

Belonging at school makes a difference

Tommy's Aunt Sue had just arrived for a visit. "Hi Tommy. You're a big school boy now! How is school?" "Good," Tommy said. "What do you like about it?" asked Aunt Sue. "Friends – Allan and Georgio." "Great! You've made some friends already." "I like my teacher too."

Aunt Sue also talked to Tommy's friend, Lulu, who had come over to play. "What about you, Lulu? How do you like school?" "It's good. If I need the teacher then I have to put up my hand. But if I need help at playtime I can ask Jackie," said Lulu. "Is Jackie your friend?" "Jackie's my buddy. She's a big girl." "What does a buddy do?" "She helps me if I don't know where to go or other stuff. She helps to look after me 'cos she's big and I'm new."

Starting school is a big change for children

Not only do they have to cope with schoolwork and teachers, but they also have to get used to being part of a class and a whole school. A lot more is expected of children when they start school and there are lots more people to get on with. It helps children to know that there are people at school who will look after them and care about their needs.

Belonging improves mental health, wellbeing and learning

All children need to feel that school is a safe place where people will care about them, where their needs for support, respect and friendship will be met, and where they will be able to get help to work out problems. When these needs are met children develop a sense of belonging at school. Belonging is very important for children's mental health and wellbeing.

Children who feel that they belong at school are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than other students. They are also more motivated to learn and be more successful with their school work. Research into children's mental health has found that a sense of belonging and connectedness at school helps to protect children against mental health difficulties and improves their learning.

Making friends and having positive relationships with teachers helps children develop a sense of belonging at school. Having older 'buddies' to turn to helps younger children feel that school is a place where they can get help if they need it. Looking after younger children encourages caring and helping in older children and helps to reduce conflicts and bullying. These are some of the ways that children's sense of belonging at school can be supported.

More ways schools can help create a sense of belonging

As part of KidsMatter Primary, schools look closely at ways they can continue to build strong positive respectful relationships with all students and families. This includes things like:

- making the school environment welcoming for all students and families
- encouraging teachers to get to know all their students and their families
- identifying ways of improving communication with families
- focusing on child and family strengths
- making sure that school policies on safety, welfare and discipline are clearly communicated and support a sense of belonging for children and families.

All children need to feel that school is a safe place.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can work with school staff to help create a bridge between home and school. When the adults responsible for children take a positive interest in what happens at school it helps children feel at home. It also makes it easier to pick up any problems early when they are easiest to resolve.

- Find out about the school and what your child is learning; participate in information sessions.
- Make time to listen to your child tell you about what he or she is doing at school.
- Let your child's teacher know if he/she is having difficulties and discuss what kinds of things you can do at home and school to help.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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