



Middle Schoolers & Belonging - Facilitation Guide -



Introduction

The **Middle Schoolers and Belonging** learning package describes how we can meet the needs of young adolescents with authentic and connected learning.

In the first video, we explore the role of school belonging in the middle grades. The second video shares strategies designed to foster and support this sense of belonging in students' learning lives.

We hope you'll learn more about why school belonging is important. And we hope you'll come away with some practical ideas for connecting middle schoolers meaningfully to you, to each other, and to the world around them, in both in-person and remote settings.



Key Takeaways

What we know:

- School belonging is generally defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment. (Goodenow & Grady, 1993)
- While a sense of belonging is important at all levels of schooling, the middle grades present a particularly critical time period, as young adolescents have a greater tendency to compare themselves to peers and to judge themselves more critically than other age groups.
- Between the ages of 10-15, students are changing physically, emotionally, and intellectually, in various and uneven ways. They're also learning more about their own and others' social identities, and the ways these identities intersect. Given that students spend an average of 1,000 hours in school each year, helping young people negotiate all of this change and exploration in a responsive, equitable and just environment- one that fosters a sense of school belonging- is a critical task for those of us who teach in the middle grades.

Current challenges:

- Research demonstrates that students who feel less connected to their schools are more likely to engage in substance abuse and are more likely to experience mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression. One recent study commissioned by United Way Worldwide found that – out of 45,000 middle schoolers who were surveyed – nearly a third didn't feel a strong sense of belonging to their school community, with many reporting feeling undervalued or uncomfortable in school being the person they want to be.
- Social distancing and school closures forced by COVID-19 has presented several challenges in education. Positive and nurturing relationships in school can be a buffer for stress and trauma.
- Fortunately, however, we know a fair amount about the conditions and kinds of learning opportunities that foster a sense of school belonging, and – not surprisingly – they're built very much upon relationships.

What this learning series package focuses on:

- A sense of school belonging is fostered in three ways:
 - **Student to Teacher:** the degree to which students feel supported by their teachers is consistently predictive of how well they do inside and outside of school. Middle schoolers do much better – in school and in life – when they believe their teacher values them.
 - **Student to Student:** Healthy peer relationships build a sense of belonging and positive interdependence.
 - **Student to World:** Young adolescents are positively affected by opportunities to make decisions and meaningfully influence the world around them.
- The videos provide specific examples of how we support students' sense of belonging in in-person and remote settings, with the objective to create learning communities that connect youth meaningfully to the people and world around them.



Reflection Questions

1. Think back on your own early adolescence.
 - a. Identify a context in which you felt a strong sense of belonging (home, school, friends, clubs, sports, other)
 - b. What helped you to feel that way?

2. What practices do you already use to help all students feel included in your learning environment?

3. How might you further cultivate students' sense of belonging through your teaching?
 - a. Student-to-student
 - b. Student-to-teacher
 - c. Student-to-world

4. How might any of these need to change if your context changes (e.g. your teaching modality shifts to virtual, in-person, hybrid)?

5. Which students are most on the margins of your learning community? Select one and make a plan to do something in the coming week that builds a sense of belonging for that student.