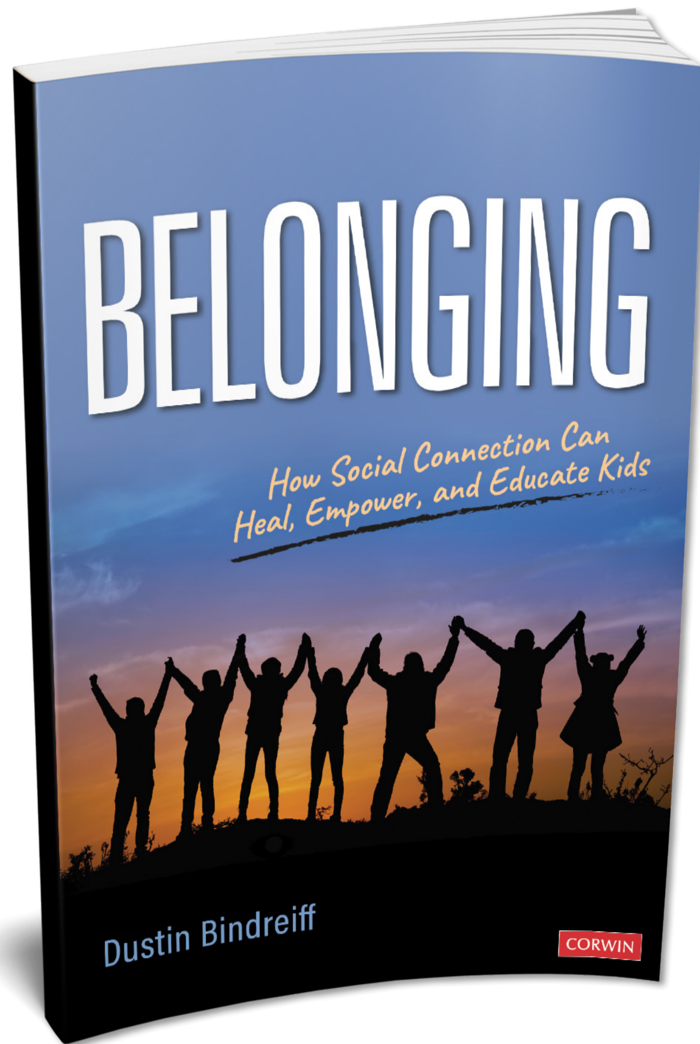

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CHAPTER 1

BELONGING IS A BASIC NEED

Ming was a bright, but anxious middle schooler who had his parents, school administrators, teachers, counselors, and psychologists puzzled. Ming spent half of his day in general education classes, where he experienced stomach pains, was unwilling to talk, and was so worried about what his peers were saying that he couldn't stay organized, remember assignments, or recall lessons. The second part of Ming's day was spent in a therapeutic classroom. In this smaller, more comfortable setting, Ming preferred to be called Marty and had a completely different identity and personality. In this class, he would talk to his peers and challenge the information and directions of the teacher, gladly pointing out any error in speaking or instruction. In contrast to his unwillingness to speak in general education classes, in the therapeutic class he talked constantly. Ming also spent time each week with the school counselor who described him as highly social, insightful, and easy to get along with. During lunch and other social times, he would latch on to older, popular students, shadowing them and trying to get their attention. However, their rejections would send him into depression, leaving him lethargic and unable to communicate or participate in the school day. Attendance was also a major struggle—he would simply refuse to get out of bed or get dressed to attend school.

Halfway through his seventh-grade year, staff and family were deeply concerned and out of ideas. The reports of his behavior from class to class were so divergent. The psychologists, doctors, therapists, teachers, administrators, and family all seemed to have different opinions about what was going on with Ming and what was needed. After 2 years of diagnostic and psychological testing, the staff was still trying to find a diagnosis that described what was causing Ming to behave so differently from class to class. Each time a new person came along to observe and assess him, a new diagnosis was proposed: anxiety disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, bi-polar disorder, depression, learning disabilities had been considered. But after a few weeks, each one seemed to fail to capture Ming.

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When trying to understand a person's behavior, the first thing to ask is, "Is this person trying to get or avoid something?" Then, "What is the person trying get or avoid?" For example, a child may act out because they are trying to access a video game. Another child may engage in the same acting out behavior to be sent to the office and avoid math. A third child may engage in similar behavior in the desire to get the teacher to pay more attention to them. And a fourth child may engage in this same behavior to avoid math one day, then the next day do the same behavior hoping to get teacher attention and the third day to get the video game.

