The importance of School Connectedness and General Sense of Belonging in Adolescent Wellbeing

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Belongingness

The experience of feeling valued, needed, or accepted and fit
Belongingness

What might contribute to an adolescent’s sense of belonging?

Adolescents need to explore the bigger jigsaw of community life, experiencing connectedness in multiple contexts.

But every explorer needs a home base to refuel.....

Parent attachment provides that safe base.
What is School Connectedness?

“The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by other in the school and classroom” (Goodenow, 1993)

Measure - Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)

- “I feel like a real part of this school.”
- “People here notice when I’m good at something”
- “Most teachers at this school are interested in me”
- “I am included in lots of activities at this school”
What is School Connectedness?

There are two major components to School Connectedness

1. Validation and Respect
   Validation is making people feel that what they have to say or contribute is meaningful and important to you.

2. Sense of Belonging, Acceptance and Inclusiveness
   School Connectedness is not only the relationship between teachers and students, but also peers, administrators, etc.
What the Research Says…

Extensive research has demonstrated links between school connectedness and:

- Academic outcomes
- Health-risk behaviour
- Delinquency
- Violence
- Markers of psychological well-being; and
- Mental Health Symptoms
## School Connectedness Mental Health Correlations

(Shochet et al 2006)

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N=2022; 14 schools

- **PSSM**: Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale
- **CDI**: Children's' Depression Inventory
- **SDQ**: Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire
- **SCAS**: Spence’s Children's’ Anxiety Scale
Prospective Finding

School connectedness predicted future depressive symptoms, after controlling for pre-existing depressive symptoms, whereas, depressive symptoms did not significantly predict future school connectedness.
Is the relationship between an adolescent’s sense of belonging and their mental health significant?

The model accounted for 59.8% of the student differences in depressive symptoms.
Comparing School Connectedness and Parent Attachment
Shochet et al., 2008

N = 153 year 8 – 12 students
49% co-variation between school connectedness & depressive symptoms.

Compared to 28% co-variation between parent attachment & depressive symptoms.
Connectedness across the Lifespan

Link between Connectedness and psychological well-being has also been demonstrated with:

- Primary School Children (Ross, Shochet and Dunn 2009);
- Adults in the workplace (Cockshaw & Shochet, 2007)
Summary of Research

Clear link between School Connectedness and academic outcomes, health risk behaviour, delinquency and violence and other markers of psychological well-being.

Students who are well connected to their school:

- Do better academically
- Have less mental health problems
- Are more motivated
- Have better expectations for the future
- Exhibit delayed initiation of alcohol and other drug use and reduced drug abuse in later life
- Exhibit reduced delinquency and crime, and lower probability of gang membership and violence
- Exhibit delayed sexual activity & reduced sexual risk behavior
General Belongingness and School Connectedness may be two of the strongest independent predictors of adolescent depressive symptoms. **Sense of belonging** is therefore a vital risk factor that needs to be considered in future research regarding the prevention of mental health issues.
Why is it so important to us to belong?

• Social acceptance was vital for survival. Therefore, we are hard wired to detect signs of rejection.

• Even complete strangers that you will never see again can impact you negatively. We are more affected by signs of rejection than signs of acceptance.

Self esteem is simply the “fuel gauge” of relational value.
The curvilinear relationship between relational value and self-esteem (Leary, 2005.)

![Diagram showing the curvilinear relationship between relational value and self-esteem.](image)
Major Teenage Issues

Identity & Self-esteem

Independence & Attachment
Helping our teenagers feel Valued and Included

How do I help my child feel Valued and Included?

At home, at school, in other contexts?

What do I do as a parent to promote or grow my child’s sense of belonging?
Making our teenagers feel like VIPs

1. Giving them opportunities to shine
2. Incorporating their interests
3. Developing relationships with support networks at school
4. Showing an interest
5. Helping them make and keep friends
6. Encouraging them
7. Facilitating new experiences
8. Providing a safety net
In summary...

Sense of belonging is vital for healthy adolescent development and wellbeing.

Connectedness to school plays an important role.

Parents provide a haven and safe base and can help support and encourage a sense of belonging at school and other contexts.