How to create a sense of belonging

A guide for schools

thrive

Why creating a sense of belonging is important in schools

A sense of belonging comes from being in an environment where we feel accepted, appreciated and safe to be our authentic selves. When children and young people experience this, they're better able to connect socially, engage in learning and grow the confidence and self-motivation to achieve.

Given the significant amount of time pupils spend in their classroom environment each week, it's essential that they feel valued and included in this space.

We can promote belonging and feelings of safety by creating positive relationships and connections with staff and peers, celebrating individuality and establishing an open and safe community.

The strategies and activities in this guide are designed to help you embed these principles into your practice, ensuring all pupils feel safe, supported and ready to learn.

Strategies for creating a sense of belonging

Advocate for your children and young people

Building strong relationships and getting to know your pupils well equips you to identify and remove barriers to their learning, so you can support and guide them effectively. Time invested in building secure relationships now, will reap rewards in the long term.

Deep down, we all wish to be noticed and appreciated. Find out what they are good at and play to those strengths. Ask questions and take the time to discover something each child or young person would like to talk about to make them feel valued. Over time, this builds trust, and they will be more likely to pay attention to your instructions. Hold in mind that your relationship with them may be the one thing that motivates them to get out of bed and face the day's challenges – family disputes, bullying, frustration at being unable to engage in learning, etc. The welcoming environment you provide will nurture feelings of security.

Seek out and embrace new ways of doing things

Thrive training equips educators to understand the underlying factors behind children and young people's behaviour, including attachment theory, trauma and neuroscience. This insight prompts a different way of thinking about school and classroom management. Participants learn practical approaches to understanding and responding to the underlying causes of absenteeism and explore how creating a sense of belonging leads to long-term, sustainable improvements.

Thrive offers a range of courses and apprenticeships to support colleagues at all levels. In addition, Thrive-Online includes introductory training for all staff, including school leaders, teaching staff and playtime supervisors. This learning can be extended by becoming a Thrive Licensed Practitioner.

Discover Thrive training >

Adopt a systematic approach

In a busy school environment, it's easy for good intentions to be overtaken by the reality of juggling competing priorities. Adopting a system like Thrive-Online will enable everyone in your school to identify which pupils have the greatest need, plan interventions to support them, and track progress. Staff can log in at any time to check how a pupil, group or class are getting on.

Thrive-Online includes thousands of strategies and activities for school staff to use in real-life situations. Once you've completed some short questions, it will recommend the most relevant approach for you to take with that class, group or pupil. Depending on the age and stage of the pupils being assessed, and the challenge you are seeking to overcome, you will see different strategies and activities.

If a pupil is regularly absent, carrying out a Thrive-Online assessment will help you identify the underlying issues and select strategies and activities to tackle the problem in an evidence-informed, systematic way. Consistency and repetition are critical as you build a trusting relationship with the pupil and work together to encourage them through the school gates and improve engagement with their learning.

Book a Thrive-Online demo >

thrive.
online

Activities for creating a sense of belonging

This pack contains five activities that promote a sense of belonging within the classroom and can be used with primary and secondary-aged pupils.

Activities may be delivered consecutively or as stand-alone sessions depending on the needs of your cohort. You may choose to deliver all or some of the activities within each class, divide them among different year groups or use them to support small groups of children/young people who are struggling to settle. It is best to start the activities at the beginning of a new academic year when most children/young people will be moving to a new classroom and working with a different teacher.

Activities come with a helpful 'how to' set of steps to support the content delivery and learning. The activities also come with relevant resources (these may be in the form of a template, a useful website, a video link, etc.), a list of useful everyday classroom items and a brief summary of how the activity will support the social and emotional development of the children and young people in your care.

Activities for creating a sense of belonging

Designing a class logo

What to do

This activity helps to create smaller class communities within the wider school community. This fosters a sense of unity and a group identity for the members of each class.

How

1. Explain that you are going to invite everyone in the group to design a logo that represents the class. Let the class know that there will be a vote for their favourite logo and the winning entry will be displayed in the classroom.

2. Explore the purpose of logos. Share some famous logos on the interactive whiteboard/display board and ask the class how many they can identify.

3. Look at the different logos and identify their features (for example, circle, shield shape, name). Discuss what makes them stand out (colour, font, imagery, etc).

4. If the class has a themed name – for example, Kingfishers, Donaldson, Cavell – discuss some of the characteristics associated with the group name. If your school does not have themed class names then discuss some of the characteristics and traits your class would like to be known for (ie, kindness, competitive spirit, politeness, etc).

5. Provide all pupils with the logo design template and materials for designing their own class logo.

6. Give each pupil the opportunity to talk about their finished logo and the features they included in relation to their class.

7. Display the logos in the classroom for everyone to see over several days.

8. Give all pupils a slip of paper and ask them to vote for a logo that is not their own. Count up the votes and display the winning logo at the entrance to the classroom. This logo could be used to identify the class in school events such as celebration days, sports days and assemblies.