With Ming, his need to belong was creating conflicting motivations. While he desperately wanted peer attention, he was also so hurt by peer rejection that it made him ill and unable to speak. His behavior was being driven by divergent needs. On the one hand, he was driven to avoid the pain of peer rejection, causing him to shut down. On the other hand, he had a deep desire to belong, to get peer attention and approval. In settings where he felt a sense of belonging, he was outgoing and talkative. When he went to classes that he had experienced a lot of rejection and failure, he became guarded, anxious, and depressed.

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As a behavior analyst, I have observed hundreds of classrooms, observing students like Ming trying to understand what was causing them to behave in ways that disrupt learning or are harmful. If you spend enough time observing students, the reality that many behave very differently depending on the class and teacher becomes clear. In some instances, students will go from threating staff and destroying property in one class to relaxed and mild mannered in the next. Understanding what causes this radically different behavior from one setting to the next is an invaluable insight into a widely discussed and yet still overlooked aspect of teaching, learning, child development and well-being.

While we often think of school as being about math, language arts, grades, and tests, for kids it is often far more about figuring how to be popular and where they fit in the social hierarchy. The need to belong, to be a valued, and to be a contributing member of a community consumes the attention of most students far more than academic lectures. This need to belong not only dominates student attention but it also fuels many of their motivations and behaviors. Like Ming, we all tend to act differently when we are around friends and family that we trust, than we do in settings where we feel rejected and judged. This is because much of our behavior, emotions, and neurological functioning is directly impacted by our sense of belonging. Just as hunger needs radically change how we think, feel, and behave, so does our need for belonging.

BUILT TO BELONG

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is one of the most widely referenced visuals used to understand motivation and behavior. Figure 1.1 shares the common pyramid structure used to describe Maslow's levels of motivation. In Maslow's model, once our basic survival needs of food, water, and safety have been met, we are driven by a need to belong—to be a part of a community. If this need is met, then we can focus on growth needs, such as being respected and reaching self-actualization. However, emerging research in biology, neuroscience, and evolution suggests that as important as Maslow's popular hierarchy has been, he likely understates the value of community. We have always depended on others to obtain food and safety; this reliance on peer cooperation has driven and shaped the most basic parts of what it means to be human.

After spending years using fMRI scans to study how the human brain responds to social contexts, evolutionary psychologist Matthew Liberman concluded that our brains are wired to connect (Liberman, 2013). This led him to conclude that belonging is our foundational need. From the time we are born through our last breaths we are dependent on our community for safety and nourishment. As he explains, our urge to connect and the pain we feel when rejected are the seminal achievement of brain. Driven by the need to live, work, and play together, the human brain was reshaped from its primitive origins to the creative and complex organ that built the modern world.

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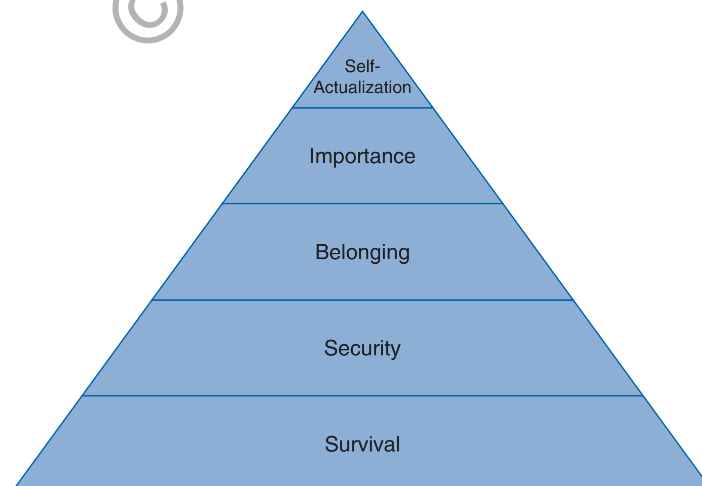
Figure 1.1 • *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*



Source: Maslow (1943).

