



I am whole, I am worthy, I am enough – Practices to foster belonging

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A sense of belonging is the foundation for children's wellbeing and learning. Our very own Early Years Learning Framework reaffirms this in its title – you can't 'be' if you don't belong, and it's tricky to 'become', live your best life and reach your full potential if you don't feel a true sense of belonging to place, people and, ultimately, yourself!

With one in seven children experiencing mental health issues¹ and up to 180 educators leaving the workforce every week², it's time we start really supporting belonging. Are you with me?

Let's get started!

¹ The Resilience Project: theresilienceproject.com.au > Media > Resilience and happiness depend on gratitude, empathy and mindfulness

² Professor Susan Irvine: theconversation.com/au > One in five early childhood educators plan to leave the profession

Practices to foster educators' belonging

Educators – not just children – need to feel belonging. Research shows that workplace belonging leads to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk and a 75% decrease in employee sick days.³

The basics

It seems obvious, but the small things count! Make the effort to always say hello and connect with your colleagues. This is a basic courtesy and an enabler of teamwork and wellbeing.

Departures count too! If it's been a tough day, acknowledge this and thank your team anyway. *'Wow, today was a challenge. Tomorrow will be better – it takes time for children to settle. Thanks for all your hard work.'*

Make your workspaces welcoming

Is there a suitable space for all educators to store their personal belongings? Pay attention to lunch and planning rooms too. A comfortable table and chairs, vase with some flowers or a painting or two don't have to be expensive and will really brighten up the space. Your local op shop or Kmart have got you covered!

Build a strong workplace community

In our enthusiasm for pursuing community connections, we can forget about our most important community – our team who is caring for and supporting children and families. How are you holding this space? What does community look like in the context of your rooms and the wider service? Discuss in groups what you can stop, start and continue doing to support your community of educators.

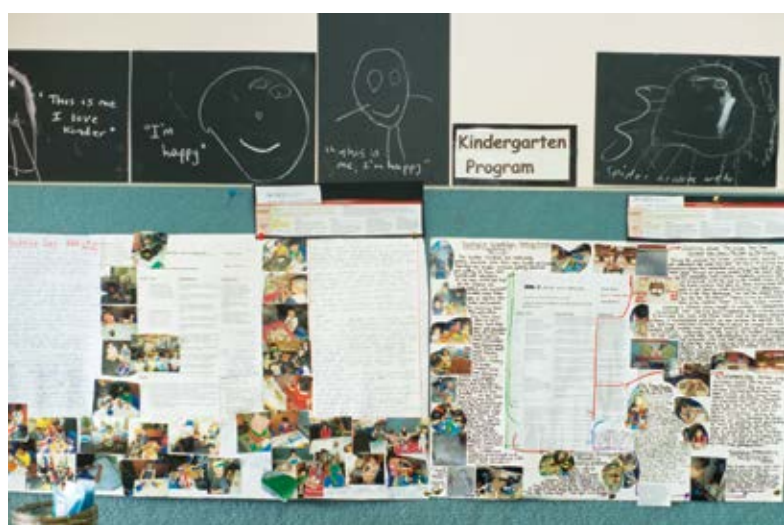
Lead by example

Strong leadership equals strong teams. How can your service foster this intentionally throughout the year? A few simple examples:

- Organise shared lunches or group dinners once a term. If your budget doesn't stretch or there is low engagement due to family commitments, at the very least, make sure you provide snacks and refreshments for every staff meeting.
- Explore community volunteering projects, hands-on resource making workshops or even a lunchtime walking group to foster wellbeing and teamwork.

Show appreciation

How do you communicate appreciation to your educators? How might you consider celebrating the successes of individuals and groups during staff meetings, formal celebrations such as end-of-year celebrations, or established morning teas?



Help your team learn and grow with specific, immediate feedback. Instead of saying 'You're doing a great job', try 'I really think you have a superpower around making new educators feel welcome' or 'Something I really appreciate about you is the wonderful way you engage with the children in the outdoor space.'

Acknowledge and encourage your team by having 'successes', 'good news stories' or 'shout outs' as a standing agenda item at meetings.

Set a benchmark for belonging

Lead by example and ensure your philosophy reflects your vision. Adapt your policies to help guide practice, and revisit these guiding documents with groups and individuals to ensure they're embedded.

Be prepared to call out undesirable behaviour – for example, an educator excluding another colleague by not acknowledging them at arrival.

Remember, true leadership is a picture, not just words. If you're not leading by example, you're not leading!

Continued on next page

³ Evan W. Carr , Andrew Reece , Gabriella Rosen Kellerman and Alexi Robichaux: hbr.org/ > The Value of Belonging at Work



Practices to foster children's belonging

Now that we've got our awesome educators covered, let's review a few practical strategies to support children's belonging.