Adaptations for secondary schools

Incorporate this activity into form tutor time and have the class design a form logo instead of a class logo. Split the form into groups – each group will design a 'mini logo' for each class trait they have identified. Bring together all the trait logos to create a form/tutor group logo.

What you need

- [ ] **Logo design sheet** (see page 7)
- [ ] Examples of well-known logos
- [ ] Paper
- [ ] Colouring pens/pencils
- [ ] Box or tub to place votes in

Why

When we feel we belong within a community, we are able to socially engage with others and be our true, authentic selves. Creating a logo that represents the identity and unity of the class reinforces the idea that children have another community to turn to in times of need. This activity supports with the development of confidence, belonging and identity.
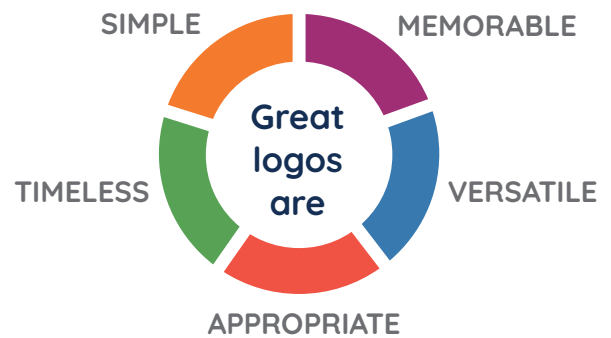
My class logo

Design/logo name:

_____

SIMPLE

MEMORABLE

Great logos are

TIMELESS

VERSATILE

APPROPRIATE

What makes your logo unique?

Explain which design features will make it stand out.

How does your logo represent your class and how will we see this within your design?

Create your design below!

Establish class rules together through song

What to do

This activity invites pupils to discuss and establish an agreed set of class rules that can be organised and presented in a creative manner by composing a song about them.

How

1. Discuss why we have rules – what would happen if we didn't have them? Review the importance of rules and how they help keep everyone safe.

2. Ask the pupils to discuss the following question in pairs: what rules might we need in the classroom to keep everyone safe and happy? Now, invite pupils to individually write a list of five rules they feel would be appropriate in the classroom.

3. Share as a group and identify any rules that appear on most pupils' lists. Choose the top five.

4. Use the rules as substitute lyrics for a popular song. For example, change "Green, green grass, blue, blue sky" by George Ezra to "Quiet, quiet voice, when it's learning time."

5. Have fun singing together!

6. Display the rules in the classroom.

Adaptations for secondary schools

Focus on rules for the whole school instead of just the classroom. Together, reflect on and discuss rules that feel most appropriate for the setting. Which ones focus on safety? Are they negotiable/non-negotiable? Discuss and incorporate some adult rules that develop students' sense of safety. A signed contract can be used instead of a song (although students may still wish to do this!). Have the adults and students sign the contract and ensure that the rules are upheld.

What you need

- ☐ Paper
- ☐ Pens/pencils
- ☐ Song choices (have a few appropriate options and ask the students to select their favourite)
- ☐ ICT resources for typing up the finished document
- ☐ School headed paper for the adolescent contract

Why

This collaborative activity involves children and young people in setting boundaries. It prevents them from feeling that they are simply being ordered or told what they need to do. When children and young people are involved in making the rules, they will have more capacity (and desire) to abide by the rules. They are also more likely to feel that their views have been heard, respected and included within their class community.

Together we can

What to do

This activity is a team-building day for children and young people to work together in small groups and undertake problem-solving challenges. It is an opportunity for pupils to get to know one another and develop teamwork skills in a fun, non-competitive way.

How

1. Place pupils into groups of four. You could plan these in advance or have random groupings.

2. Explain that they will have a series of problem-solving tasks to work on together and will need to use teamwork skills to solve them. Invite pupils to share what positive teamwork looks like – record these skills/attributes on the board and revisit these at the beginning of each task.

3. Task 1: In 15 minutes, create a chair using only newspaper and Sellotape. It must seat one member of the group.

4. Task 2: Build the tallest tower possible using only spaghetti and marshmallows!

5. Task 3: In five minutes, identify a common thread that is shared by each group member. This could be something you like to do, music you enjoy, a sport, etc. Now, in 25 minutes, make and design a flag that represents your group based on your common thread.

6. Task 4: Build a cup pyramid! Using only an elastic band with four pieces of string tied to it (a piece for every group member), create a cup pyramid with a base layer of three cups, a middle layer of two cups and a top layer of one cup. Now, use the strings to expand and tighten the bands to get around and move the cups. For a more detailed description of this activity, look at **Ms. Sepp's Counselor Corner: Teamwork – Cup Stack (mssepp.blogspot.com)**

7. Following each task, evaluate what went well, what was difficult and the teamwork skills that were required and applied.

Adaptations for secondary schools

Extend the challenge by inviting young people to devise an activity for others. The activity must be achievable and they can test this by having a go themselves. Students must include a set of simple instructions and identify the skills involved for the activity. Share the activities with the other groups to try.

