

Sense of Belonging and Academic Success: Research and Promising Practices for Young Children

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Today's Presenters



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The need to belong
is as essential to learning as
the need for food is to
survival.

Allen Mendler, 2001

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Define social belonging and understand what it looks like in early childhood
- Understand the importance of belonging for academic success and other positive life outcomes
- Use strategies to promote belonging and build positive relationships



What is Belonging?



Defining Belonging

Feeling like an accepted, valued, and legitimate group member



Belonging is a Fundamental Need

The need for social connections is innate and universal

- Fulfilling this need requires:
 - Frequent, positive interactions with others
 - These interactions must occur within the context of long-term significant relationships



Belonging is a Fundamental Need

The need for social connections is innate and universal

- It is a need—not a want



VS



Belonging is a Fundamental Need

The need for social connections is innate and universal

- We are sensitive to even very subtle cues that our belonging is threatened
- Neuroscience suggests social pain and physical pain activate some of the same regions of the brain



Exclusion is Painful

- Psychological consequences
 - Sadness, anger
 - Decreased self-esteem
 - Impaired self-regulation
 - Poorer cognitive functioning



Exclusion is Painful

- Psychological consequences
 - Sadness, anger
 - Decreased self-esteem
 - Impaired self-regulation
 - Poorer cognitive functioning
- Physical consequences
 - Rejection triggers an inflammatory response
 - Chronic loneliness poses the same health risks as smoking, drinking, and obesity



Belonging in Early Childhood



Belonging in Early Childhood

Seeking connection begins early



Newborns prefer to gaze at faces than at other things



Belonging in Early Childhood

Seeking connection begins early

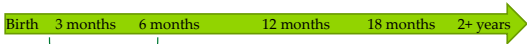


Infants begin social smiling when they are about 8 weeks old



Belonging in Early Childhood

Seeking connection begins early

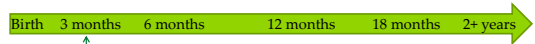


Infants begin to tell the difference between strangers and familiar adults, and they show preference for caregivers



Belonging in Early Childhood

Seeking connection begins early

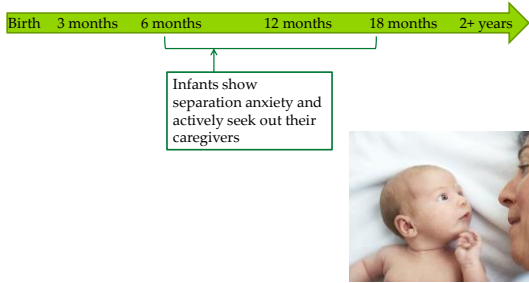


As early as 12 weeks, infants try to prolong social interactions



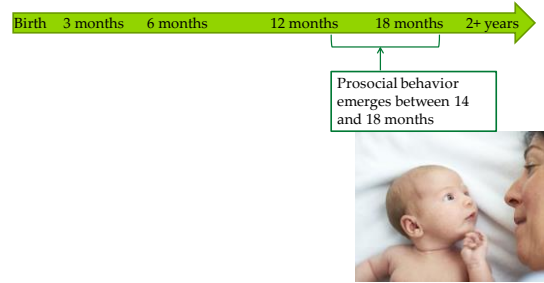
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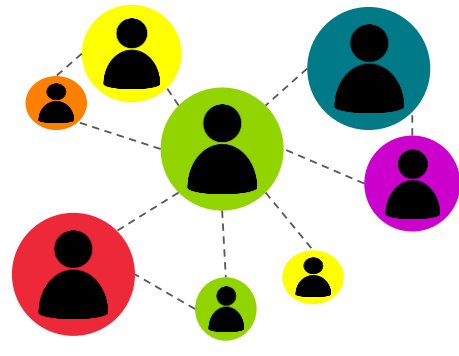


Belonging in Early Childhood

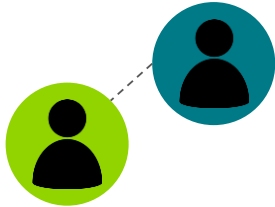
Seeking connection begins early



Belonging



Attachment



Attachment Theory

- An attachment is a special kind of relationship between an infant or child and his or her caregiver(s)
- Attachments begin forming by 7 months
- Attachments motivate infants to stay close to the people who can protect them from harm
- We form only a few attachment relationships

