Guide to Fostering Classroom Connection and Belonging

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Classroom connection and belonging is a foundational principle in trauma-resilient school communities. Students who feel a sense of belonging engage more effectively with teachers, with peers and with learning and are much less likely to struggle with a number of negative social, emotional and mental health challenges.

Tips for getting the most out of this guide
In these pages, you'll find a variety of strategies and curated resources to help classrooms become safe spaces of wellness and learning for all students.

In some cases, you may recognize ideas which you and your team are already employing. That's great! Be sure to **celebrate your small successes** as they tend to lead to larger ones!

In other cases, there may be new ideas offered that you'd like to try. **Pace yourself.** Remember: Slow and steady wins the race. Start small and build from there as you go. This guide is designed as a go-to reference for whenever you're ready to level up your game. These ideas are not meant to be fully consumed in one sitting or activated within one season.

Now, for the next few moments, **embrace your role as a curious learner** as you review this guide's offerings. May it inspire within you a deeper sense of curiosity for your students and a brighter vision for what's possible in advancing deep, authentic connections within your personal and educational spheres of influence.

▶ **Tips**

What Does Classroom Connection and Belonging Look and Feel Like?:

"A sense of belonging in school means feeling a sense of acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support." - Professor Deleon Gray, North Carolina State University

Classroom Connection and Belonging is creating a safe space and community for students where they feel **valued, accepted, respected, included, and supported** by their peers and teachers as individuals and as learners.

This might look like a class of students who problem solve together, share accomplishments with one another, and/ or face adversity as a united front – creating a sense of felt safety, of interconnectedness and of a welcoming space where students are **excited to participate and engage** with one another in classroom activities.

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An educator from this **_video_** from Edutopia shares some simple ways to build a belonging classroom which can include all of these attributes.

One of the most essential needs we have is the **NEED TO BELONG.**

Why Fostering Classroom Belonging Matters:

"A sense of belonging in a classroom or school is a protective factor for children's mental health."
- William Leever, PsyD, The Kids Mental Health Foundation

When students feel safe, valued and included within their environments, they become more engaged, cooperative and motivated to learn.

In the video, **_The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides,_** Dr. Geoffrey Cohen, author of *Belonging,* discusses the growing importance of belonging as we live in an era of increased isolation and division. **Through his research, he discovered that the very experience of social exclusion activates the same regions in the brain associated with the experience of physical pain.**

Not belonging literally has physical consequences within our bodies! In comparison, fostering a sense of belonging between teachers, students, and classmates has many important mental, emotional and physical healing benefits.

4 Ways Classroom Belonging Benefits Youth:
▶ Enhanced academic engagement, motivation and performance
▶ Increased student mental wellness and health. They report feeling happier and more confident.
▶ Lowered risk of mental health challenges and illness including anxiety, loneliness, and depression.
▶ Decreased risk of engagement in risky behaviors such as substance use, violence, self-harm and suicide.

A key benefit for schools:
When classroom connection and belonging are present, student engagement, retention, and achievement grows. To learn more visit MindPeace's new guide: *Strategies and Ideas for Boosting Student Attendance and Engagement.*

Attention vs Attunement

"Attention is not a substitute for real connection."
- Ricky Robertson, AdLit Teaching for Trust video

In our technology-infused world, we all have a great number of things vying for our attention on a daily basis. We seek social media 'likes' and 'swipes,' and when we receive them, we feel good… for a moment.

But, just as sugar-filled sweets offer us empty calories which leave us craving more sugar sweets, so too does simply 'paying attention' to a student's behavior without fully attuning to the workings of their inner world - the felt sense underneath what they say or do. Without attunement, attention can often feel sweet in the moment, but a bit empty or lacking when it comes to connection.

You see, attention sends the message, "I see you."
Whereas, attunement sends the message, "I feel you."
Lands differently, right?

In a classroom, attention may look like the teacher observing a student's behavior, while attunement might be a teacher getting curious about what might be underneath the behavior - which emotions the student might be feeling, which needs she might be expressing, and/ or which message he might be sending.

And while we can't expect teachers to become mind readers, it is possible for us all to become better detectives - to hold our curiosity a little bit longer, to ask thoughtful questions and stay present.

And the best part about attunement - you don't have to wait until a student acts up to practice it, as it can be just as effective with students who are disengaged with learning or even those stellar students behaving well. We all long for and benefit from healthy attunement.

Disclaimer: We recognize it's not always realistic for teachers (especially those who teach older grades) to be fully attuned with each and every one of their students at all times (given increased numbers and limited schedules). And yet, there are simple ways to foster attunement by simply staying mindful and curious in your student interactions.

