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BELONGING



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“Belonging” is a feeling that many humans crave. But what does it mean to feel like you belong in a particular place or with a particular group of people? Belonging can lead to feelings of comfort and confidence. It can mean feeling supported or loved. It can also mean feeling like an important part of a larger group. And we should remember that “belonging” can look and feel different to different people.

It is important to note that belonging is different from conformity. When people conform, they take on the same thoughts or actions as the rest of the group. Belonging does not mean that everyone looks, acts, or thinks the same. It is actually quite the opposite. Belonging is when differences are recognized, acknowledged, and celebrated. When people feel that they belong, they are free to be themselves.



Belonging in an Early Childhood Education Program

When promoting a sense of belonging in an early childhood education program it is important to consider both the children and their families. From the time a family enrolls, they should be made to feel welcome and safe in the program. It is important to be intentional about this through the physical space, interactions with staff, and through policies and procedures. Below are some ways to promote “belonging” in the program as a whole.

- Policies and procedures- Most programs have an inclusion statement in their parent and staff handbooks. While inclusion statements are important, the program’s policies and procedures should reflect that statement. If the inclusion statement says that all families are welcome; we should see different families represented in the materials. Another idea is to have examples and plans for any accommodations that your program will make for differently-abled children. Be sure that your program is living your inclusion statement!
- Inclusive language- When writing out the program’s policies and procedures, be sure to use inclusive language. Not every child is cared for by a mother/father. Using the word “families” in place of “parents” is a great way to be sure everyone is included. This could also be considered when planning events. Using language such as “special person” instead of mom or dad when inviting a family member to a classroom event would be more inclusive of diverse families.
- Welcoming new families- When a new family enrolls in your program be sure to get to know them a bit beyond their child care needs. Questions about culture, language, special traditions or interests can be helpful in accommodating each family. This is also good information for educators to use in getting to know the child in their care. New family interviews also provide opportunities to get the families more involved in the program with different events or parties.

In addition to the suggestions above each educator can work to promote a sense of belonging in their individual classrooms/spaces. Each child should feel like an important member of their classroom. Even infants can develop a sense of belonging!

- Inclusive pictures and materials- Be sure your books, posters, and materials represent a diverse group of children and families. Be intentional when choosing items. When purchasing or requesting dolls or figures, consider different races and cultures. There are lots of great options to purchase small people figurines that are differently abled. When looking for books, we want to consider different types of families. Try to add books with LGBTQ+ families, children raised by grandparents, and children who are adopted or in foster care. These are just a few examples of the beautiful array of diversity options.
- Traditions and holidays- Get to know what types of traditions and holidays are celebrated by the children in your care. This is also a great opportunity to invite family members to share their special traditions. We always want to take time to recognize the things that are important to the children and their families. This helps build community.
- Important details- In addition to traditions and holidays, get to know some of the things each child likes or dislikes. These little facts are likely big, important things to a child and it helps them to bond with you. If the child is younger or nonverbal ask their family for a few facts about them. For older children, show and tell can be a great way for them to share something they love with their educators and friends.
- Encouraging children to support each other- What better way to build community than children supporting and encouraging each other? Again, keep in mind that for young children many things that seem small are actually really big and important to them. If a child climbs the play equipment for the first time, encourage the other children to celebrate with them. If you are an educator with children who are potty-training, this is a great opportunity to celebrate each other. There are so many opportunities to encourage support throughout the day.
- Routine and flexibility- This one is especially important for infants and toddlers. Having a routine that is familiar helps children to feel secure in their space. While knowing what to expect is important, we also want to make sure that we have flexibility. If a child is tired before naptime, have a quiet place for them to lay down. If they are hungry before mealtimes, have some simple snacks on hand. Having their needs met, even if it means deviating from the typical routine, helps our youngest children to feel safe and loved.



- Individual spaces- Another way to help children feel like they belong in their classroom environment is to have individual cubbies or bins for each child to put their coats, book bags, or other personal items. Consider labeling their space with their names and a picture of them. This helps them to identify that this space belongs to them.
- Morning greeting- This one might seem instinctual but it is definitely worth pointing out. Greeting each child (and family, depending on the drop off procedures) by name is a great way to start each day showing the child that they belong in their space. Sometimes a hug or a distraction can help with difficult drop offs and start the day on a positive note. Encourage children in the class to also greet each other as they arrive.

These are just a few of the ways you can ensure that each child and family feels a sense of “belonging” in your program. There are so many more opportunities to create community within your program and in each classroom/space. So many of the little things you do on a daily basis make such a big difference in the lives of the children and families in your care. We would love to hear what your program does to encourage “belonging.”

Professional Learning Experiences:

- [Reflecting on Teaching Practices for a Happy and Healthy Classroom \(Hybrid\)- DIEEC](#)
- [Relationship Based Care for Infants and Toddlers \(Virtual Live\)- DIEEC](#)
- [The Parent Voice: Engaging Families \(Virtual Live\)- DIEEC](#)

Resources:

- [Creating a Sense of Belonging for Children \(ChildWatch\)](#)
- [Creating a sense of place: Considering routine, ritual, and belonging \(Penn State Better Kid Care\)](#)