

## Creating education settings where children and young people feel they belong.

In Manchester, a key indicator that our children and young people are thriving in education is that they have a strong sense of belonging to their education setting. This is clearly stated in our belief statement articulated at the start of this toolkit:

*“it is important that every child and young person in our early years’ settings, schools and Post 16 provisions, whatever their circumstance or ability, has a sense of belonging, feel respected and is valued for who they are.”<sup>1</sup>*

School belonging is frequently described as

*“the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school’s social environment”*  
(Goodenow & Grady ,1993, p. 80).



<sup>1</sup> Consultation with headteachers, senior school leaders, teachers and key partner agencies took place in Spring term 2020 to identify shared core values. This statement received the strongest agreement and has been adopted as our central guiding principle.

## Why is belonging important?

Robust research<sup>2</sup> has found that a sense of school belonging is related to students' emotional wellbeing, inclusion, engagement with school (attendance and academic motivation) and educational outcomes. It also mediates the association between peer-bullying and mental health difficulties, particularly for LGBTQIA+ students (Hatchel, Espelage, and Huang, 2020). It can also empower peers to confront perpetrators of discrimination and harassment (Tam & Brown 2020).

*"The psychological sense that one belongs in a classroom and school community is considered a necessary antecedent to the successful learning experience."* (Beck and Malley, 1998, p. 133).

The Government, too, has acknowledged its importance in promoting children and young people's mental health:

**"school should be a safe and affirming place for children where they can develop a sense of belonging"** (DfE, 2016, p.8).



The value of school belonging is further highlighted when thinking about who might not experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to school.

There is research and anecdotal experiences that indicates those who do not experience of belonging to school may seek belonging with other groups that offer solidarity and membership. This may mean seeking belonging from the community (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002); however, in some cases, this might be from groups associated with exploitation (Roffey & Boyle, 2018; Timpson, 2019).

### High levels of school belonging are associated with

#### Academic Outcomes

- Higher educational motivation and task persistence
- Classroom engagement
- Improved school attendance
- Academic performance is strong

#### Wellbeing Outcomes

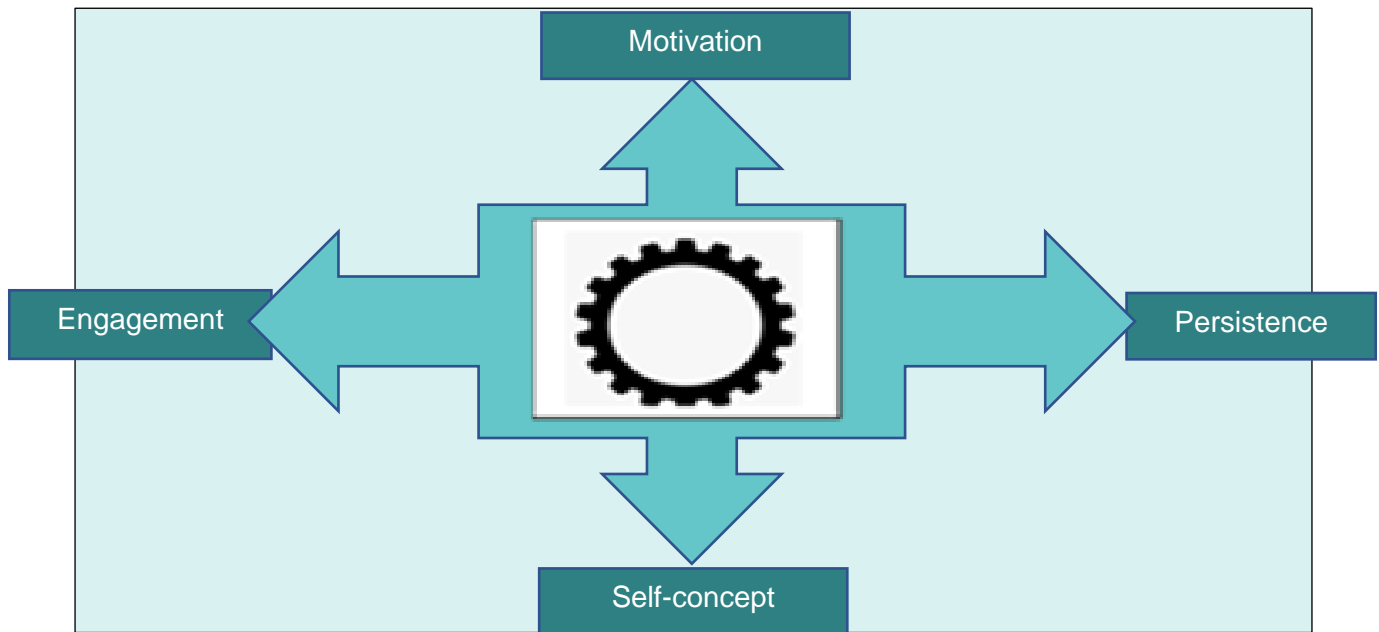
- Life satisfaction and happiness
- Higher levels of self-efficacy
- Better friendships
- Improved relationships with teachers
- More help-seeking behaviour

