

# The Power of Belonging

## *Why Feeling Connected at School Matters More Than You Think*

We all want our children to be happy and successful at school. We focus on their grades, their friendships, and their extracurricular activities. But what if I told you that one of the most important factors for their well-being, both now and in the future, is their sense of belonging?

A fascinating new study from Monash University has shed light on the profound impact of school belonging on long-term mental health. Associate Professor Kelly-Ann Allen, the lead researcher, followed over 1500 individuals from adolescence to adulthood, examining the link between their feelings of connection at school and their mental well-being later in life.

The findings were striking: those who felt a strong sense of belonging in high school experienced fewer mental health challenges in their twenties. This connection was evident even after accounting for other factors like academic achievement and family relationships. In other words, feeling like you fit in, that you matter, that you're part of the school community, has a lasting positive impact on your mental health.

## Why does belonging matter so much?

Think back to your own school days. Remember that feeling of walking into a classroom where you felt welcomed, valued, and supported? Or perhaps you recall the opposite—the sinking feeling of being an outsider, of not quite fitting in. These experiences shape not only our immediate well-being but also our long-term sense of self and our ability to navigate social and emotional challenges.

When children feel like they belong, they're more likely to:

- **Engage in learning:** They're more motivated, attentive, and eager to participate in classroom activities.
- **Develop positive relationships:** They feel more comfortable interacting with peers and teachers, fostering friendships and a sense of community.
- **Cope with stress:** They have a support system to turn to when faced with academic or social challenges.
- **Build resilience:** They develop a stronger sense of self-worth and the confidence to navigate life's ups and downs.

# So, how can we, as parents, foster a sense of belonging for our children?

## 1. Partner with the school:

- **Open communication:** Stay connected with your child's teachers. Attend school events and parent-teacher meetings. Be an active participant in your child's school life.
- **Advocate for your child:** If your child is struggling socially or emotionally, don't hesitate to reach out to the school counsellor or other support staff.
- **Support school initiatives:** Get involved in school activities and events that promote a sense of community and belonging.

## 2. Nurture connections at home:

- **Family time:** Prioritise quality time together as a family. Share meals, play games, and engage in activities that foster connection and communication.
- **Emotional support:** Create a safe and open environment where your child feels comfortable expressing their feelings and concerns. Validate their emotions and offer unconditional love and support.
- **Social skills:** Help your child develop strong social skills. Encourage them to engage in activities that foster friendships and positive peer relationships.

## 3. Champion their interests:

- **Encourage exploration:** Support your child in exploring their interests and passions. This could involve extracurricular activities, hobbies, or simply pursuing their own unique curiosities.
- **Celebrate their strengths:** Focus on their positive qualities and accomplishments. Help them develop a strong sense of self-worth and confidence.
- **Foster autonomy:** Give them age-appropriate choices and responsibilities. Allow them to make decisions and experience the consequences of their choices (within safe boundaries).

## The Bottom Line:

School belonging isn't just about feeling happy and comfortable in the classroom; it's a crucial ingredient for long-term mental health and well-being. By partnering with the school, nurturing connections at home, and championing our children's interests, we can help them build a strong foundation for a happy, healthy, and fulfilling life.



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