Similarly, in *The Social Leap* William Von Hippel expands on the social brain hypothesis, detailing the driving force that social interactions have had on our evolution. Von Hippel notes that over the last 6 million years, our bodies have changed very little, but the large changes in our psychology have allowed us to conquer and reshape the world. The driving force in these psychological changes has been the need to work together and navigate social interactions. As a result of this, the need to belong is wired into our brain and DNA. As Johann Hari explains in his fascinating examination of the causes of the depression epidemic, "...every human instinct is honed not for life on your own, but for life...in a tribe. Humans need tribes as much as bees need a hive."

The ability of humans to survive and thrive is rooted in our ability to make friends. Alliances are what allowed our vulnerable ancestors to hunt, fight, farm, and survive. Being alone in the forest, tundra, or jungle meant likely death, so we evolved to place primary priority on not getting isolated from our tribe. As the early prosocial humans thrived and reproduced, the social skills of belonging increasingly shaped our behavior, became wired into our DNA, and expanded on their initial advantages. The need to build community played a critical role in our development impacting everything from the development of complex language to the whites of our eyes. The development of communities also allowed knowledge to accumulate and be passed from generation to generation more effectively.

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As Von Hoppel explains in *The Social Leap*, "It was this need for collective action that brought about the most important psychological change that enabled us to thrive, rather than just survive on the savannah: the capacity and desire to work together." The early humans who liked to cooperate, and who could be counted on by others to be cooperative, reaped great rewards. Even children as young as four are attentive to who helps and who doesn't and they adjust their behavior accordingly. The threat of social rejection was the first tool our ancestors developed to ensure cooperation among individuals. The pain of ostracism remains and is why we are often driven to do whatever it takes to stay in our social groups' good graces.

These same basic belonging dynamics occur in the classroom daily. With teachers and students using the opportunity to belong as a motivator and threats of rejection as warnings to correct behavior. At the younger grades school success is especially driven by the reward of approval from parents and teachers. As students age, the need for attention and approval does not go away, it shifts away from adults and toward peers. This explains why wise educators at all levels invest so heavily in building community. In a community,

students will look after one another, correct problem behavior, take more risks, ask more questions, and try harder. These are the behaviors that lead to growth and make teaching a highly rewarding career.

BELONGING PREDICTS FUTURE HEALTH AND SUFFERING

Advances in technology have led neuroscience and biologists to reach similar conclusions about the importance of belonging in shaping our brain and biology. The importance of belonging to a community can also be understood for its predictive value. The number and strength of our social connections is one of the most reliable predictors of happiness. Social bonds predict our physical and mental health. The inverse is also true, i.e., a lack belonging is a reliable predictor of unhappiness, mental illness, and deteriorating health. In the book *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships*, Robin Dunbar, the head of Social and Evolutionary Neuroscience at Oxford University, describes belonging as the single most important factor predicting psychological health, physical health and life span.

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Chris Peterson, one of the founders of the field of positive psychology, a branch of psychology focused on studying the character strengths and behaviors that allow people to flourish, regularly summarizes the entire field and what makes for a good life with the three words "Other people matter." According to Peterson, if you're interested in happiness, well-being, and overall life satisfaction, you need other people in the equation. Since 1938, Harvard researchers have been surveying and studying adults to understand what makes us happiest. The current director Robert Waldinger summarizes what they have learned about happiness over the past 80 years: "The clearest message is this: good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period" (Mautz, 2019). In contrast, isolation has been found to lead to depression and illness. In the 1980s, distinguished University of Michigan Professor James House and colleagues published research concluding that social isolation is as dangerous as obesity, inactivity, and smoking (House et al., 1988).

Many researchers have spent their careers studying well-being and illness. Both paths have led highly regarded researchers to conclude that belonging is a fundamental need, both in terms of understanding why people thrive and why they struggle. Fortunately, these sustained efforts advocating for the value of belonging and its relevance in public health is increasingly being heard by educators. Traditionally, schools have tried to separate subject matter from the affective domains. However, the growing affective needs of youth has caused an increased focus on social emotional learning. These efforts empower

teachers to go beyond exclusively teaching subject matter to teaching students skills such as empathy, communication skills, self-awareness, and social awareness.

BELONGING RADAR

Our amygdala, the more primitive part of our brain, serves as a spotlight on constant look out for threats in the environment. When these threats are detected, our brain focuses on self-preservation and our fight or flight response is triggered. Whether these threats are physical or psychological, this response follows the same neurological pathway. When triggered, this response alters blood flow and fills our brain and body with chemicals that prepare us to run or fight. Because our survival has always depended on group belonging, social rejection and isolation are some of the most reliable triggers of this fight or flight response from the amygdala.