#### Behavioural Outcomes

- Reduction in absenteeism
- Fewer incidents of bullying, aggression, and discrimination.
- Lower rates of substance misuse.

<sup>2</sup> Osterman (2000); Craggs & Kelly (2018b)

Belonging is sometimes conceptualised as a 'psychological hub'; the central cog which supports other psychological processes such as motivation, persistence, self-belief and engagement.



### Which children/young people is this relevant to?

Belonging is understood to be a universal human need – we all need to belong. We can all recognise the thoughts and feelings associated with feeling excluded from a group or rejected by a group of people. Neuroscientists now have research to support the notion that physical and social pain are not that different from one another. Simply observing the social pain of others can give us painful feelings.

When our sense of belonging is threatened, however mildly, we know intuitively that it feels unpleasant<sup>3</sup>.

The lives of children and young people are socially complex. They are constantly monitoring their belonging status. Key times when a sense of belonging seems particularly important are:

- ❖ Early adolescence, particularly owing to the increased impact of social rejection.
- ❖ During transitions between year groups and particularly between education settings



### Differences in students' sense of belonging

While the majority of children feel a sense of belonging to school, **1 in 4 children do not**<sup>4</sup>. There are some themes within the group that feels a lower sense of school belonging in England, which includes:

- Children from disadvantaged communities (Riley et al, 2020)
- Those with additional educational needs

<sup>3</sup> Baumeister & Leary (1995)

<sup>4</sup> Riley, Coates, & Allen (2020)

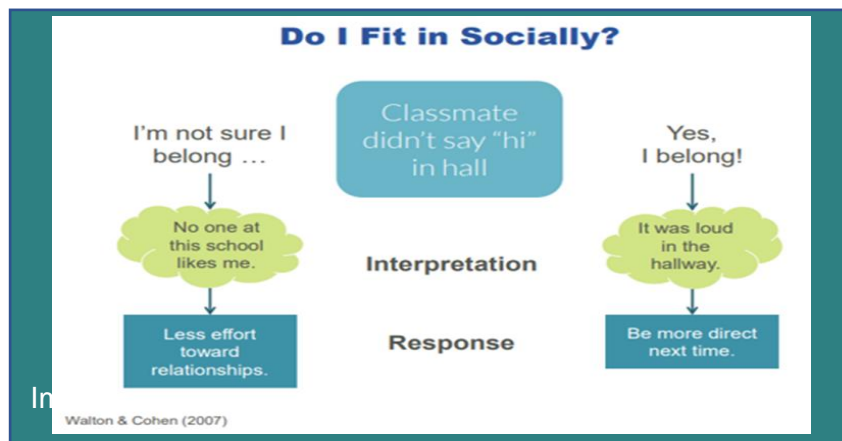
- Those experiencing discrimination in school<sup>5</sup>
- Young people from some ethnic groups, for example children who identify or are identified as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African reported lower sense of school connectedness<sup>6</sup>
- Pupils that have been excluded<sup>7</sup> (of which some ethnic groups and students with special educational needs are overrepresented)
- Pupils that present with behaviours that challenge and/or present as withdrawn

*Discrimination* due to protected characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) have been shown to reduce a sense of belonging. This is at the interpersonal level and system level (e.g., discriminatory policies), lower teacher expectations for some groups, and inadequate responses to discriminatory incidents).