Promote positive transitions

It's essential to work with families to facilitate children's successful arrivals. Why? Children's arrivals that are rushed and not supported by empathetic and understanding adults, or by a rotation of adults, don't set children up to be successful in early learning.

We want children to feel safe, participate and transition from home/school to your service as positively as possible. A few things to try:

Consistent staff

- Have the same educators complete the morning 'arrival' shift for an extended period. Three to six months is ideal.

Who's the best fit?

- Convenience and acknowledgement of other personal and family commitments are important but try and balance this with the 'best person' for the shift. It's ok that some educators may find upset children and families a little too emotionally taxing long term so perhaps they may be more suitable for a late shift. Focus on the strengths of your team.

A welcome space and ritual

- Have a connection space/ritual which you maintain during all arrivals so children know what to expect.
- Avoid too many toys, which can be a distraction and prevent children from 'being'.
- It's OK if children need to express themselves by crying or releasing energy in their body (by going for a sprint outside, for example) to reduce their stress levels and keep everyone safe.

- Help children feel secure with a warm, open facial expression and by using language to name their feelings. Remember, to support children's mental health we've got to name it to tame it.

Scripts to try

- 'Lily, I'm so happy to see you.'
- 'Zia, I've been waiting for you.'
- 'Khanh, I know it's hard to say goodbye to Mum. I'm here with you and will keep you safe.'
- 'You look sad, Mia – you have tears in your eyes. Can Justin give you a cuddle?'

Create a warm and embracing space for children

Think of yourself as a host at a party and your job is to support others to connect. Acknowledge children's arrivals, successes and contributions to play. Scripts to try:

During circle time

- 'Friends/my special people... Ariel is here today [smile and acknowledge child] and something very special happened in Ariel's family. Ariel, would you like to share...'

During mealtime

- 'Let's see who we have at the table. There's [pause and encourage older children to identify themselves] Katie, Emina, Finley and Youssef. Katie and Youssef are eating tabbouleh wraps, and I can smell something very delicious coming from your lunch box, Emina...' [continue by discussing the diversity of children's food in a positive way and promoting curiosity about cultural origins, how food was made, flavours, etc.]

During art

- 'Jesse, I love the way you've painted the fish mouth with a tiny nose like a beak. Why don't you share your painting with one of your friends and show them what you've been working on.'



Provide inclusive environments

Have a variety of experiences and consider how you foster belonging for all children, especially for those with less common play interests or an increased appetite for specific play. For example, how does a child who has a high need for movement (hopping, running, skipping, climbing) manage to belong if tabletop activities are over-represented and outdoor play is time-limited or low levels of teacher engagement are provided (for example, supervision is prioritised over scaffolding Serena's ball skills so she can play throw and catch with greater confidence)?

Incorporate children's voices

Remember to get children involved in designing play spaces and evaluating. Be inspired by Rinaldi's *The One Hundred Languages of Children* and encourage children to be artists, painters, sculptors, photographers...

Work with children to display, publish and present their creations – or not, if that's their preference. For example, you might have a photo display where children hang pictures of things that make them happy, or a word cloud of situations that make them feel frustrated or angry.

Incorporating children's voices authentically to support belonging means letting children represent themselves fully and not just the highlights!

Consider young children

When young children enter the world of your early learning service, they leave their families, homes, pets, routines and familiar ways of being. Don't take their dummies and blankets if they need them to self-soothe or just 'be'. Always be kind, make room for their personal belongings and advocate for their rights.

Partner with families

Get to know families and make it your mission to find out more about children's home lives – routines, traditions, weekend adventures.



Without really investing in getting to know families and the children we've been entrusted to care for, there is a risk that supporting belonging may be reduced to generalist pedagogies as opposed to truly individual inclusive practices.

Showcase family photos and artefacts, and explore projects with children that focus on appreciation of their similarities and differences. You might incorporate a type of passport club, which focuses on the different food and meal rituals of children's families or explores the diversity of homes children live in (e.g., apartment, unit, house, farm) and the people who occupy them (e.g., nuclear, same-sex, blended and/or extended family).

And finally...

Show some love!

Yes, really – familiarise yourself with love rituals which can be facilitated with babies to enhance attachment, and with older children to promote wellbeing and group belonging. Don't underestimate the power of touch and song!

Remember, you want children's inner voices to exclaim, *'I am whole, I am worthy, I am enough...'*

And so are you! All the best when it comes to enhancing your culture of belonging!



Did you know that your service can access FREE program support and mentoring to ensure the inclusion of all children?
Call 1800 177 017 today.