



# The importance of social connection in schools

School resources

Social connection is defined as the interpersonal and interdependent closeness between people, resulting in a sense of belonging. Notably, it is not the number of or proximity to friends, or the frequency of interactions with others. Rather, social connection expresses the positivity and closeness that an individual perceives in their interactions with others. Social connection is a sense of trust and belonging in one's community. It is a feeling of being accepted and appreciated for one's best qualities, rather than tolerated or ignored. Common themes associated with social connection include an ability to be one's authentic self and a comfortable sense of peace. Because [cognitive processes are inextricably linked in the brain to emotional ones](#), social connection is a necessary precondition for learning and wellbeing.

## Why is it important for students?

In broad terms, social connection is critical to physical and mental wellbeing. A feeling of closeness to others increases longevity and strengthens the immune system, whereas a lack of social connectedness has been found to be more harmful to one's health than high blood pressure, smoking, or obesity. In educational contexts, social connection is especially critical. While it was once thought to have been incidental to learning and cognition, it is increasingly evident from neuroscientific research that a sense of belonging has a profound effect on the knowledge and skills that students can learn, retain, and apply<sup>1</sup>.

### Social connection is crucial for learning

When students have weak social connections, learning is limited through reduced executive function. Executive function serves as the command center of the brain which nimbly sorts and applies new learning. It is depressed by the stress and cognitive load caused by low social connection, and the following capacities are greatly diminished:

- **Organisation, planning, & time management.** Students who feel isolated will have trouble planning ahead or managing their time because they are caught up in the strain of their current state.
- **Working memory and attention.** Working memory involves the initial encoding of information and refers to the amount of information a person can hold in their head at one time without losing track or becoming confused. When students feel disconnected from their environment or believe that their teacher doesn't like them or believe in their abilities, working memory and attention are greatly diminished. Students spend more of their cognitive energy focusing on the source of their stress than on what they are learning. They are less able to listen, follow directions, and focus on complex learning.
- **Flexible transfer of knowledge & skills.** The sorting of new information into previously held schema or adapting current schema to allow for new understanding requires an unstressed brain. Lack of social connection also limits a student's ability to creatively solve problems. Framed another way, social connection is fundamental to human happiness, and when we are unhappy, our critical thinking skills are highly depressed. The availability of the prefrontal cortex for flexible use of knowledge or skills is compromised in a person feeling lonely or rejected.

The following vignette provides an example of how lack of social connection can affect a child's wellbeing and success at school. Kelun is an English Language Learner and new student to a secondary school in Auckland from China. Although Kelun is a bright student, he feels isolated at school and worries that his accent sets him apart from the other students his age. As a result, coming to school is highly stressful and he has trouble focusing on new lessons. Even when he does master a concept, he feels uncomfortable sharing his knowledge with others in group projects or presentations for fear of drawing attention to himself. Kelun starts to miss class to avoid the poignant stress of feeling like he doesn't belong. The emotional impact of his social isolation will unfortunately have lasting consequences on his self-esteem. He has less resilience to rejection or failure as a result of weak social connectedness and therefore hurtful comments are more difficult to simply brush off. Following a couple of low test scores, he has a harder time challenging himself, and his wellbeing is affected. Students like Kelun, with weak social connections at school, have lower attendance and rates of achievement, higher rates of school dropout, and may experience anxiety and depression.

## Social connection is important for mental and physical health and wellbeing

Students with poor social connections are more prone and more sensitive to the effects of the following:

- **Social threat and bullying.** Students who have weak friendships are often identified by bullies as prime targets. These students tend to have a low self-image and will likely not respond to aggressive acts by an abuser, although lack of an outward response is not indicative of a lack of internal impact. Students who are labeled as members of the 'out' group feel the stress of verbal or physical abuse even more strongly. The lack of a social safety net decreases their ability to recover from bullying and abuse.
- **Depression & anxiety.** Over time, loneliness or rejection may lead to mental illness. Depression and anxiety among children and young people are a growing problem in many countries. In extreme cases, anxiety, depression and even loneliness or social isolation can lead to tragic events like suicide and school shootings.
- **Substance abuse.** Alcohol or drugs are sometimes used to cope with the stress of being lonely. Long-time drug users usually report trying substances for the first time in secondary school.
- **Health issues.** A lack of social connection is a strong risk factor for death, outweighing obesity, smoking, and heart disease. At the same time, weak social relationships have highly correlated connections to each of these health issues, as well as Alzheimer's, high blood pressure, and general cognitive decline.