This is particularly relevant to the Manchester community as the #BeeWell annual survey and 2020 Runnymede Trust report suggest that young people in Manchester have reported experiencing discrimination because of their race, skin colour, country of birth, gender, sexual orientation, special educational needs and disability.

## Why might a child/young person’s sense of belonging impact upon their feelings and behaviours?

How we interpret what is happening around us and to us can be deeply affected by how we perceive the world. Children and young people who have a strong sense of belonging to a community (for example a school/education setting) will be more resilient at times of difficulty. They will tend to see ‘the best’ rather than ‘the worst’ in a situation and react accordingly. It is important to recognise that many children and young people in our education settings arrive in the morning ‘expecting the worst’. This is not necessarily because the education setting itself has let them down – teaching staff may be going the extra mile – but their life experiences to date are making them vigilant to perceived threats (jokes made by peers, constructive criticism about work from teachers).



This can create a vicious circle where the beliefs of children and young people create behaviours which, in turn, can lead to adults excluding them and peers ostracising them. When young this might just be a small child being corrected by an adult and asked to sit away from the group on the carpet ...but when these experiences occur time and time again (due to

<sup>5</sup> Aerts et al. (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Chung (2019)

<sup>7</sup> Allen (2019)

events at home, in education and in the wider community), the child's beliefs about the world grow stronger and their reactions can become more problematic. Where possible – keep this in mind. Support poor behaviour restoratively, seeking to find ways to help the child and young person to successfully re-enter their group (class, friendship group, school) and feel valued and accepted again. Be clear that disapproval is for the act not the person and you retain positive regard and high expectations for them.

## So how do education settings foster a sense of belonging?

Listening to student's views has been shown to support a sense of school belonging (Shaw, 2019). There have been a number of research studies exploring what children and young people believe has fostered their sense of belonging in education. Some of the things they have identified are:

- ❖ Having friends and being a friend
- ❖ Being able to express yourself without fear of negative judgement
- ❖ Not feeling under threat of exclusion or isolation
- ❖ Feeling known as an individual
- ❖ School acceptance and understanding of ethnic, cultural and religious identity
- ❖ Schools valuing participation in a broad range of activities
- ❖ Teachers holding high expectations of all students<sup>1</sup>

As a starting point, becoming aware and listening to the voices of the individuals and communities your educational setting serve is vital. It is only by listening to students, families, staff, and other stakeholders that we can understand the needs and any barriers for individuals and groups, that are specific to our contexts (E.g., home-school relationships, experiences of discrimination, linguistic barriers, representation, power dynamics).

Research studies often refer to four elements of school belonging: teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, extra-curricular activity involvement, and discrimination (e.g., ethnic/racial, gender, sexual orientation). These have differing impacts for each individual and group.

Post-16

Top  
Tip

In post-16 settings, three factors are particularly important to support belonging:

- Social acceptance
- Peer support
- Faculty support (e.g., reducing barriers to participation consistently)

Vaccaro et al 2015

Research<sup>8</sup> suggests the following support children and young people to develop a sense of belonging to their education settings, by addressing these four areas:

### Prioritising Relationships

- **Connection with teachers**
  - Teachers who are available and willing to speak
  - Demonstrate respect and provide support (Ryan & Patrick, 2001)
- **Home-school relationships (Wallace 2019, Wright et al 2016)**
- **Peer relationships**
  - Including between classes and year groups
  - Friends with shared aspects of their identity can support belonging

