

**WHY SCHOOL
BELONGING MATTERS**

AND WHAT YOU CAN DO



**HAMMERSMITH & FULHAM
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE**

What is school belonging?

School belonging is about students feeling accepted, valued, and included in their school community. It's key to supporting wellbeing, attendance, and engagement. When students feel they truly belong, they're more likely to thrive both academically and socially.

Many everyday practices already promote belonging, such as:

- Building positive relationships between staff and students
- Creating inclusive classrooms that celebrate diversity
- Offering pastoral support and mentoring
- Encouraging student voice through councils and peer-led activities

As students grow, their identity and peer relationships become more complex. Strengthening belonging during this time can make a real difference to their confidence, motivation, and success.





INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH



Research consistently shows that a strong sense of school belonging leads to a wide range of positive outcomes for students and for staff. Below is a summary of key findings, grouped into themes to support understanding.

Attendance

Students who feel a strong sense of belonging at school are more likely to attend regularly, while those who feel disconnected are at greater risk of absenteeism and disengagement (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Štremfel et al., 2024; Kearney et al., 2020).

Academic

A strong sense of school belonging boosts academic success by increasing students' motivation, and engagement, while also reducing disengagement, and behavioural issues (Arslan et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2016; Abdollahi et al., 2020).

Risk Reduction

Feeling a strong sense of belonging at school is linked to better mental and physical health, including lower stress and risk-taking behaviours, and contributes to long-term wellbeing and healthier lifestyle choices (Arslan, 2021; Steiner et al., 2019; Goodenow, 1993; Slaten et al., 2016).

Staff Retention

Fostering a strong sense of belonging among school staff leads to improved wellbeing, greater job satisfaction, and significantly higher teacher retention, especially for early career teachers (Hansom et al, 2024; NEU, 2023; Stark & Daulat, 2025).

Mental Health

A sense of belonging helps reduce anxiety, depression, behavioural difficulties, and supports overall mental health (Arslan, 2021; Allen et al., 2024).

Broader Impact

School belonging is a key foundation for lifelong social and emotional development, shaping future relationships, work engagement, and civic involvement (Ethier, 2024; Monash University, 2024).

Why Belonging Matters: Key Theories Explained

Understanding the psychology behind school belonging helps staff create environments where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to learn.

Key ideas include:

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS People are motivated to fulfill basic needs before moving on to other, more advanced needs. Belonging is a fundamental psychological need. Students must feel accepted and connected before they can engage in learning. 	ATTACHMENT THEORY Attachment plays a key role in school belonging. Secure attachments with trusted adults (e.g. teachers) help students feel safe, emotionally regulated and connected at school. This sense of emotional security helps them engage more confidently with learning and with others. 
SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY Motivation and well-being are driven by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When students feel connected to others, capable, and free to express themselves, they are more likely to feel they belong and engage meaningfully in school life. 	SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF SCHOOL BELONGING This model explains that a student's sense of belonging at school comes from how connected they feel, not just because individual factors, but also because of their relationships with others, how the school is run, and the wider community and culture the school is part of. 

Principles

Safety

Creating environments that feel physically accessible and psychologically safe for all.

- Includes both physical safety (e.g. accessibility, safe spaces) and emotional safety (e.g. predictable routines, trauma-informed practice).
- Applies to pupils and staff alike.
- Supports trust, regulation, and readiness to learn.

What does this look like in school: predictable routines, warm greetings, quiet breakout areas, and adults who respond with patience and care.

Connection

Helping pupils and staff build positive relationships and feel part of the school community.

- Encourages trust and strong relationships.
- Helps everyone feel included and seen.
- Builds a shared sense of belonging.

What does this look like in school: feeling included and valued can include small actions like greeting each other by name, working together in groups, and making sure everyone is represented and celebrated.

Principles

Agency for All

Empowering voice and choice for all.

- Ensures everyone feels heard, respected, and able to influence their environment.
- Embeds pupil voice in decision-making and learning.
- Supports autonomy, engagement, and co-creation.

What does this look like in school: Pupils have choices in their learning, students influence routines and decisions, opportunities to lead (e.g., buddies, ambassadors), and students help solve problems and set goals.

Growth

Helping pupils and staff build skills that support a sense of belonging.

- Helps pupils learn emotional, social, and thinking skills.
- Helps staff use inclusive practices that make everyone feel they belong.
- Encourages kind, thoughtful leadership.

What does this look like in school: Staff engage in ongoing CPD to build skills, reflect on their practice, and share learning with colleagues. Schools normalise mistakes and model them as learning opportunities and scaffold new skills and offer safe stretch challenges.

