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Building and maintaining school belonging

Though there have been a few positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of traditional school routines has not been one of them. Lockdowns and remote learning over the past couple of years contributed heavily to a decline in physical school connection, but the continued experience of often unpredictable isolation periods continues to challenge a sense of belonging for many students.

Studies have shown *a positive sense of school belonging* among adolescents can increase life satisfaction, self-confidence, well-being, and other positive emotions. The lack of a sense of belonging can contribute to higher levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and overall negative feelings. Critically, a strong sense of belonging at school can be a protective factor for mental health, reducing the likelihood of mental illness well into adulthood.

Among the many variables found to help build a student's sense of belonging, there are three key relationships: teachers, parents, and peers; and parents can have a role in safe-guarding all three.

Student-teacher relationship

It is well-known that a positive student-teacher relationship is essential for fostering a sense of belonging at school. When teachers provide academic and personal support to students and show they care for them, they can promote a sense of belonging in their students. It may be no surprise that teachers who are approachable, likeable, and have a sense of belonging to the school themselves are teachers who are more likely to grow or maintain a sense of belonging for students as well.

Whether in-person or online, school staff can positively impact students' sense of belonging and connection. In fact, students emphasise that the same strategies that help their belonging face-to-face are also helpful online. Each interaction is a chance to build relationships with students, reach out, and identify potential vulnerabilities in belonging and school connection. Young people want to be noticed and known by their teachers.

Parents can help the student-teacher relationship by keeping communication channels open, attending school events that might allow opportunities to meet teachers, and encouraging their children to ask their teachers for help when needed. Parents could reflect on their own school experiences, share information about their favourite teachers when at school, and help their children identify a teacher's positive aspects, especially for those teachers their child is struggling to build rapport with.

Student-parent relationship

We know from research that different parenting styles significantly impact how a young person copes with stress and perhaps even grows from the experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents reported spending more time with their kids but we also saw increased mental health problems and experiences of stress among many adolescents.

Parents who can easily recognise and work with children's inherent strengths and abilities are more likely to have children who are better equipped to manage their emotions and cope with challenges.

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Parents can use a strength-based approach to build school belonging in their children by:

1. Identifying their children's strengths
2. Teaching their children to be able to harness their strengths within their learning contexts, particularly when challenges and stress arise
3. Showing an interest and support for their child's learning
4. Having expectations and trust that your child can meet their goals at school
5. Strength-based parenting is one of the most recommended and effective ways to maintain or rebuild child-parent relationships by supporting and nurturing children's character strengths.

Peer relationships

Many large-group and extracurricular activities were eliminated due to COVID-19 restrictions, thus preventing students from forming positive relationships with their classmates. And remote learning and online groups, despite some benefits, did not have the same scope of effectiveness as face-to-face interactions for many students. This may have impact student's social identity, but also important connections for social support.

Many young people, following COVID-19, have identified that they want help making connections with peers and friends.

Parents can organise "play" dates (outdoor or virtual) and facilitate interactions through helping their children find opportunities to mix with others and build friendships. Parents might have a role in helping to break the ice with other kids or helping their kids to initiate the first steps to reconnecting.

Other strategies that build belonging

Recognise that some children may have a slower pace in reconnecting.

This past year, some children and young people experienced a wide range of experiences. Reconnecting can take time.

Be a role model

Endeavour to maintain your own social needs and connections. Was there a hobby or group you dropped during lockdown? What can you do to make sure you are feeling a sense of belonging as well?

In closing

Taken together, the most important messages to remember are that belonging is important, it can take time to grow, and the relationships your child builds through school are key to them building a sense of belonging.

▶ Click here to view a quick tip video by Dr Justin Coulson related to this Insights article

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