### School level support

- **Commitment from leadership**
- **Good communication between staff**
- **Engagement with local community**
- **Moving beyond 'inclusion' to a commitment to foster belonging for all students, through:**
  - Representation of local community in the workforce and curriculum (including extra curricular activities)
  - Recognising and valuing the achievement, strengths, and contributions of individuals and communities served by school
- **Staff who feel skilled and confident, through training and support, to:**
  - Understand their identities, biases, attitudes, influence, and power
  - Address and discuss discrimination
  - Respond to incidents of discrimination (Lewis, 2016)
  - Teach about the nature of discrimination
  - Support students to understand their identities and what it means to them
  - Develop critical thinking skills about discrimination and power
- **Monitoring progress of students at risk of not feeling a sense of school belonging (see above)**
- **Supporting school staff members' sense of belonging and wellbeing. Again seeking staff views on what would support their belonging will be key.**

## What is important for children and young people who have already experienced a lack of belonging?

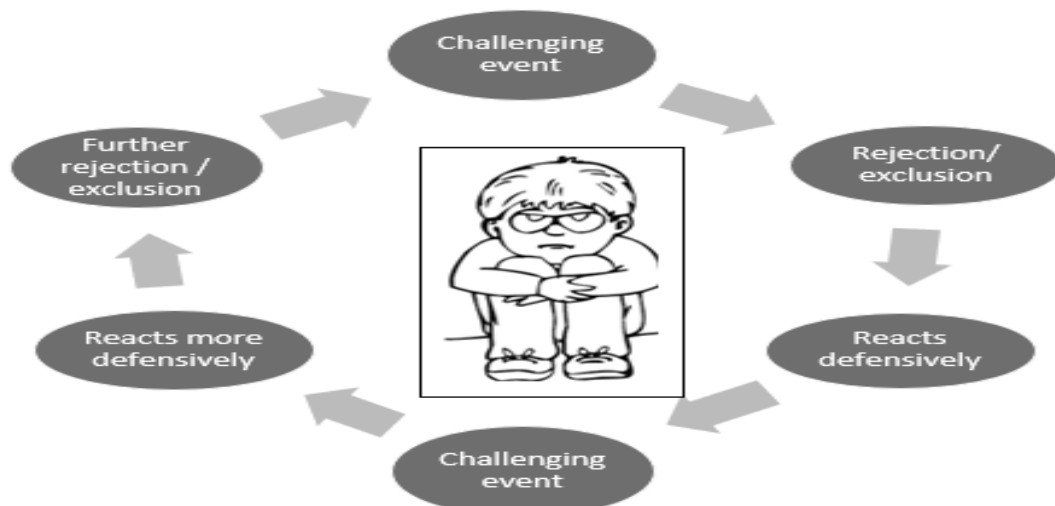
When children and young people who had already experienced disruption in their education places (managed moves, moves to alternative provision or permanent exclusion) were asked whether feeling a sense of belonging to their education settings was important they unequivocally said it was. In other words – not belonging did not diminish their desire to belong. They identified similar factors that they felt supported them to feel they belonged.

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<sup>8</sup> Greenwood & Kelly (2019)

Friendships	Feeling understood and accepted	Feeling safe	Feeling Supported	Contributing
<p><b>Facilitators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Adults prioritise fostering peer relationships</li> <li>*Positive peer relationships</li> </ul>	<p><b>Facilitators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Being listened to</li> <li>* 'Fitting in' – finding your place</li> <li>* An opportunity to redefine your identity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Facilitators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Respectful school climate – sense of equity amongst teachers and pupils</li> <li>* Sense of community</li> </ul>	<p><b>Facilitators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Adults willing to include CYP with complex needs and take a holistic view of challenges</li> <li>*Personalisation/ SEN support</li> </ul>	<p><b>Facilitators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Pupil voice is valued</li> <li>Extra curricula activities</li> <li>* Physical and recreational space</li> </ul>
<p><b>Barriers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Fear about being able to make friends</li> <li>* Feeling pressure to conform to peer stereotypes</li> <li>* Rejection by peers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Barriers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Being pre-judged negatively</li> <li>*Stigma associated with SEN</li> <li>*Poor adult relationships</li> </ul>	<p><b>Barriers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Victimisation by peers</li> <li>*Trail period/last chance narratives</li> <li>* Public scolding</li> <li>* FTE or isolation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Barriers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Adults not seeing pupil needs' as in their expertise or their responsibility</li> <li>*Inflexible school systems</li> <li>* Inadequate SEN Support</li> </ul>	<p><b>Barriers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Where it is a shared placement – the pupil does not ever attend the home school.</li> </ul>

The opportunity to be accepted (without being prejudged by their previous mistakes) was very important. Remember the vicious circle.