Attachment is Co-Regulation

- Attachment relationships are a form of co-regulation that help infants organize their worlds
- Attachment figures teach infants how to regulate:
 - Emotions (expressing and controlling them)
 - Attention and memory (where to direct them and why)
 - Social relationships (how to interact with others)

Belonging in Early Childhood

- Attachment
 - **Secure attachment**
 - Infant obtains comfort and confidence in the presence of the attachment figure
 - Infant has a “secure base” from which to explore
 - **Insecure attachments**
 - *Avoidant*: Infant appears aloof but is on high alert physiologically
 - *Resistant or ambivalent*: Infant may seek connection with attachment figure but fails to find comfort in it
 - *Disorganized/disoriented*: Infant may freeze, walk in circles, or exhibit other behaviors

Secure Attachment is Beneficial

- Children with more secure attachments
 - Do better in school
 - Make friends more easily
 - Have more positive peer interactions
 - Have higher self-esteem
 - Are more flexible



Secure Attachment is Beneficial

- Children with more insecure attachments
 - Have fewer positive social relationships
 - Demonstrate less persistence on tasks
 - Have more risk of mental health problems



Attachment is Not Destiny

- Attachment is not a zero-sum game!
- Infants and children typically develop attachments to more than one caregiver
- Each attachment relationship is unique



Attachment is Not Destiny

- Secure attachment fosters—but does not guarantee—other secure attachments and positive relationships
- Children can “earn” a secure attachment later in life through romantic or therapeutic relationships



The emotional relationships we have throughout life may be seen as the medium in which further development can be fostered.

Daniel J. Siegel, 2012

Teacher-Child Relationships

- Early childhood settings provide more opportunities for teacher-child attachment than later schooling
- Not all teacher-child relationships are attachments, but they can be a “surrogate” secure base



Teacher-Child Relationships

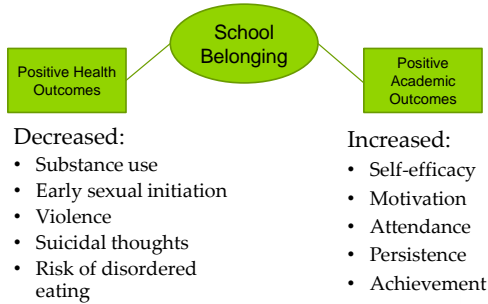
- Secure relationships with teachers can serve as a buffer
 - Kindergarten teacher sensitivity is associated with teacher-child closeness, even when children are insecurely attached to their mother
 - Research indicates vulnerable kindergarteners who develop close relationships with teachers are no longer at risk for aggressive behavior



Why Does Belonging Matter for Academic Success?

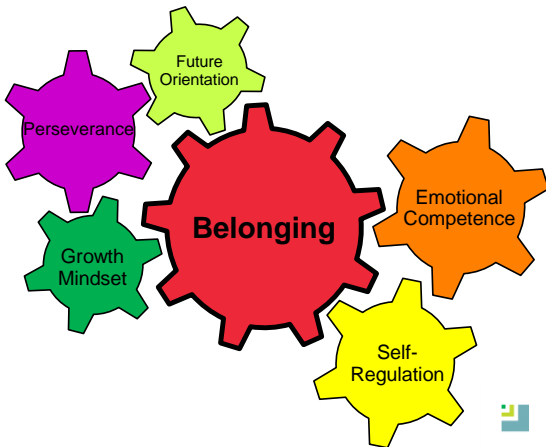


Belonging and Academic Success



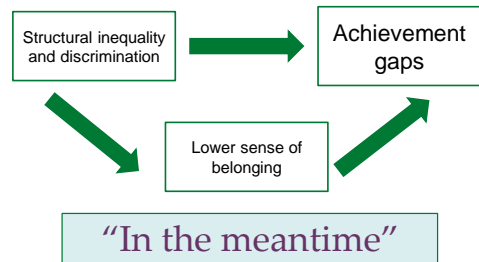
Belonging and Academic Success

- Evidence from early childhood
 - Young children who feel greater sense of belonging
 - Persist longer at challenging tasks
 - Report more enjoyment of challenging tasks
 - Learned more



Belonging and Equity

Addressing achievement gaps and other inequitable life outcomes



How Can We Promote Belonging in Early Childhood Settings?