Affective disorders including anxiety and depression impact an increasing number of students in New Zealand and around the world. A significant percentage of all children and adolescents suffer from a major mental health disorder, particularly between the ages of 16 and 24. By contrast, strong social connections at school, at home, and in the community protect against mental illness and foster academic resilience.

This vignette demonstrates the power of positive social connections at school. Hana has strong relationships with teachers and peers at her school. She trusts that her instructors are committed to helping her learn and have faith in her abilities, even when she performs poorly. Hana knows that there is support available if she needs it, and she feels comfortable letting an adult know when she is struggling academically or psychologically. She is generally happy at school and has a few friends she can truly be herself around. These elements equip her with resilience from rejection or failure throughout her school experience. Because Hana trusts that her teachers and friends believe she will do well in challenging courses, she looks forward to planning out her academic year. She is not weighed down by the stress of social isolation, negative relationships, or perception of others' low expectations. Therefore, she can clearly process new information and plan out her daily or weekly assignments. She also feels motivated to prove her friends and teachers right, so she works hard to study for exams and produce creative projects.

## Characteristics of a socially connected student

A socially connected student:

- Looks forward to going to school
- Feels that they are liked and accepted for who they are at school
- Feels close to teachers, staff, and peers at school
- Feels like a valued part of the school
- Feels that they are part of the decision-making process on issues that matter to them and affect them
- Cares what the teacher thinks of them and cares about the teacher's wellbeing
- Trusts that their teacher and other adults in the school care about their wellbeing and academic progress and will help them when they need it
- Takes on the values and culture of the school

## How can we cultivate social connection?

Given the high value of social connection to student academic success and emotional wellbeing, it is worth the investment of time and resources. There are a number of ways that school leaders and teachers can promote social connection at a school and classroom level.

## Recommendations for schools

### Anti-discrimination policies

Schools can support all students through protective anti-discrimination policies. These policies should be clearly communicated to parents and students, including consequences for harassment. Depending on the school context, these policies may be easier to enforce if the parent and/or student community is invited to be involved in the policy-making process. As with any rule, guidelines must be swiftly and closely adhered to in order for students to take them seriously. The school may also find it useful to discuss why proactive inclusivity is important and why differences of background or belief system are so valuable. Hiring a diverse staff and developing a curriculum that represents an array of perspectives is also important to cultivating an inclusive space for students.

### Opportunities for service-learning

Service-learning combines academic learning with social responsibility. It is distinct from volunteerism because it seeks to benefit both the students and the community. Service linked to academic learning is also an effective teaching tool and supports student pro-sociality and social connection. In other words, students who learn to build bonds with their community are more skilled at creating rich and enduring social connections with other students and adults at school.

While charity-based service has been criticised for reinforcing existing power inequalities and hurtful stereotypes of groups of people as helpless, service-learning combats this limitation by emphasising reciprocity of learning and critical reflection. In a reciprocal service-learning program, students should be able to point to specific skills and awareness they have acquired as a direct result of their work in the community, rather than just ways they have helped others. In addition, thoughtful reflection through writing or discussion promotes a deepened awareness surrounding social issues. Students who are asked to write a paper, prepare for a debate, or create a presentation on their experience will form opinions about the social issues associated with their service-learning project. This reflection helps to connect students to their local communities.

### Training for teachers to support students with mental illness

Many students who develop mental illness do so during their school years, which can lead to low academic achievement and attendance, and a feeling of isolation at school. Students with mental illness are especially in need of social connection at school. While most teachers have not received specific training on how to identify and support students with mental illness, one of the most important actions they can take is to decrease stigma against mental health. Students who learn about the prevalence of mental illness and practice strategies for stress management will be more likely to turn to their teacher when they need help and more equipped to help themselves or others.

Whenever possible, teachers should work with mental health professionals to learn how various mental illnesses manifest in students, and how best to support students experiencing mental illness. Important questions for teachers to ask mental health professionals include:

- How can teachers make their classroom environments more accommodating, both physically and socially, for students experiencing mental illness?
- What behaviors should teachers address in class and when should they call for assistance?
- How can teachers avoid inadvertently exacerbating students' problems or setting off disruptive behavior?
- What risk factors and warning signs merit immediate referral to mental health professionals?

