

MODULE 1.4

SIMPLE STEPS TO IMPROVING SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS



Show empathy and kindness

- Encourage kindness, helpfulness and acceptance amongst students to create a positive and caring classroom climate.
- Provide opportunities for students to assist each other.
- Ask if students need help, ask them to contribute to the class and make sure they understand content.
- Be responsive to stress and distress in young people.
- Remember that you are the adult and can show empathy and kindness even if it is not being returned.



Model pro-social behaviour

- Greet each student by name.
- Give lots of acknowledgement.
- Show interest in students' non-school worlds.
- Speak to students privately about any problem behaviour. Make it explicit why you are doing that e.g. "I am choosing to speak with you privately so that I don't embarrass you in front of your peers".
- Model respectful behaviour and language towards students and staff.
- Initiate regular non-curriculum focused chats with every student on a rolling basis.



Make a concerted effort on difficult relationships

- Implement interventions for specific, difficult relationships. This can include spending time with a student providing undivided attention and following the student's lead without teaching, directing or reinforcing. This conveys acceptance, interest and safety to the student.
- This is particularly important if there has been conflict in the relationship and time and effort may be required to repair the relationship. Some students may require more time and effort than others to develop trust in relationships.
- Talk about the behaviour rather than the person.

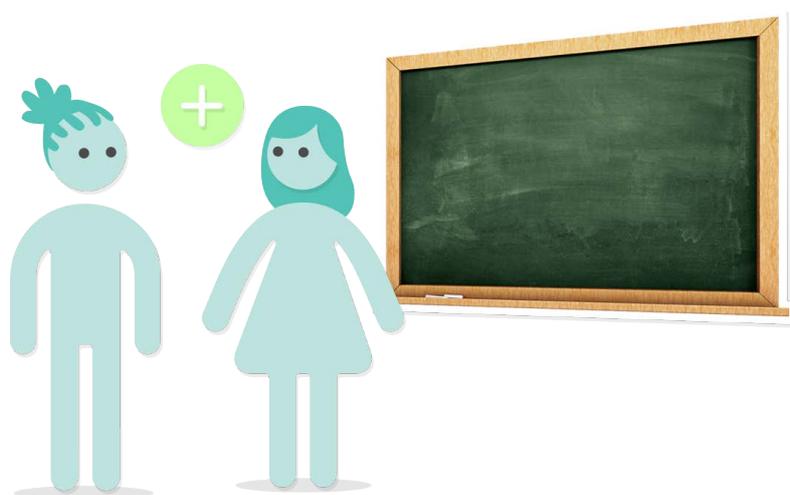


Maintain high standards

- Have high, but achievable, expectations for students to show you care about them and their achievements.
- Let students know it is your job to help them be the best they can be. This has potential to re-dress perceptions about 'power over'.
- Students feel cared about if staff members ask if they need help, call on them, make sure they understand content and put effort into making their classes interesting.
- If staff get off task, teach while students are not paying attention and do not answer questions or explain things, then students feel that staff do not care for them.

Use classroom management and teaching methods that can improve relationships

- Provide choice whenever possible to be responsive to students' interests and preferences.
- Communicate clear expectations for learning and behaviour. Ensure that expectations are developmentally appropriate and that students are held accountable.
- Clearly describe lesson goals and how the information relates to students and the real world.
- Use interactive and experiential activities, such as group discussions, problem solving and role playing to engage students in learning and help them personalise the information.
- Vary classroom management strategies and teaching methods to suit the diverse needs and learning styles of students.
- Engage students in appropriate leadership positions in the classroom and provide avenues for their voices and opinions to be heard. For example explain about rules and consequences and include students in the decision making process for them.
- Encourage open, respectful communication about differing viewpoints. Creating opportunities for students to challenge and debate can teach respect for diverse opinions and perspectives.
- Engage students in talking about how they learn best and what strategies help most. Then commit to embedding this into pedagogy whenever possible.