In contrast, when we receive cues of belonging, the amygdala turns off this “fight or flight” response, shifting the focus to building and sustaining the bonds we share with others. Chemically, these interactions with family and friends cause the brain to release neurochemicals such as oxytocin and dopamine, which make up feelings of love and acceptance. For this reason, we are operating from distinctly different parts of our brain depending on our sense of belonging.

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The need to belong becomes especially important when things get difficult. The quality and quantity of our close relationships is one of the primary factors shaping our willingness to take risks. If you have friends around to help you attack a problem, it’s more likely you will find a solution. In this environment, the brain approaches the situation with curiosity, as an interesting challenge, not as a dangerous threat. The result is dopamine in the brain is released rewarding your curiosity and preparing you to rise to the challenge. In contrast, if you are facing a challenge alone, your likelihood of success decreases, while your anxiety level increases. In this instance, instead of dopamine, stress chemicals are released, which often undermine performance.

BELONGING IN THE BRAIN

To ensure survival, our brain places high priority on preventing pain so it is especially adept at learning to avoid pain at the earliest point possible. Since belonging is so fundamental to our well-being and survival this area of our brain pays special attention to signals of rejection. Over time, our brain learns to trigger our fight or flight response at even subtle suggestions of being excluded.

This helps explain why Ming, from the beginning of this chapter, was having so much trouble adjusting to middle school. He had a deep need to belong but was also hurt deeply by the repeated experiences of rejection. Over time, he increasingly looked for ways to avoid these painful experiences, ultimately staying home from school for weeks at a time.

This sensitivity to social rejection has important implications for the classroom, where virtually everything a child does is seen and judged by their peers and teacher, reported to their parents, and stored in a permanent record. When a student struggles to be accepted, is teased by peers, reprimanded or disciplined, they may begin to develop anxiety prior to even entering the classroom. These experiences of rejection have taught this child's brain that they are not a part of the classroom community, so they are not safe and as a result the classroom is dangerous. In response, the amygdala turns on the "fight or flight" system, ramping up adrenaline and stress hormones as the child approaches or even thinks about the classroom. Consequently, the energetic child becomes anxious, displaying the impulsiveness, disorganization, and lack of concentration associated with ADHD or anxiety.

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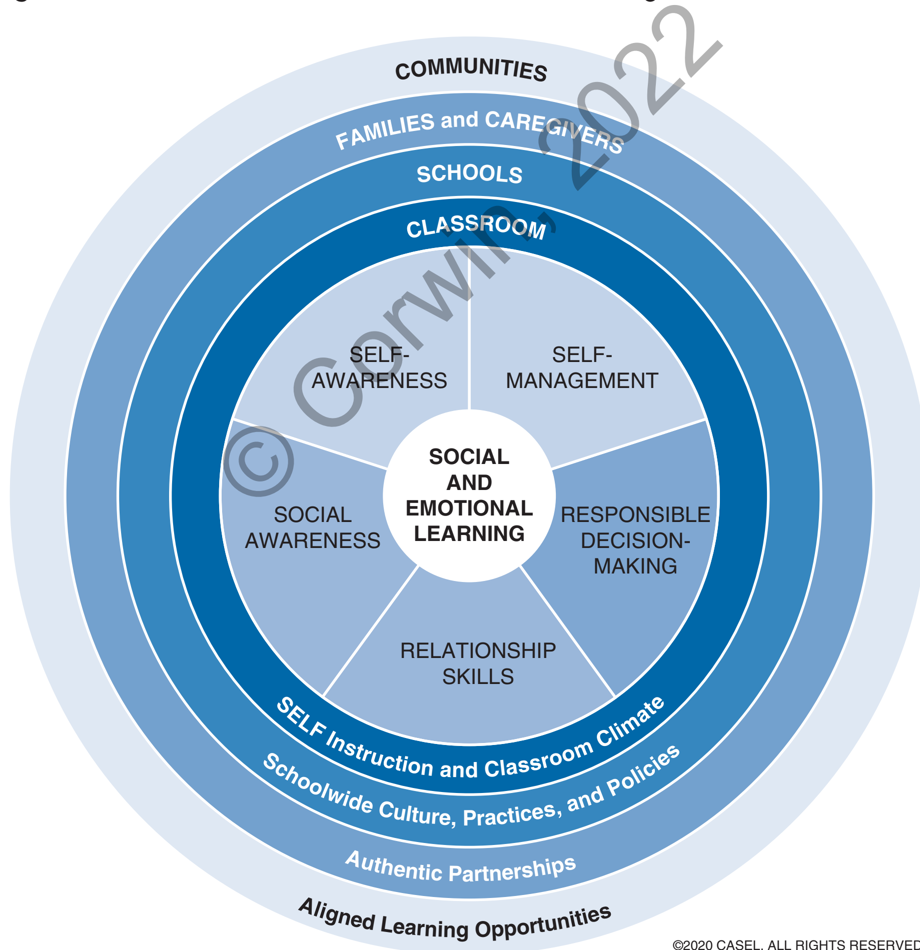
The threat of social isolation impacts student behavior and learning in another important way. If a student doesn't feel a sense of belonging in a classroom, they will not be able to pay attention to the lesson. Their attention is at best split between the lesson and processing the gestures of peers, worried about being called on by the teacher, even random noises need to be processed as potential threats. Until students have a sense of belonging, they will not be able to effectively access the executive control area of the brain that is responsible for higher order thinking, self-control, curiosity, problem-solving, and other aspects of complex thought. This hypervigilant focus on belonging can cause even the most capable students to become distracted, impulsive, and less thoughtful.