Training should also address key legal and ethical issues, such as protecting student privacy. While it is important to let caregivers know when students seem especially worried, sad, or angry, teachers should never attempt to diagnose a child. When speaking with parents, teachers should avoid making statements like, 'Jack seems depressed,' and instead offer factual observations such as 'Jack has spent less time at recess with his friends than he has in the past.'

For students who have been diagnosed with a mental illness, it is important to work with their mental health professional and read any accommodations carefully to support them in class. Training regarding student mental health should seek to help teachers become better teachers, not mental health experts or therapists. A teacher's main responsibility is to know the warning signs of students who may need outside support from a mental health professional, and to know how best to support students with diagnosed mental illnesses in the classroom setting.

### Advisory groups and mentorship opportunities

The systematic shuffling of students to different teachers and class configurations can make school a passive and anonymous experience. The advisory group seeks to counteract this effect, by pairing students with a teacher and a group of peers who remain constant throughout their high school experience. Advisory groups consist of roughly 15-20 students of mixed ages in high school settings and meet regularly – at least several times a week. Studies show that students are much more likely to be academically successful if they believe that even one adult at school cares about them.

Advisory groups first emerged in schools in the 1920s, when research began to emphasise adolescence as a time to reflect on one's personal and social development. While it is important to note that advisories should not replace guidance counselors, the advisory group curriculum should span similar topics, from making responsible financial choices to sexual health or conflict management. Successful advisors care deeply about their students and encourage their best impulses, and connect student interests and needs with resources and opportunities within the school community. They can also foster positive relationships with students' parents and other students by practising perspective-taking with each party. Finally, advisors may advocate for their students with other teachers or administration. Knowing that at least one adult 'has their back' can make the difference between coming to school or dropping out.

In a similar vein, students who are given the opportunity to serve as mentors may begin to reframe how they see themselves. For example, a student who struggles in most subjects but excels in math may brighten when recognised for his abilities. Students tend to embody the traits that they associate with those in that role. If they think of themselves as 'stupid' or a 'problem-student,' they are likely to reinforce this view, but if they shift this to 'mentor,' then they may strive to be someone others emulate. The more a student has a positive self-perception, the more connected they feel to those around them and the more comfortable they will be at school.

## Recommendations for teachers

### Building trusting relationships

While classrooms tend to be a place where off-topic conversation is discouraged, chatting with students individually or as a class in a non-academic way can repay in spades. Shy students who seem socially isolated may open up if the teacher makes clear that they care about the student's unique personality, talents, hopes, fears, plans, and frustrations. The most important piece here is to consistently make clear to the student that they are unconditionally accepted and valued.

Just as supportive yet strict parenting leads to positive relationships with children, this approach builds healthy social connections between teachers and students. High structure combined with high support creates trusting relationships between teacher and student. Therefore, firm enforcement of the rules is equally as valuable as compassionate responsiveness to student needs and feelings. Qualitative research has found that teachers who are compassionate disciplinarians build trusting relationships with students. Furthermore, by taking the time to cue into student moods, worries and frustrations, teachers can instill the value of reflecting on one's mental wellbeing. It is no secret that students often experience anxiety regarding their academic success. Schools tend to reinforce this anxiety by devoting every minute of class to content. By taking a couple of minutes to chat with students every day, teachers communicate the importance of personal wellbeing.

### Teacher advocacy for students

Students from minority groups are more likely to be bullied or marginalised in schools. However, when these students are given a space to support one another through a club or association, this helps to

lessen their stress and foster a sense of belonging. Whether students choose to disclose aspects of their identity or not can influence their stress levels, and the need to conceal parts of themselves can often produce high levels of stress. Teachers should also intentionally and frequently celebrate differences in students, and stop harassment immediately and firmly whenever it arises. It is also important to keep an eye out for high-risk students, and to have a clear plan in place for when bullying occurs.

In addition, the experiences of oppressed groups should be represented in curricula. For example, when taking a history lesson or visiting a historical site, teachers should invite students to try taking the perspective of every group involved. This practice allows students to broaden their perspective and also reasserts the value of students who may belong to a minority group discussed in the lesson.