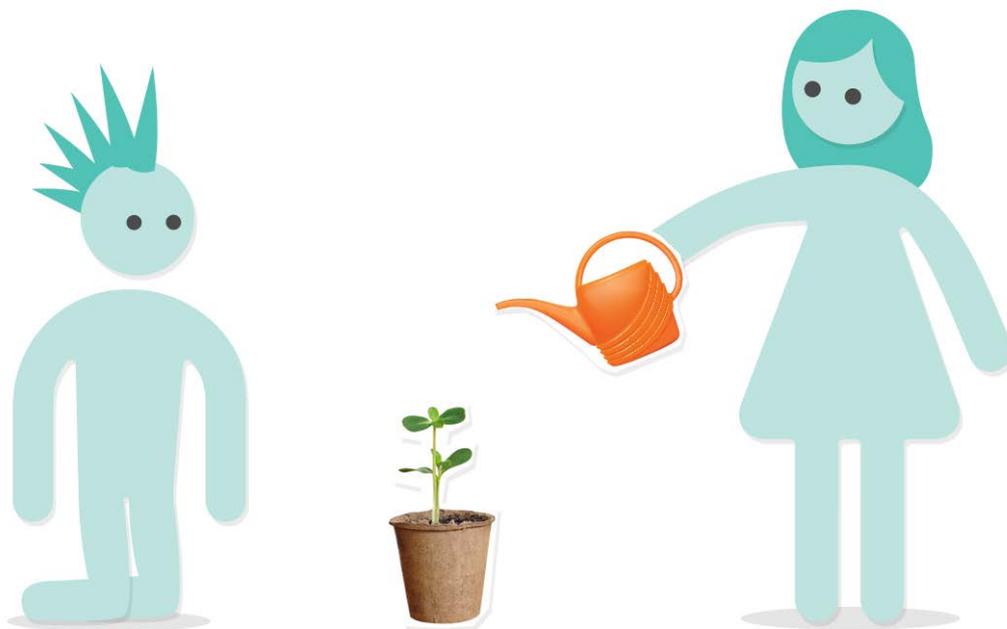
Provide students with academic, emotional and social skills

- Incorporate the teaching of social skills into one-on-one tutoring programs.
- Support positive academic competition within and among schools.
- Foster pro-social behaviour by engaging students in helping activities such as peer tutoring, classroom tasks, and teacher assistance.
- Encourage families to create a supportive learning environment in the home, including providing homework guidance, ensuring adequate educational supplies such as computers or books are available and assisting young people with time management.
- Use school sporting events and physical education classes to promote teamwork and sportsmanship, and emphasize fair play and non-violence.
- Provide the language for and opportunities to practice and apply social and emotional skills. Let other staff know what your skill focus is so that they can support your students' learning too.
- Allow slip ups and mistakes when students are first learning a new language and new skills.
- Model social and emotional skills.



Enable active participation

- Lead the school community in a process to develop a shared vision of high standards for learning and behaviour.
- Solicit teacher and staff input and involvement in all efforts to improve the school climate and students' sense of connectedness to school.
- Work with students, staff and parents to identify simple changes or modifications that would make the school's physical environment more pleasant.
- Assign students developmentally appropriate levels of responsibility for classroom decision-making and management.
- Create opportunities for students to work in partnership with adults in helping roles. Involve students in activities that traditionally involved only adults (e.g. parent-teacher interviews, curriculum selection committees, school health teams).
- Support students to understand how they think and learn (metacognition) and what works best for them.
- Explain and involve students in applying theories to their learning e.g. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, Hermann's Brain Dominance Model, 4MAT etc.



Improve relationships with families

- Ensure the first communication from the teacher to the parent or carer is about a positive experience the student has had, not a negative one.
- Establish regular meetings with families to discuss their young person's behaviour, grades and accomplishments.
- Communicate the school's behavioural and academic expectations to families, and encourage them to reinforce those expectations at home.
- Ask parents about their hopes, aspirations and dreams for their young people.
- Ask parents how they think their son or daughter learns best.
- Ask parents how they would work with their son or daughter if they were the teacher.



Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff

- Enable school staff to learn from each other by building learning teams to observe experienced teachers applying effective classroom management techniques and facilitating group work in a way that values students' thoughts and opinions.
- Develop a self-selected coaching or mentoring program for teachers. Pairing teachers in this manner allows them to solve problems at school, share teaching techniques and classroom management strategies, and create a supportive work environment.
- Offer professional development on ways to organise and structure the classroom to promote a positive environment. Developmentally appropriate discipline strategies emphasize positive behaviours and values and assist students in developing self control.
- Employ school staff who have been trained in or are willing to learn about and embrace adolescent development, and demonstrate effective implementation of student- centred pedagogy, a variety of classroom management techniques and teaching methods (e.g. cooperative learning).



Implement some bigger school-wide initiatives

- Consider structuring the school so that teachers stay with the same students for a number of years. This can provide continuity in learning and might allow the development of stronger teacher-student relationships.
- Allow students and their families to use the school building and property outside of school hours for recreational or health promotion programs. This can increase their feeling of being part of the school community.
- Provide diverse opportunities for students to be meaningfully involved, learn and be recognised. These opportunities could include community service, extracurricular activities and creative projects.
- Hold school-wide activities that give students opportunities to learn about different cultures, people with disabilities, and topics such as arts or sports. This will increase students' respect for diversity and form connections among students.
- Provide opportunities for parents and carers to increase their own skills and competence in areas that will help them be more involved in their young person's school life. For example, English as a Second Language or effective communication skills.
- Use creative methods to communicate and promote expectations, values and group norms that support positive health and academic behaviours.
- Engage community partners to provide a range of services at the school that students and their families need.
- Designate a percentage of counsellor time to be off-site, developing community networks and partnerships.



MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au