What you need

- ☐ **Ms. Sepp's Counselor Corner: Teamwork: Cup Stack (mssepp. blogspot.com)**
- ☐ **43 Best Team-Building Games and Activities for the Classroom (weareteachers.com)** for alternative task ideas.
- ☐ Newspapers
- ☐ Sellotape
- ☐ Scissors
- ☐ Spaghetti (uncooked)
- ☐ Marshmallows
- ☐ Felt-tip pens
- ☐ Flag template (paper or fabric)
- ☐ Elastic bands
- ☐ String
- ☐ Plastic or paper cups

Why

Working alongside others develops a whole host of essential life skills, including communication, teamwork, debating, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Supporting children and young people to develop their friendships and strengthen their connections with each other early in the new school year will increase their confidence and give them a sense of belonging within their setting. Repeating this throughout the academic year when students are more comfortable and settled with one another, will allow them to challenge their place and explore their responsibilities within the group space safely.

People bingo

What to do

This activity encourages pupils to communicate verbally with one another by asking specific and direct questions. This enables them to find out more about their classmates in a safe and supported way.

How

1. Explain the concept of 'people bingo' by using the template provided as an example. Encourage the children to move around the classroom and find others who match the qualities in the bingo tile.

2. Set guidelines around the activity. For example, they must introduce themselves, read out the question, share their own answer, and thank their classmate before moving on: "Hi, I am Kerry. My favourite pet is a dog, what is yours? Thank you for sharing." They can only record someone on their sheet once.

3. Give pupils ten minutes to write their own responses to the questions on their sheet.

4. Give pupils 15 minutes to move around the classroom, filling in as much of the people bingo sheet as possible.

5. Now, bring the group together and ask the pupils to share their findings. Who do they have similarities with? What unique things did they discover about each other?

6. Celebrate similarities and unique attributes.

Adaptations for secondary schools

Use this at the beginning of a new school year during form time. Incorporate some timetable elements into the people bingo such as 'in the same maths group as me', 'in the same year group as me', 'attending the same after school club as me', and so on. This will allow students to connect with those in similar subject lessons and/or after-school clubs.

What you need

☐ **People bingo sheet** (template provided on page 11)

☐ Pens

Why

This activity offers an opportunity for children/young people and key staff to connect with one another from the offset, establishing positive relationships that increase engagement and feelings of belonging.

BiNGO

Challenge

Find a classmate who is 'the same' as you for each of the headings below!

Eye colour	Number of letters in first name	Birthday month	Favourite ice cream!
Favourite colour	Lives in the same city	Favourite film	Favourite sport
Number of siblings	Pet	Height	Favourite subject
Favourite book	Wearing something the same colour	Hair colour	Free choice!

Check-in/question of the day

What to do

This activity provides structure to the beginning of the day, and it can be used throughout the whole of the academic year. It is an opportunity for pupils to share and reflect on how they are feeling each day, develop empathy and improve their emotional vocabulary.

How

1. Create a list of check-ins that you can use over the next few weeks. Some examples are included in the resource for this activity.

2. Initially, ensure that all pupils are gathered together (for example, on the carpet or at their tables) and focused on you. Provide guidelines around the check-in by sharing that this is something you will do each day. Tell pupils that they have the option to pass but where possible you would like everyone to share.

3. Introduce the first check-in/question of the day – for example, 'If you were a form of transport today, what would you be?'

4. Provide an example and wrap language around the metaphor – for example, 'I am an aeroplane just taking off. I was a bit slow to start this morning, but now I am zooming off and ready for our day together.'

5. Invite the children to share their metaphor. They do not have to explain their response (and they may not be able to), but support them with questions and observations – for example, 'I wonder if your train is a steady steam train or a fast electric train whooshing on the track… I wonder if it's going so fast because you have had so much to do this morning!' Over a period of time, the children will begin to independently expand on and explain their choices.

6. You can use this activity at different points in the day to monitor how your pupils are feeling and doing.

Adaptations for secondary schools

Invite the students to suggest some of the check-in metaphors once they are familiar with the activity. You could also link some of the check-ins to learning experiences (for example, if they were a character from a novel/period of history/film, who would they be?). This could provide insight into how students wish to be perceived by others and themselves.

What you need

☐ A series of check-in metaphors **(see examples on page 13)**

Why

Using metaphors during check-ins encourages integration within the brain. Engaging in this playful activity gives pupils the skills to express their emotions and share in a safe space. When they are able express themselves without restriction, they are able to be authentic without fear of shame or embarrassment.

Check-in/question of the day ideas

If you were a .... what/who would you be?

Landscape	Form of transport	Type of weather
Colour	Wild animal	Pet
Character from a story	Film title	An emoji
Household item	An item of clothing	Song
Musical instrument	Sport	Food

Additional ideas for secondary schools

Historical figure	A politician
Period of history	Sports person
Shakespearean text	School subject area
Painting/piece of art	Material

To create a strong sense of belonging, children and young people need positive, supportive relationships and a safe, consistent environment where they feel seen, heard and valued. By embedding the strategies and activities in this guide into your daily practice, you can help pupils build the confidence, resilience and emotional security they need to thrive.

For more support and resources on creating a sense of belonging:

Visit the Thrive website >