

## Family Belonging Builder



Set aside time for family rituals like cooking a meal together or storytime.



Create space for one-on-one parent-child time.



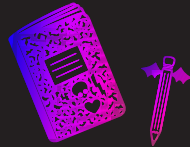
Develop a sense of shared meaning by telling family stories together.



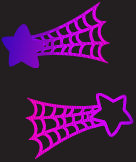
Select activities together.



Schedule regular family check-in times.



Start a fun tradition with roles for every family member.



Find things in common.



Work on family projects together.



Ask for a hug or high-five.



Share observations about what gifts each family member has.



Hang up photos of family members.



### Never miss a resource!

Join the e-community with The Kids Mental Health Foundation to receive free resources.



## Learn More from The Kids Mental Health Foundation



Helping children who feel like they don't fit in



Why belonging matters for underrepresented children



Why school belonging matters



### About KMHF

The Kids Mental Health Foundation is the leading organization promoting mental health for children in the United States. Its vision is to build a world where mental health is a vital part of every child's upbringing. Nearly 1,000 mental health professionals and researchers at Nationwide Children's Hospital, in partnership with other trusted experts, provide real-world knowledge and expertise to power the Foundation's free educational videos, guides and curriculum.

#### About Our Author:

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William Leever, PsyD, is a pediatric psychologist at Nationwide Children's Hospital and assistant professor at Ohio State University. Dr. Leever uses evidence-based mental health treatments to help kids feel better. Dr. Leever also works to increase awareness around the importance of social connection for youth well-being.



MONSTER HIGH

PROJECT  
BELONGING



How-to Guide

## Belonging Boosts Kids' Mental Health

Because people are social creatures, a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need. Children who feel connected to their families, their schools, their neighborhoods, or other meaningful groups develop a sense of belonging, which is associated with mental and physical health benefits. And there are things we can do to increase their feelings of belonging!

## Understanding Belonging and Connection from the experts at The Kids Mental Health Foundation

Children who feel that they belong in one or more areas of their lives tend to feel better about themselves and more connected to their community. This helps them to feel more secure. They tend to:

- Do better academically
- Be less focused on being bullied or excluded
- Build friendships easier
- Learn new skills
- Be more social

A strong sense of belonging benefits all four parts of a child's mental health:

- **Social health** - the ways that your child relates to others
- **Emotional health** - your child's feelings of connectedness or loneliness
- **Cognitive health** - your child's ability to think and solve problems
- **Physical health** - your child's body and immune system

## Risks of Not Belonging

When children don't experience a sense of belonging, they are at a much higher risk of feeling lonely. Lonely children may constantly be on edge, expecting to be excluded by the people around them at any given moment. This can lead to:

- Lack of concentration at school
- Poorer academic performance
- Increases in the risk of depression and anxiety
- Weakened immune system

## How Can I Improve My Child's Belonging?

To help bolster your child's sense of belonging and connectedness, try these ideas from the experts at The Kids Mental Health Foundation:



### • Model healthy relationship skills.

Kids who know how to listen, share, cooperate, and follow directions are more likely to feel a sense of connectedness with others. Social skills don't guarantee a sense of belonging, but they provide common ground. Parents can also increase a child's social skill development by coaching them on ways to manage intense emotions. For example, parents can help children use healthy calm down strategies when angry instead of acting out toward peers. With teenagers, parents can model how to solve problems with peers ("OK, let's get a better idea of what each of you are feeling and then come up with a compromise").

- **Provide opportunities for belonging and connection.** Invite friends over, attend special events at school, or allow your child the chance to interact meaningfully with others to build a sense of connectedness. Without social opportunities, your child's sense of belonging may decline, which you may have experienced firsthand during the early pandemic lockdowns.

### • Consider your child's motivation level.

Different children tend to develop stronger or weaker senses of belonging. Very social children may be highly motivated to connect with others. Other kids, including children on the autism spectrum, may have a lower motivation for social belonging. All children can benefit from a sense of belonging, so it is important for parents to invite people over to the house and provide social opportunities, such as play groups. However, it's also important to understand your child's motivational levels. If you're concerned about your child's motivation to socialize, it can be helpful to get a professional opinion from a mental health provider to rule out things like social anxiety.

- **Give your child perspective.** Your child's perception of belonging can be strongly influenced by experience. If your child experienced bullying or rejection in the past, they may be more sensitive to signs of not fitting in. Fortunately, social connection is based less on how many friends your child has and more on the quality of their relationships. Children with very few social connections can feel very strongly that they belong if they have high-quality connections. Parents can also help their children think differently about (perceived) negative interactions by coming up with alternative, neutral explanations of what happened with a peer or teacher.

*All content was written by the experts at The Kids Mental Health Foundation. More information about the organization and the author can be found on the back.*