As Anne Murphy Paul explains in the book *The Extended Mind*, "...we learn things better when we attend to them with other people. We remember things better when we attend to them with other people. And we're more likely to act upon the information that has been attended to with other people" (2021). Additionally, she points out that our willingness to persevere is enhanced when our efforts are made on behalf of a group we care about. Thus, a sense of belonging has the potential to improve attention, recall, application, and resilience.

Once we understand the foundational role that belonging plays in the learning process, we can incorporate deliberate efforts to build community into

improvement plans and professional development. A 3-year survey of over 600,000 California fourth through twelfth graders provides a great example of the potential impact this could have. The researchers found that those students who developed an increased sense of belonging from one year to the next had better attendance, fewer behavior infractions, and above-average gains in math and reading test scores. Overall, those students reporting a greater sense of belonging also reported more social-awareness, self-control, self-efficacy, and a growth-mindset (Hennessey, 2018). These categories make up many elements of the domains of Social Emotional Learning outlined by the national Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), see Figure 1.2. Ultimately, all kids learn better when they are a part of community.

Figure 1.2 • *Domains of social emotional learning*



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Similarly, all kids will be more prone to problem behavior and struggle to recall what has been taught when they are isolated.

THE PAIN OF REJECTION

Like all young people, Derek wanted to belong; to be popular and have his teachers like him. In elementary school he did well, kids liked him, and his teachers saw his talents. He was energetic, often struggling to sit still, but his teachers were able to accommodate him. He was a likable kid; like many, he loved to please his teachers. Then, things changed in middle school. His parents were splitting up, his body was changing, and he was adjusting to the new middle-school environment. The identity he had in elementary school was gone. Increasingly, he was not able to live up to the reputation of his family, who were successful athletes and students. It didn't seem to matter how hard Derek tried, his body wouldn't let him do the things his siblings could do. Similarly, in class he did ok, but his teachers would mention he should be more like his sisters. At home, he often heard similar comments from his frustrated parents. He felt the disappointment from his concerned parents, coaches, and teachers, but just couldn't keep up.

As his frustration mounted, he would lash out in loud bursts, at other times he simply shuts down, refusing to speak or complete work. The disappointment of not being the athlete or student he dreamt of started to take a toll and led him to look for other ways to belong. He tried different social groups, engaging in risky behaviors, fighting, and skipping class to fit in with his new friends. This pattern continued through eighth grade. As he was entering high school, people were becoming concerned for Derek. He was starting to explore drugs and alcohol, his grades were poor, and his circle of friends seemed to be constantly in trouble.