Attunement is built on safety and trust
Without emotional safety and relational trust, attunement is not possible. That's why we're so grateful for this student-developed resource on *__Defining a Safe & Trusted Adult__* produced by our partners at *__Hey! Cincinnati.__*

Here regional youth share a roadmap for how educators can become safe, trusting and caring connections for students through building relationships, getting to know students and providing care, empowerment, inclusion, and daily encouragement.

Balancing the Scales of Trauma

"Students and teachers thrive in classrooms when these connections are made because if these connections are not there, and the relationships are not there, there is no way I could do my job and actually teach them." - An educator from Warren County Public Schools in The Power of Connections: Trauma Informed Practices in Schools from University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children

Having a strong relationship with a positive, caring adult at school and feeling a sense of classroom belonging are both examples of **Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs).**

PCEs are protective factors, like supportive interpersonal relationships, which boost youth resiliency and grow their capacity to thrive by offsetting the harmful effects and impact of toxic stress and trauma from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In trauma-informed care, we learn that **healing happens within relationships.**

When a student's classroom fosters connection and belonging, it can become a buffer to the adversity a child or teen may face outside of school and can offer youth the type of safe and supportive environment needed to begin the process of healing.

Four categories of PCEs include:

▶ Nurturing and supportive relationships

▶ Social engagement and connectedness

▶ Safe, stable, protective and equitable environments

▶ Social and emotional learning

These Positive Childhood Experiences are protective factors that can improve a student's mental wellness, school engagement, and academic performance. A supportive caregiver-child relationship and a student's experience of feeling attuned with adults and peers at school has been shown to lower risk of suicide attempts in high school students. These positive experiences set the stage for healthy adult mental health and wellbeing.

"Risk factors are not predictive factors, because of protective factors."
-Dr. Carl Bell, psychiatrist

The concept of PCE's originated from Dr. Robert Sege's HOPE Framework which encourages us to move from asking "What's wrong?" to "What's strong?"

HOPE, or Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences, describes the seven experiences that protect children from trauma (see graphic below), including feeling belonging in high school, feeling supported by friends, and having two or more non-parent adults who care.

Instead of starting a conversation off with a student about their problems, first ask about what is going well. Helping a student identify their strengths and protective factors gives the message that "*we are not the sum of all of our problems,*" *as Dr. Robert Sege puts it best.*

In fact, in a study by Dr. Sege, **children with the most Positive Childhood Experiences were 72% less likely to suffer from poor mental health** even if they had endured the most trauma compared to students who had faced less adversity but had fewer PCE's, especially strong relationships with family, friends, and communities.
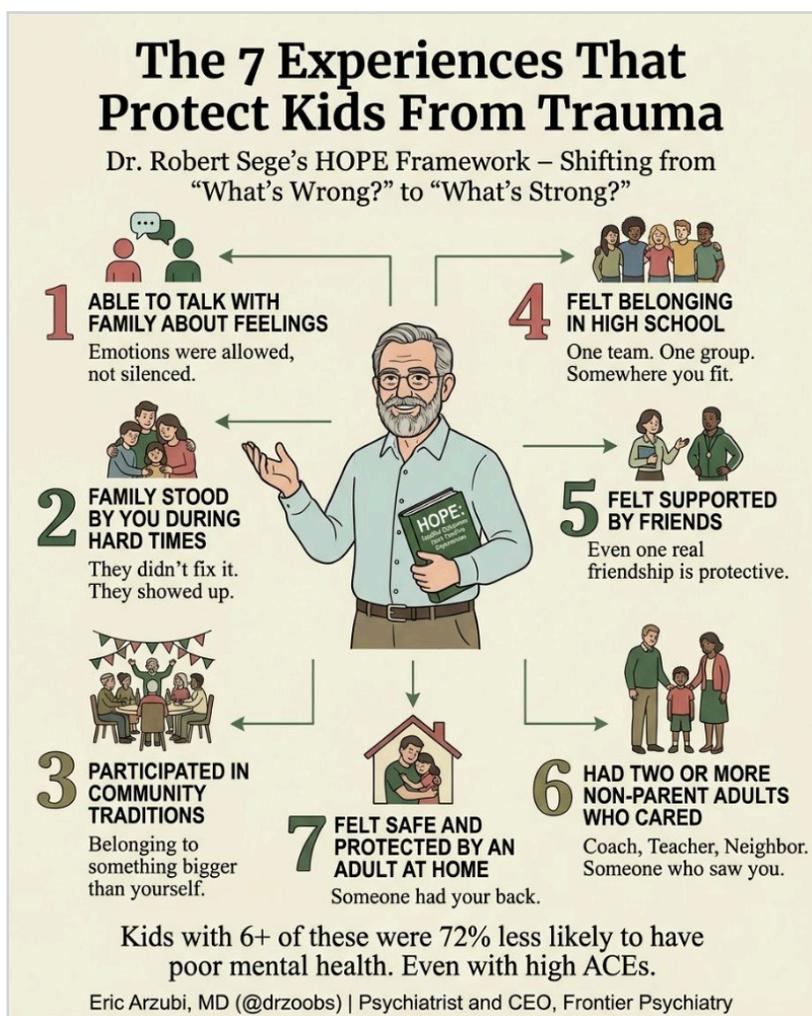
Shared with permission from Dr. Eric Arzubi.