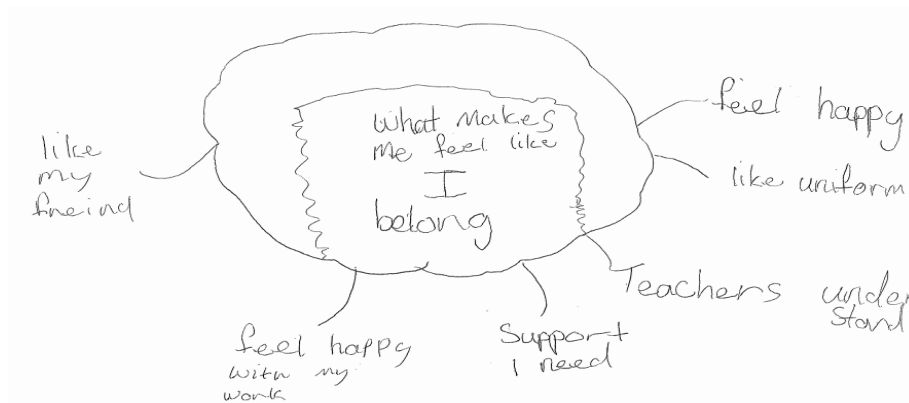


**Studies**

Cockerill (2019); Craags & Kelly (2018); Ellis et al. (1998); Nind et al. (2012); Pesonen et al. (2015)

## So how do you know if children and young people feel like they belong?

A good conversation can often be the best starting point. Asking young children to draw or take you to people and places in school which make them happy can be helpful. For slightly older children and young person you can explain what the word belonging means and then ask them to draw a web of ideas about what, in school, helps them feel they belong. Below is a drawing completed by a pupil from Manchester Secondary PRU.



**The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)** was created by Carol Goodenow (1993) and is widely used in research as a measure of school belonging. It is a short scale.

It can be downloaded here:

<https://youthrex.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PSSM-Scale.pdf>

It has 18 questions, each of which the CYP answers using by selecting a scale point.

### Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

Circle the answer for each statement that is most true for you.

1) I feel like a part of my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
2) People at my school notice when I am good at something.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
3) It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
4) Other students in my school take my opinions seriously.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
5) Most teachers at my school are interested in me.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5



## The School Belonging Scale

This was developed by Kelly-Ann Allen and Margaret Kern (2018) who have researched and published extensively in the area of school belonging. They encourage the use of the scale as a means of understanding the needs of students and intervening to support their sense of belonging. Instructions are provided below.

### Use as a practitioner tool:

In reviewing the research (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie & Waters, 2018), we identified 6 individual and relational factors that have been found to impact upon school belonging: academic motivation, social and emotional competencies, mental health, teacher, support, parent support, and peer support.

To help identify which factors are most relevant to the needs of your students, have your students complete the following questions. Then, use the scoring codes to determine which areas students are doing well at and where they might be struggling. You could also have students complete this again after intervention has occurred to see if scores improve.

### **Directions**

**Read each of the following statements and indicate how well this describes your thoughts, feelings and experiences (not at all, somewhat, or very much)**

	Not at all	Somewhat	Very much
<b>Connecting with Teachers</b>			
1. I feel connected with my teachers			
2. I get along well with my teachers			
3. My teachers care about me as a person			
4. My teachers care about my learning			
5. I can talk to my teachers about both academic and personal issues			
6. My teachers treat me fairly			
7. I respect my teachers			
8. I feel like my teachers understand who I am as a person			
9. I communicate well with my teachers			
10. I feel close to my teachers			
<b>Connecting with Parents/ Caregivers</b>			
1. I feel connected with my parent(s)/ caregiver			
2. I get along well with my parents			
3. My parents care about me as a person			
4. My parents care about my learning			
5. I can talk to my parents about both academic and personal issues			
6. My parents treat me fairly			
7. I respect my parents			
8. I feel like my parents understand who I am as a person			