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Through the evolutionary process our brain adapted many of its most primitive pathways to fit the increasingly complex world. As part of this adaptation process, social pains are processed through many of the same pathways as physical pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003; Prinstein, 2018). As a consequence, the pains of social rejection can feel just as real as the physical pains of being injured. Researchers have even found that taking Tylenol can reduce social pains, just as it does physical pains. Additionally, the pain from rejection and isolation can create deep emotional pain that takes longer to heal than physical injuries. In many instances, a physical wound takes only 1 or 2 weeks to heal, but a psychological wound caused by a malicious remark can take years to heal, if it ever does.

In Derek's case, the feelings of disappointment and rejection he developed as his parents split up were deep initial hurts. Over the course of his middle-school years, this pain was being compounded by his inability to meet family and teacher expectations. As the pain of disappointing the people he cared about continued, he began to look elsewhere for relief from this pain. Gabor Mate, a renowned expert in child development and trauma, has seen similar patterns in many addicts he has helped. In his view, experiences of rejection often create traumas in children's psyche. As kids grow, they try to ease the psychological pain caused by the trauma of rejection. Many eventually develop unhealthy addictions from trying to self-sooth traumas of rejection.

Luckily, as Derek entered high school, the freshman orientation had him excited. There was a computer teacher telling students about the gaming club on campus. The club learned coding and designed games, even competing at local events with other schools. Here, he connected with a few other kids that were into video games, so he signed up. The opportunity to hang out with other kids that shared his interest in computers became the highlight of Derek's week. The teacher was also a fan of video games and embraced Derek's personality. Additionally, a group of junior and senior gamers befriended him. Feeling valued by his teacher and older peers coupled with his new friends created a shift in Derek. Having a community that valued him as an individual gave him confidence. His motivation started coming back, no longer was he skipping school, instead he would stay late in the computer lab. Over the next 4 years, he remained an active member of the gaming club, became a leader, graduated, and enrolled at a nearby college to pursue his passion in video games. The sense of belonging, that hanging out, and talking about video games put Derek on a far different path than he had leaving middle school.

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BELONGING HEALS

Victims of trauma arrive at school with their brains focused on survival and detecting threats in the environment. This causes them to struggle to learn, ask thoughtful questions, be creative, wait, or manage frustrations. Additionally, students in this mindset will be highly sensitive to even small social slights, potentially leading them to overreact to benign interactions. Shifting students from this hypervigilant state to engaged curiosity begins by providing students with a sense of belonging. This is why one of the most frequently emphasized aspect of addressing trauma is to develop strong, supportive relationships. This sense of community puts the brain's threat radar center at ease, allowing attention to focus on learning. Raising a hand to say, "I don't understand," in a crowded classroom is an act of courage. For

students recovering from trauma, the natural fears of being laughed at for asking a question are compounded with a hypervigilant threat-detection network. Subsequently in highly public settings, this hypervigilance can compound sensitivity to environmental cues, resulting in high levels of stress hormones coursing through their bodies, making self-control nearly impossible.

In an episode on trauma in his popular podcast, Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman explains the chemical impact of social connection in helping people heal from trauma (2021). Tachykinin is the chemical that our brain releases when we are afraid. This chemical is increased with social isolation and can exacerbate the preexisting traumas in students. However, a connection with trusting others has been shown to reduce the levels of tachykinin and the associated anxiety and irritability symptoms. Bruce Perry, author of the bestselling book, *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing,* explains the fundamental role of relationships in helping people heal from traumatic experiences. He describes trusting bonds as the currency that allows victims of trauma to confront and heal their pain. In addition to providing community and opportunities to be heard, these connections also provide resources and strategies to cope and heal. Supportive relationships provide a relief from the isolation and loneliness many feel when struggling with trauma or mental illness. Social bonds allow for shared experiences and empathy, reminding those in need that they are not alone.

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BELONGING AND DEVELOPMENT

As author and psychology professor Mitchell Prinstein explains in his 2017 book *Popular,* understanding our need to belong is fundamental to understanding people. This need has been written into our DNA and then drives our development. Many of our fundamental memories, conscious and unconscious, center around feelings of belonging or rejection, these experiences become a template for our subsequent social interactions and heavily influence our own identity. Prinstein explains "We all share a universal desire to be regarded positively by others. Our minds, our bodies, our health, and our emotions are linked to popularity in ways that only the most current and sophisticated methods in Psychology and Neuroscience are now beginning to reveal."