1. **Take the classroom temperature:**

This Belonging Survey (for high school students) can help educators get a sense of their classroom's experience with belonging and can also be shared with school staff to gauge your team's culture of belonging.

2. **Offer culturally relevant content:**

Creating culturally-relevant classroom content which supports the community and identities of students in a classroom is a great way to help students feel safe to express themselves and to take more academic risks within their learning.

Professor Deleon Gray at North Carolina State University in this *video* gives an example about how inviting students to design shoes for Mars, in a community culture where students valued sneakers, brought more meaning and value to their classroom work and connected their outside lives with classroom learning.

3. **Help students find and foster their personal strengths:**

Get to know your student's strengths and encourage and empower them to use them in the classroom as they work together with peers to overcome challenges.

As an educator or leader, you can set up a *free Pro Dashboard* on Via Character Strengths to gain access to strengths-based surveys and resources for youth. Also, check out this *Research-based Activities to Activate Strengths in Youth* resource which offers two simple classroom activities to reinforce each student's strengths, ultimately increasing collaboration and connection among students.

4. **Promote play and movement**

Leveraging play and movement within the classroom (at all ages) offers students the chance to interact, cooperate with one another, and share in fun and memorable experiences. These types of shared experiences can foster positive group dynamics and contribute to a shared sense of belonging.

In *Anxious Generation,* Jonathan Haidt discusses the need for face-to-face interactions, reduced digital distractions, and promoting play in classrooms for students to counteract the growing negative effects of a device-based childhood.

5. **Validate Uncomfortable Feelings:**

Letting students know that it's okay to have a bad day, checking in with them frequently about how they are feeling, and showing them they are seen and heard are all helpful ways to validate their emotions.

Research in Action: Classroom Story Sharing
As Dr. Geoffrey Cohen discusses in his *video*, sharing stories of adversity helps foster connection and even bolsters confidence. When we're feeling down or discouraged, it's instinctive for youth to assume they're the only ones feeling this way or even presume it's because "there must be something wrong with me."

By normalizing tough times, students feel less alone in their struggles and are better able to overcome challenges. Stories of overcoming adversity also allow students to share and celebrate the ways they are growing, which in turn, strengthens classroom bonds, enhancing classroom inclusion and connection.

6. **Express Belief in One Another**

When students feel as if teachers and other adults believe in them, they begin to internalize those beliefs, which in turn, can positively impact their motivation.

To help counteract this era of isolation, Dr. Geoffrey Cohen, author of Belonging, offers 3 science-backed best practices that educators can use to foster a sense of belonging among all students: expressing belief in potential for growth, sharing stories of adversity, and focusing on affirming students' values.

One research example he shares is the powerful impact a simple encouragement (written on a post-it note) had on a group of middle school students. The middle school teacher simply added a note on edited papers that read: ***"I'm giving you these comments, because I have high standards and I know that you can meet them."***

When compared to students who did not receive the post-it note intervention, the students who did achieved better academic outcomes along a vast array of intervals well after the intervention was complete, even years later.

And while he recognizes that multiple variables are likely at play within each of these students' lives, the evidence is clear that for some amount of time, even a small post-it note encouragement holds the power to foster connection and boost student confidence and achievement.

7. **Learn and Affirm What Students Value:**

Affirmation activities help educators get to know their students and what they value. This can generate meaningful classroom conversations and help students realize their interests, strengths and differences.

The following research-based Affirming Values Activities from Professor Cohen's *website* can help students, when met with a challenge, remember who they really are and what they stand for. This little act can help ground a student (and their adult supporters) when faced with stressful situations.

Affirmation Activity #1 for ages 9-11
Affirmation Activity #1 for ages 12-16
Affirmation Activity #1 for ages 17+

Looking for other simple activities to help students affirm their values?
▶ *Prized Pictures...* Ask students to bring in a picture of their affirming value(s) to share with the class and then keep in the classroom. If working with older students, you can have them simply locate a photo on their cellphones and share with a peer or small group why that particular photo holds meaning.
▶ *Values-based assignments...* Develop student assignments where their values can be integrated into their work.
▶ *Create meaningful 'jobs'* for students around the classroom that relate to their identified values.

> For more ideas and activities to support belonging education within elementary classes, visit MindPeace's new resource: *Classroom Belonging Activities, Elementary School*
>
> ▶ **Note**

Hard to Reach Students

"The children who need love the most will always ask for it in the most unloving ways"
- Russel Barkley

Children and teens exhibiting big behaviors
We've all seen them -
▶ The classroom comics,
▶ The disrupters,
▶ The sassy commenters,
▶ The picking-on-my-neighbor initiators,
▶ And more.