Promoting Belonging

- Create a welcoming and inclusive culture
- Build relationships
 - Teacher-student
 - Student-peers
 - Teacher-family



Welcoming and Inclusive Culture



Welcoming and Inclusive Culture

- Avoid exclusionary disciplinary practices
 - Exclusionary discipline is any type of action that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual education setting



Welcoming and Inclusive Culture

■ Avoid exclusionary disciplinary practices

Children's early years set the trajectory for the relationships and successes they will experience for the rest of their lives, making it crucial that children's earliest experiences truly foster—and never harm—their development. As such, expulsion and suspension practices in early childhood settings should be prevented, severely limited, and eventually eliminated.

Joint Policy Statement,
U.S. Department of Education
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



Welcoming and Inclusive Culture

■ Avoid exclusionary disciplinary practices

■ Build a shared identity

- “We’re the Caterpillar Group!”
- Special days (e.g., pajama day, crazy hair day)



Welcoming and Inclusive Culture

■ Avoid exclusionary disciplinary practices

■ Build a shared identity

■ Respect the unique aspects of children's identities

- Intake surveys to identify children's interests
- Special friend of the week



Teacher-Student Relationships



Teacher-Student Relationships

- Teaching practice that promotes secure attachment
 - Provide affectionate, responsive, and sensitive care



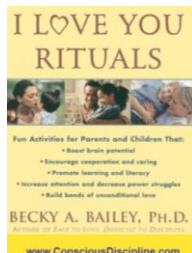
Teacher-Student Relationships

- Teaching practice that promotes secure attachment
 - Provide affectionate, responsive, and sensitive care
 - Minimize care transitions
 - Keep daily staffing and peer group patterns stable
 - Practice gradual transitions between rooms/groups
 - Reduce staff turnover



Teacher-Student Relationships

- Practice connection rituals
 - Component of the Conscious Discipline approach
 - Interactive, one-on-one “special moments” that include key elements:
 - Eye contact
 - Playfulness
 - Touch
 - Being present in the moment together



Teacher-Student Relationships

- Practice connection rituals

Positive Nursery Rhymes

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
What a wonderful child you are!
With bright eyes and nice round cheeks,
Talented person from head to feet.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
What a wonderful child you are!



Silly Greetings

Say to the child, “What did you bring to school today?” Then begin taking inventory of all the things (i.e., body parts) the child brought. You could say, “Oh, I see you brought your thumb, your shoulders, your ears ...” Touch each body part as you name it.

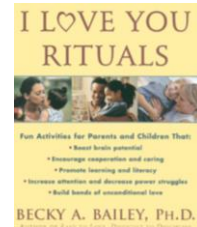


Teacher-Student Relationships

- Times to practice connection rituals
 - When relationship/trust building is needed
 - During routines and transitions
 - Greetings and goodbyes
 - Diapering/toileting
 - Transitioning from active to quiet times
 - Rest time



Teacher-Student Relationships



Check out www.consciousdiscipline.com for more ideas and resources

Student-Peer Relationships



Student-Peer Relationships

- Buddy Bench

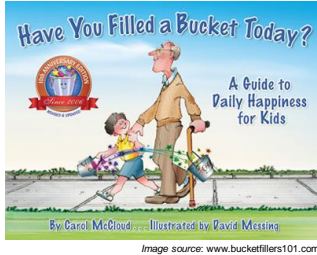


Image source: buddybench.org



Student-Peer Relationships

■ Be a “bucket filler”



Student-Peer Relationships

■ Be a “bucket filler”

- Reward children for doing kind acts by putting a “warm fuzzy” in their individual bucket
- Older children can write or draw “drops” that feature a happy message or compliment
- Present real-life scenarios and decide whether others’ actions are “bucket filling” or “bucket dipping”



Teacher-Family Relationships



Teacher-Family Relationships

- Hold intake meetings to get parents’ perspectives on their children



Teacher-Family Relationships

- Hold intake meetings to get parents' perspectives on their children
- Share positive and specific information about children with their families



Teacher-Family Relationships

- Hold intake meetings to get parents' perspectives on their children
- Share positive and specific information about children with their families
- Respect and value cultural differences

"Does this setting reflect my culture, my values, my language?"



Teacher-Family Relationships

- Respect and value cultural differences
 - Highlight diversity in all forms (ethnicity, family structure, gender roles, abilities, etc.)
 - Incorporate aspects of various cultures in the classroom and through group activities
 - Instruments and music from around the world
 - Books in different languages and featuring diverse people
 - Dramatic play props from around the world
 - Images depicting many people and cultures



Thank you!

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