Questions to Kick-Start Discussion

Here are some reflective prompts to help deepen your understanding of school belonging and consider how it plays out in your school:

Reflecting on Practice

- When do students in your school feel most connected? Least connected?
- How do your routines, rules, and expectations support or hinder belonging?
- When we introduce change, how do we support staff to feel connected, informed, and part of the process?

Thinking About Relationships

- Which students might struggle to feel a sense of belonging and why?
- How do staff build trust with students who have experienced exclusion or trauma?

School Culture and Environment

- How are student voices heard and valued in your school?
- Are there spaces (physical or emotional) where students can feel safe and seen?
- How well do staff feel their voices are heard, and who might be overlooked?"

Curriculum and Learning

- How does your curriculum reflect students' identities and experiences?

Team Discussion Starters

- What would a 'belonging audit' of our school reveal?

Belonging, Identity and Inclusion



Use the SOCIAL GRACES framework to reflect on how different aspects of identity may influence a student's sense of belonging, participation and inclusion.



Belonging grows when every member of the school community feels seen, heard, valued and represented.

Step by step guide

Step 1: Belonging Reflection

- Identify 'Belonging Champions' in your school, including at least one member of the senior leadership team.
- Contact the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) to arrange a facilitated school reflection session on belonging (e.g., using the audit tool or other organisational psychology tools).
- Work with your EP to identify key strengths, concerns, and priority areas related to belonging in your school using the audit tool that can be found on our Learning Partnership website . Identify a small set of priority, school-generated targets.
- Your EP will help interpret findings and link them to strategies in the School Belonging Support Pack. Further EPS input can support follow-up work.

Step 2: Set Goals and Plan Projects

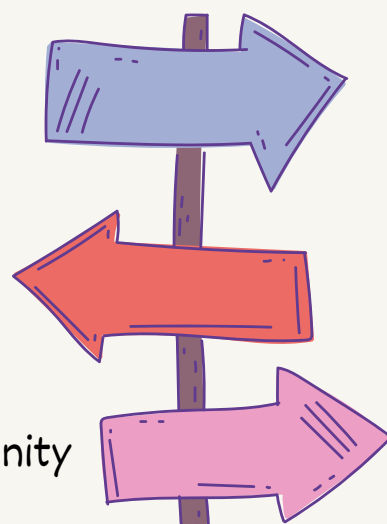
- Use Step 1 priorities to agree clear, realistic goals.
- Plan staff- or student-led projects aligned with these goals (e.g., improving relationships, increasing student voice).
- Collect baseline data (e.g. PSSM scale- please duplicate this MS form and use internally for you school).
- Train staff and ensure Belonging Champions can lead the next steps.

Step 3: Monitor and Gather Feedback

- Collect ongoing feedback from staff and students through forms, observations, or reflective conversations.
- Belonging Champions help notice what's working and what needs adjustment.

Step 4: Evaluate

- Collate feedback, looking for emerging themes, impact, and next steps. Consider re-doing PSSM scale.
- Share outcomes with staff teams, governors, or community partners through meetings or bulletins.
- Use learning from this cycle to refine targets and plan the next phase of work or review audit.



Youth Council Belonging – Summary

We met the Hammersmith and Fulham Youth Council on 2 Dec 2025 to gather their views about belonging in schools. Below is a summary of what they told us.



Safety: safety is closely tied to trust - trust in adults, trust that bullying will be addressed, and trust that spaces are genuinely supportive.



Connection: students value belonging experiences that are social, collective, and rooted in shared purpose (e.g., sports, arts, celebration, clubs).



Agency for All: Students want their voices to matter in action, not just in consultation.

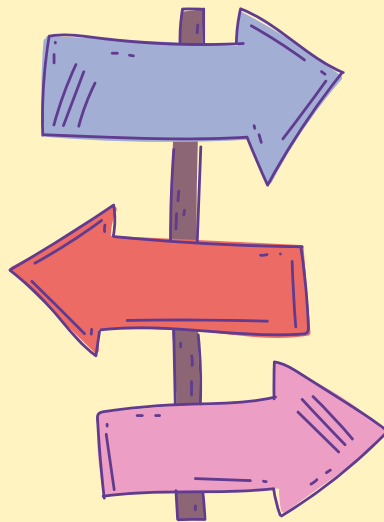


Growth: relationships with staff are central to belonging and growth. Students thrive when adults are approachable, visible, and personally known. They would like more support when learning or life feels difficult.

Thank you for taking the time to explore this guide.
We hope the ideas and prompts support reflection and
conversation in your school.

Want to Learn More?

For a more detailed exploration of the research,
psychological theory and practical tools to support
belonging, see the School Belonging Support Pack,
available on the Learning Partnership website.
You may also find the School Belonging Audit Tool useful
for reviewing and planning next steps.



If you would like additional guidance or support,
speak to your link Educational Psychologist, who
can help you apply this work in your school.

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