And yet, often the students testing our patience the most and consuming the greatest amount of real estate within our heads are the very same ones who get written off as "just wanting attention." But, what if what initially looks like "wanting more attention," is actually a deeper (and often poorly communicated) desire and need for connection?

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In the *video* Teaching for Trust by AdLit, Ricky Robertson suggests teachers replace the words 'attention-seeking' with **'connection-seeking'** in order to keep this important mindset top of mind. Here he offers a simple intervention strategy he calls a 2x10 where he invites teachers to initiate 2-minute conversations with 'connection-seeking' students for 10 consecutive school days as a way to gain insights and better meet their needs for connection.

In the *video* *The Power of Connections: Trauma Informed Practices in Schools* by University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children, experienced teachers, school administrators and staff share real-life strategies, stories and outcomes for breaking through to those often hard-to-reach students.

A few ideas shared by these educators include:
- Ask the student *"What is the weather like inside your body today?"*, such as cloudy, stormy, or sunny as a creative way to check-in with how the student is feeling that day. They could even draw their 'weather' as a check-in.
- Giving post-its to students with affirmations throughout the day.
- Allow times for struggling students to initiate a structured break when needed
- Meet the child where they're at by connecting them with an adult mentor within your building who can play one-on-one games or other activities with hard-to-reach students.

Flip the Script!
After an intense behavior or escalation event by a student in the classroom, consider asking your principal or other staff member to step in to watch over your classroom, giving both you and the student an opportunity to deescalate and reset together in a calming space before returning back to the classroom.

This flips the script on traditional practices as often it's the administrator who supports the student in de-escalating.

By allowing the teacher space to help de-escalate the child without the pressure of managing a full classroom of other students, you're promoting a deeper relationship and connection between the duo and re-establishing the teacher as someone with whom the student can count on for support when their emotions become too big for their body again in the future.

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Students with low self-esteem
Students who are hard on themselves often struggle to connect with others. In this video, *Best Practice for Child with Low Self-Esteem,* Colleen Adrian from Connected Parenting offers a few simple tips on how to best support students who share complaints and judgements about themselves.

While it's tempting and natural to want to correct the facts when a student speaks harshly about themselves, resist the urge to 'fix' the situation and instead mirror back to them, in an empathetic way, the deeper feelings underneath the messaging they shared.

▶ **Often what may feel like a 'please fix it' request is actually a 'please hear and understand me' request.**

Maintaining a Healthy Connection with YOU!

When you are running on empty, it's unlikely you'll have the energy or patience to intentionally build attuned connections with students. And, that's ok! You are only human. If you are going to build strong, nurturing connections with your students, you must first tend to your own needs. Here are a few ways to get started…

Connect with Your Inner Expert
No one knows you like you. And while you are busy connecting with your students, it's equally important for you to take time connecting with your own needs. Self-care is a lofty term which means many different things to many different people.

Instead of sharing some generic self-care ideas for you to add to your to-do list, we thought it would be helpful to offer you something more powerful - questions. So, grab a cup of coffee or tea, shut your door and invest 10-15 minutes of quiet time checking in with yourself in an honest way. Here's a great resource by Mindful Teachers to get you started - *Realistic Self-Care: 12 Key Questions to Figure Out What Works for YOU.*

Stop Energy Drains by Reflecting on Your Locus of Control
Connecting with students isn't always easy, especially when there are multiple challenges a student may bring into your classroom that are completely out of your control. That's why it's important to stay tethered to what's within your sphere of influence.

This video *Keeping Your Staff Focused on What is in Their Locus of Control* by Jigsaw Learning provides a helpful activity for individuals and/or staff teams to reflect on what's within your internal and external locus of control. Individuals who believe their actions influence outcomes have a stronger internal locus of control versus those who believe outcomes are based merely on circumstances or chance who have a stronger external locus of control. Focusing your energy on factors within your internal locus of control will help you build more effective connections with students while also avoiding the slippery slope of teacher and staff burnout.

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A good starting point after identifying things within your control, might be to choose one small thing you can change within a challenging classroom situation. Having a small, tangible first step that is within your control can build self-efficacy and confidence.

Educators who have internal locus of control may feel more confident in their ability to improve or influence student learning in the classroom, which in turn could lead to improved classroom connection. In classrooms where teachers focus on internal locus of control, students have been shown to be more engaged and successful in their academics.

Connect with Other Educators
Oftentimes, your best teachers maybe located just down the hall. Take time to ask and share ideas with your colleagues on how each of you are fostering connection and belonging within your classrooms. And, remember, students aren't the only ones who benefit from connection and belonging. Carve out time to build up your own support circles both within and outside of school.

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