as some astronomical theories of the multiverse!

Content guidance

- Suitable for all ages.
- Discussion of the death of a character (unseen, offstage).

Helplines and Support

Childline

Childline offers free, confidential advice and counselling for young people aged up to 19 on youth specific issues. They can be contacted by phone, or live chat and email [via their website](#).
Phone: 0800 1111

Samaritans

Samaritans can be called 24 hours a day, every day of the year, and will listen and offer a safe space to speak about issues that are impacting you emotionally.
Phone: 116 123
Text: SHOUT to 85258

National Suicide Prevention Helpline

National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK is an overnight helpline who offer a supportive listening service to anyone with thoughts of suicide, open from 6pm to 3.30am.
Phone: 0800 689 5652
Email: info@spbristol.org

Mind

Mind is the UK's mental health charity, offering signposting to local services to support anyone living with mental health issues. [Their website](#) contains advice and tools for many issues, including who contacts for mental health emergencies.
Phone: 0300 123 3393
Email: info@mind.org.uk

Climate Emergency

Climate Emergency organise action and provide tools and information related to the climate crisis and ecological emergency.
Email: declare@climateemergency.uk

FRANK

Frank offers honest and confidential information and advice about drug use, and signposts support services for anyone concerned about a friend, family member, or their own drug use.
Phone: 0300 123 6600
Text: 82111
Email: <https://www.talktofrank.com/contact>

Drinkaware

drinkaware provides independent advice, information and tools to help people understand alcohol. Their website offers [advice and support](#) for a range of issues and questions relating to alcohol use.

withyou

We Are With You is a charity focuses on substance use, offering an online chat service to help people understand addiction and access tools they need to support themselves and others.

The Good Grief Trust

The Good Grief Trust is a support system run by people who have experienced bereavement, for people who are experiencing bereavement. They provide a [map of grief support in the UK](#), as well as advice, resources, and pop up events.
Email: hello@thegoodgrieftrust.org

Macmillan Cancer Support

Macmillan is one of the largest charities providing specialist health care, information and financial support to people affected by cancer. Their website offers a [community platform](#) where support can be accessed 24/7, and their phone line offers 8am-8pm support from cancer experts.

Phone: 0808 808 0000

Youth Offending Services (YOS) | Brighter Futures for Children

Brighter Futures for Children's Youth Offending Services offer advice, support, and activities for young people – or families of young people – who have entered the justice system, to prevent reoffending and provide support through the legal system.

Phone: 0118 937 2420

Email: reading.yos@brighterfuturesforchildren.org

Tender

Tender is an arts charity working with young people to prevent domestic abuse and sexual violence by promoting healthy relationships based on equality and respect, by coordinating and delivering workshops in schools, youth settings, sixth forms and universities.

Email: home@tender.org.uk