

The Need to Feel a Sense of Belonging

Everyone has four types of needs: the need to be heard and understood for who you are, the need to feel significant and unique, the need to feel belonging, and the need to feel capable. When any of these needs are not being met, it can often present itself through misbehavior at home or in school. And as I say, *misbehavior is a form of communication*. In this blog I'd like to discuss the need to feel a sense of belonging, why it's important, and how parents can identify when this need is not being met.

Belonging is such an important thing for our children because it is what connects them to those around them. Those connections become like roots of a tree that will keep them grounded even when they face life's storms. Think of your child's environment as one with concentric circles. In the very middle would be themselves, out from there would be family, peers, their neighborhood, their schools, their community, state, country, etc. The circles go on and on, but what is clear is that the closer to the center of the circle it is, the more critical it is to feel a sense of belonging. When a child does not feel a sense of belonging it is helpful to identify which social group it is that they're struggling to feel a part of, as well as why they don't feel like they belong. Is it at home? School? Society as a whole? If a child feels like they are a minority in any way at school, whether it's race, class, religion, or are simply being pulled out of class for special assistance they might struggle with feeling like they really belong.

The question then becomes, how do we create a sense of belonging? Holiday traditions, family vacations, routines, and rituals are a great way to create belonging in the family. One of the most powerful ways to do this is the family dinner. Family dinners just a few times a week can make a world of difference in a child's sense of belonging. Studies have shown that teenagers who have regular family dinners are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and are more likely to experience improved academic performance. The best benefit is that they seem to be healthier both mentally and physically. Family dinners every night can be difficult to maintain, and overwhelming, so I encourage you to start small. Check out the below resources for some ideas and support:

<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/>

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/20/04/harvard-edcast-benefit-family-mealtime>

When my children were young, I created several bedtime rituals. I would tell the children a secret garden story that was like a guided visualization to help them relax and go into their imagination. Another ritual was a little game that I played with them where I would pick them up and move them around the room and ask, "Do you sleep this way?" or, "Do you sleep that way?" I would put them upside down on their bed or on the floor and they would laugh so hard. I realized how much this meant to one of my daughters when she asked me to play this game with her when she was 16 years old. I couldn't lift her anymore, but I could still play around with her in other ways and ask if she slept this way or that way. Even if traditions and rituals are infrequent or inconsistent, it is likely to create a long-term impact on your child's sense of belonging in your family.

Feeling connected to one's family is just one of the areas where the need to belong comes into play. Like we discussed, there are these concentric circles of social groups where belonging is important. The next circle for our children is often their peer group at any age but especially for the adolescent whose peer group becomes their "second family." For this group it's important to just be aware of how important it is for a child to feel like they belong or fit in with their peers.

For the older school children something as simple as their clothing choices can become a battle at home. Clothing is a huge deal to children and impacts whether they feel like they do or don't fit in with their peers. I have had parents discuss with me their fights with their child over things like their insistence to wear shorts to school, even though it's quite cold out. The parents feel like they know better and think that it is crazy that their child wants to wear shorts in the cold. In this instance the parents are missing the point! This has nothing to do with the cold. The reasoning behind the shorts was not logical, it was based on the need to belong. In instances like this one the consequences of the child's choices are *minor and survivable*. If the child is cold enough, they'll likely make their own decision to dress more warmly.

Conversely, there are times where you need to stick to your guns regarding setting limits with your child. For example, if your child is screaming at you that everybody gets to keep their phone in their room at night, they are likely speaking to a need to belong and fit in. The important thing isn't to just let a child do whatever they want to do to fit in, but to validate that it makes sense that they feel that way. In this instance you could say something like, "I understand that it is really important for you to feel like you are like everybody else. I get that, and we do things a little differently in our family." Validating their feelings AND talking about how it's okay that your family does something

different can help your child through their difficult emotions. It isn't our job to fix their differences, we just need to validate their feelings.

There are many causes to why a child might feel that they don't fit in with their peers. When this happens, many parents may default to putting their children in sports, but not all children are athletes. Consider your child and their particular interests when helping them get plugged into social groups. Consider not just sports, but theater, debate, dance, working on a local farm, etc. Knowing your child gives you the opportunity to be creative in how you provide them opportunities to belong. *Think outside the box!!!*

To help your child feel a sense of belonging in their community, consider volunteer opportunities. If you give your child an allowance, think about asking them to donate to a cause that they care about. If there is a natural disaster, take your children with you to volunteer in the cleanup efforts. These small things help reinforce the feeling of being connected to one's community.

It really all comes down to creating intentional moments and opportunities to connect. Help your child to connect as a family, as a peer group, as a community... a little bit goes a long way, and each intentional moment just continues to strengthen those roots of connection to their surrounding world.