

# Connect through strong relationships

**A mentally healthy learning community is characterised by strong, supportive relationships.**

## Connectedness and belonging

**Connectedness** is the sense of caring for and being cared for by others. Children and young people feel connected when they feel they belong, are an active part of their learning community, are treated equally, and feel safe, accepted, respected and included.

**Belonging** is the sense that you're a valued member of a community. When children and young people feel like they belong, they're more likely to develop a strong sense of identity, a positive sense of self, and strong relationships.

Connectedness and belonging are associated with positive mental health – both as protective factors and in assisting in recovery from mental health issues. On the flipside, when a child or young person feels lonely, isolated, unsupported or like they don't fit in, a range of negative outcomes can occur.

Learning communities can build connectedness and belonging through:

- **Relationships:** Developing connections based on warmth, empathy, and respect is crucial. The perception of having somebody to talk to about things that matter is strongly correlated with positive mental health.
- **Active participation:** Providing opportunities to take part and contribute. When children and young people are listened to and their contributions are valued, it supports the development of a positive self-image and sense of connection to the learning community.
- **Inclusion:** Everyone in your community needs to feel that they fit in, and that they have a unique part to play. Educators can actively find ways to respect differences, model positive attitudes and value diversity.

## Positive and respectful relationships

**Positive and respectful relationships occur when all parties feel respected, secure and supported in their interactions with one another.**

To strengthen relationships with children and young people, you can do the following:

- **Show interest:** When trusted adults value the contributions of children and young people, and celebrate their achievements, it helps to build the confidence and courage to participate fully in social and learning activities.

- **Role model:** Everything you do has social influence. Show empathy and kindness, communicate clear, developmentally appropriate expectations, and apologise when you've made a mistake or forgotten something.
- **Praise** respectful behaviour to positively reinforce it.
- **Encourage participation:** Provide choices and opportunities to suit diverse learning styles, and set individual and realistic goals for each child.
- **Set high but achievable standards:** Research shows that high expectations give children and young people the sense that educators care about them.
- **Value, respect and celebrate diversity,** and promote inclusion.

**To strengthen relationships between peers, you can:**

- develop strategies to help children and young people join in with others
- help them to solve day-to-day difficulties (for example, disputes about turn-taking)
- teach social and emotional skills, inclusive behaviour and culturally respectful attitudes
- encourage kindness, helpfulness, acceptance, and collaboration
- notice and respond to social withdrawal.

**To strengthen relationships with families, you can:**

- communicate clearly, positively and regularly
- use a strengths-based approach
- include all families (be aware of cultural differences that may affect communication, ask families for input, and ensure forms are accessible and inclusive to all)
- share resources (for example, consider allowing children, young people and their families to use early learning service or school buildings outside of hours for recreational programs).

## Bullying

**Bullying is damaging, common and complex.**

A person is bullied when they are intentionally and regularly exposed to negative and harmful actions that aim to embarrass, threaten, intimidate or exclude them. Approximately one in four children and young people in Australia are affected. There are serious psychological and social consequences of bullying, including an increased likelihood of developing mental health conditions. Without the right support, bullying can have significant long-lasting effects.

## Healthy transitions

**Transitions are a period of adaption to new circumstances, expectations, people, environments or routines.**

Belonging and connectedness supports children and young people's adjustment during transitions. Successful transitions are more about positive relationships than perfect procedures. You can support positive transitions by:

- understanding how transitions might affect children and young people at different developmental stages
- being aware of how they might communicate their feelings
- noticing when they may need additional support
- creating opportunities for small, positive transitions to promote learning
- partnering with families to understand and address children and young people's needs
- providing families with resources about mental health and wellbeing during times of transition, to empower them to support their child or young person.