### Teaching conflict management

Students will learn how to handle conflicts through explicit instruction and by watching the people around them handle conflicts. If schools do not teach conflict management, children will take on the strategies of their friends and family members, which may not always be positive and restorative. Schools have a considerable influence over students' social development, and it is important that schools use this to teach students how to thoughtfully confront conflict.

Unfortunately, schools often use 'negative peacemaking', or the premature use of bargaining or settlement procedures to 'keep the peace' rather than addressing or discussing the root of the problem. Some schools use strict rules and zero-tolerance policies. However, both forms of conflict management lead to weakened social bonds and breed mistrust. These approaches are based on the belief that students do not have the self-discipline or empathy to practise and learn from mistakes in managing conflict.

On the other hand, schools that emphasise to students the positive potential of conflict and practise the process of perspective-taking tend to have more accepting and peaceful class cultures. Everyday social interactions within the classroom can provide the backdrop for powerful conflict management instruction. Clear explanations and practise of sample situations help students improve social problem-solving skills. Students can explore and practice engaging in positive conflict in the following ways:

- Serving on a student government committee
- Serving as peer facilitators or conflict mediators
- Analysing multiple perspectives on public questions
- Studying problems of war, peace, or controversial issues

### Explicitly teaching perspective-taking

Perspective-taking, or the process of figuring out the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of others, and how they perceive the situation, is vital for positive conflict. Perspective-taking also encourages students to expand their worldview, which has been associated with increased altruism and helping behaviors, and reduced prejudice. Importantly, perspective-taking is a skill that can be taught. When students read, write about, and discuss fiction, they practice walking in the shoes of the characters. In this way, they have the opportunity to 'try on' perspectives and values different from their own. Drama and performance activities also encourage students to see the world through another's eyes. By encountering tensions and trying on new perspectives, students gain an understanding of how their own beliefs are formed and why other people think differently.

Teachers can also use history to teach perspective-taking. For example, in discussing the events leading up to World War II, a teacher may ask their students to take the perspective of Neville Chamberlain by

asking, 'Why might Chamberlain have wanted to ignore German aggression in 1939?' In a similar way, a debate teacher might wish to engage with current events by asking, 'What might motivate the Prime Minister of New Zealand to support \_\_\_? Why do \_\_\_ oppose it?' In history, current events and literature, taking the perspective of a non-central character - one whose perspective may not be explicitly outlined - can be particularly poignant. For example, you might consider why the Puritan community in *The Scarlet Letter* is afraid of Pearl, Hester Prynne's daughter. By seeking to understand multiple perspectives, narratives become more complex than simply 'good and bad.' Students may take this realisation into their own relationships and social connections.

## How can we measure student social connection?

The student perspective is of paramount importance when measuring social connection. Social connection is defined as **perceived** closeness to others, which means that student self-report surveys can be subjective and accurate at the same time. The following is a robust measure of student social connection at school:

- [School Climate Survey](#)

To check in with students regarding their sense of social connectedness in a more informal way, whether as part of a discussion or as a written survey, teachers can choose from the following list of related questions:

- Do you look forward to going to school? (Never/Sometimes/Usually/All the time)
- Do you feel you are accepted for who you are at school? (Not at all/A little/Mostly/Completely)
- Do you have friends you can be yourself around at school? (Yes/No)
- Do you feel like a valued part of our school? (Never/Sometimes/Usually/All the time)
- Do you feel that you are part of the decision-making process on issues that matter to you and affect you at school? (Never/Sometimes/Usually/All the time)
- Can you name two adults in this school who care about your achievement and wellbeing? (Yes/No)
- What do you think about the rules/values of our school? Are they important to you too? Do you only follow them to avoid getting in trouble?  
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- If you're stuck or struggling with a problem, what will you probably do? Who will you probably talk to about it?  
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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Benningfield, Potter & Bostic (2015).

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



### Claire Chuter

Claire is a Ph.D. student at Johns Hopkins University - School of Education. Her primary interest lies in improving students' empathy through virtual reality perspective-taking activities. Previously, Claire conducted research as a consultant for the non-profit organization Opportunity Education, as well as teaching in K-12 settings for four years. She holds a B.A. in Italian Studies, a B.S. in Human Development, and an M.A. in Education from the University of California, Davis. Claire enjoys developing guides with The Education Hub for teachers as they support students in their personal and academic lives.