	Not at all	Somewhat	Very much
9. I communicate well with my parents			
10. My parents support my learning			
<b>Connection with Peers</b>			
1. I feel connected with my peers at my school			
2. I get along well with my peers			
3. My peers care about me as a person			
4. My peers support my learning			
5. I can talk to my peers about both academic and personal issues			
6. My peers are accepting and tolerating of others			
7. I respect my peers			
8. I feel like my peers understand who I am as a person			
9. I communicate well with my peers			
10. I feel close to my peers			
<b>Connecting with Oneself</b>			
1. I know my strengths and weaknesses			
2. I believe I can do the things I try			
3. I believe things will work out, even if challenging at the time			
4. I understand my thoughts and emotions			
5. I like myself as a person			
6. I understand who I am as a person			
7. I am proud of what I do			
8. I get along well with others			
9. I'm good at managing my emotions			
10. I regularly set and achieve goals			
<b>Connecting with Learning</b>			
1. I enjoy learning new things			
2. I am a good student			
3. I am motivated to learn at school			
4. I have high aspirations for my future			
5. I value my classes			
6. I have a regular study routine			
7. I value my school			
8. I feel engaged and interested in my classes			
9. I feel comfortable asking for help with my schoolwork when needed			
10. I embrace failure			
<b>Connecting with Help</b>			
1. I effectively deal with stress			

	Not at all	Somewhat	Very much
2. I cope well when things go wrong			
3. I feel connected with one or more groups at school			
4. I have numerous ways to deal with problems			
5. I feel comfortable asking for help when needed			
6. I'm generally in a positive mood			
7. I easily let go of worries			
8. I know where to go for help			
9. I rarely feel anxious or depressed			
10. I am kind to myself			

### Scoring

Within each category, score the responses as:

Not at all = 0      Somewhat = 1      Very much = 2

Add up the scores for each category

Connecting with teachers: \_\_\_\_\_ Connecting with parents: \_\_\_\_\_

Connecting with peers: \_\_\_\_\_ Connecting with oneself: \_\_\_\_\_

Connecting with learning: \_\_\_\_\_ Connecting with help: \_\_\_\_\_

Scores can range from 0 to 20 in each category. Consider focusing on area where students score lowest.

Allen, K-A. & Kern, M. (2018). *School Belonging Scale*. Retrieved from [https://figshare.com/articles/online\\_resource/Untitled\\_Item/7163864](https://figshare.com/articles/online_resource/Untitled_Item/7163864)

## Useful Resources

**Boosting School Belonging in Adolescents Interventions for Teachers and Mental Health Professionals**  
**Kerry Ann Allen**

This has practical strategies/interventions to support the fostering of School belonging.



<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/ucl-centre-educational-leadership/creating-place-and-belonging-schools>

This has information about school belonging and then five videos

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/sites/ioe/files/place-and-belonging-unlocking-possibilities.pdf>

Description of the role of leadership and research findings from work in UK schools



<https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/inclusive-learning-for-students-building-inclusive-practice-into-your-life-during-higher-education-and-beyond/0/steps/309315>

An article discussing the role of belonging in an inclusive learning community

<https://blackequityorg.com/education/>

Black Equity Organisation outline the current barriers to black students in UK education, including the right to belong.

<https://theblackcurriculum.com/>

A social enterprise promoting belonging through addressing the eurocentrism of the UK curriculum

<https://hedcoinstitute.uoregon.edu/blog/2/lgbtqia-school-belonging>

A blog outlining evidence-based strategies specific for LGBTQIA+ youth (US based)

[https://asksource.info/sites/default/files/131028%20CDA%20Belonging%20Paper\\_web.pdf](https://asksource.info/sites/default/files/131028%20CDA%20Belonging%20Paper_web.pdf)

A document outlining school belonging for students with disabilities, including strategies (Australia based)

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/school-experience>

Guidance from National Autistic Society about improving the school experience and sense of belonging for Autistic students

<https://inclusion.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/>

Resources on how to develop belonging on a school policy level.

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