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School belonging starts at home

Belonging is a hot topic right now. It's on posters and internet memes, with some schools making it their number one priority. A sense of belonging at school has been linked to many benefits – including better grades, improved physical and mental health, and positive outcomes for future education or employment. But what does school belonging mean and what steps can you, as a parent, take to encourage it?

In psychology, a sense of belonging refers to the feeling that you form an integral part of your surroundings. Humans can be highly motivated to seek out a sense of belonging. For many people belonging emerges from relationships and bonds with other people. These bonds come from many sources. Most children first begin to form bonds with their family circle. As they grow up, their social connections expand beyond the household. Naturally, since kids spend a significant portion of their days at school, the school becomes a key environment to form connections and experience feelings of belonging

Benefits of school belonging

The most accepted definition of school belonging comes from psychologists Goodnow and Grady (1993). They describe school belonging as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.” Psychologists often view school belonging from an ecological perspective. In other words, multiple supports (teachers, parents, peers, etc.) come together to encourage school belonging.

Overall wellbeing, academic achievements, better physical and mental health, and increased self-esteem are often cited as benefits of school belonging. Similarly, prosocial behaviours, including participation in classroom and extracurricular activities, have been reported in students who feel connected to their schools. School belonging can also have the potential to prevent negative outcomes such as school dropout, low academic achievement, low self-esteem, behavioural issues, and feelings of anxiety and loneliness.

Now that we've established the importance of school belonging, let's explore the role that parents play. The following suggestions are actions that you can take to support your kid's sense of belonging at school.

Offer academic support and encouragement

In a 2007 study of American middle school girls, Pauline Garcia-Reid found that parental support is directly related to school engagement. School engagement (e.g., participation in class or extracurriculars) is a facilitator of school belonging. The students in Garcia-Reid's study who reported higher levels of supportive parental behaviours were more positively engaged in school.

Examples of academic support and encouragement include having regular conversations about school, classes your kid is taking, and plans for the future. These conversations can help nurture a desire to engage and achieve at school and inspire plans for higher education.

Get involved

There are many ways to get involved in your kid's education – at home and at school. Ideally, your kid's school will provide opportunities for involvement, such as invitations to school activities or opportunities to provide

input in educational decisions. Other examples of at-home involvement include sharing educational values and supervising school activities (e.g., monitoring homework).

Contrary to popular belief, research suggests that parental school involvement is just as important during the middle and later years of education as it is for younger years (Mo & Singh, 2008). Of course, that may be easier said than done. As teens gain more independence and busy schedules get in the way, it is common for parents to step back from school involvement. But remember – school involvement comes in many forms. Small steps, like attending a parent evening or getting in touch with a teacher, can still go a long way for your kid's engagement and performance in school.

Form close family relationships

Positive family relationships, for example, parent-child relationships, incorporate all of the strategies we have explored so far. Supportive behaviour, encouraging communication, and active involvement in your kid's life – at school and beyond – all contribute to a strong relationship.

Close family relationships may not seem especially relevant to education. However, research shows that family relationships directly affect school connectedness and academic performance (Kelly et al., 2012; Mo & Singh, 2008).

At the end of the day, it's about being there for your kids. When kids feel like they can come to you for support and advice in their everyday lives, that feeling will extend to support for school. A sense of belonging at home, in the community, and at school can do wonders for your kid's academic engagement and achievement.

Most of us take the first steps to a healthy sense of belonging at home, closely followed by school. Although we continue to form our sense of belonging throughout our lives, school belonging plays a crucial role in kids' development and motivation to belong moving forward. Teachers, educational policymakers, and parents all have a role to play in encouraging school belonging.

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