Prinstein describes how our ability to connect with others shapes our personality and life options, opportunities available to us. Beginning in 1975, the Minnesota *Study of Risk and Adaptation* has become one of the most comprehensive research projects investigating the growth and development of children from

birth into adulthood. The study examines the social experiences of children and families identified as at risk for abuse and neglect, analyzing how experiences shape these children's later life.

After observing hundreds of children from birth into their thirties, the researchers concluded that nothing is more important in the development of the child than the care they receive, especially in the early years (Sroufe, 2005). These early experiences of belonging shape how children subsequently interact with the world and how they go about getting their needs met. When children have a secure attachment to early caregivers, they understand how to build relationships with adults and peers. As a result, when they enter preschool, they are better able to build relationships with their teachers and peers.

These positive experiences tend to compound, creating more opportunities and connections for the well-connected child. This creates a recursive process of being welcomed, valued, and supported by caring teachers and peers. In contrast, children that struggle to build relationships at early ages are more likely to experience rejection, leading to a recursive narrowing of opportunities and increased isolation. Ultimately, Minnesota researchers came to see the development of children as a series of transactions between the person and their environment. No single experience determined a child's fate; rather how the children navigated one social environment shaped what experiences were subsequently available to them, when they entered the next stage in their development.

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TEACHING BELONGING

Taking time to teach young people the social emotional skills to get their physical and psychological needs met in appropriate ways can lead to increased access to learning opportunities, friends, and a broader support group. This can create a virtuous cycle of growth allowing even the most underserved children to transcend their circumstances. A child's ability to build relationships opens doors and creates opportunities. In contrast, students who lack relationship-building skills tend to have more problems, fewer opportunities, and less support.

Elementary students usually place great value in their teacher's attention and approval. Often, when they can't get this attention in positive ways they begin acting out. In many instances, problem behavior is not because the child dislikes the teacher or vice versa. Rather, many students don't arrive knowing how to successfully navigate this new complex and interactive social

environment. Unlike at home where they may be the center of the household, in a classroom they are often asked to wait, take turns, and follow directions, all valuable skills that can be painful to learn. Nothing is more important to us than our social connections, and this need often consumes student's attention. Yet, it seems each year we invest less time teaching kids social skills, to understand what others are thinking, or to navigate social climates. The Minnesota study highlights how transformational these skills can be, especially for students that are at-risk. The Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit focused on building resilience, explained it well; resilient kids have an uncanny ability to get adults to help them out. Social skills allow students in need to build alliances, access otherwise unavailable resources, and access otherwise unavailable opportunities.

Behavior is purposeful, and often misbehavior is more accurately understood as an ineffective attempt to get a need met. When we make the mistake of assuming students know the socially appropriate way to get their needs met, we risk alienating students and leave the door open to classroom management issues. Often problem behavior can be prevented by teaching young people the hidden curriculum. By hidden curriculum, I am referring to the norms and behaviors that allow some students to thrive, access rewards, get their needs met, and build positive relationships in a complex social environment.

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Like many, the pandemic gave me the opportunity to shift my work online. As I began preparing small groups and individual students to return to classrooms, we did a series of social skills activities online. Through direct instruction, practice, and reinforcement of social cues and prosocial norms, many of the students were prepared to thrive, when they returned to school. Through role play and application of their new skills with parents and teachers, they began to understand the power communicating respect has on adults. We learned to frame these simple skills as a superpower allowing kids to get whatever they want.

At other times I have done similar classes with older students. In these settings, we spend more time talking about why it is important to learn to build strong relationships with your teachers. Over the course of these classes, middle schoolers often talk about how differently their teachers treat them if they say simple things such as "Good morning, how are you?". Adolescents are often highly sensitive to being disrespected. So, we spend time talking about how to communicate respect and it's reciprocal nature. Many middle schoolers found that by communicating respect to their teachers, an entirely different school

experience became available to them. For some students, when they better understood how to navigate the social environment, they would become class leaders and cause their teachers to smile when they entered the classroom. For students that have experienced years of rejection and conflicts with teachers, these can be transformative experiences, allowing them to release years of rejection and anger about their school experiences.

Just as many young people are uncertain about how to build a strong relationship with their teacher, many young adults are unsure how to navigate the power dynamics in college or the workplace. This tension can undermine their ability to perform and unintentionally cause them to sabotage their work success. For this reason, when I work with high school and college-age students, we focus on the value of building healthy relationships with supervisors and colleagues. Teens and young adults may interpret relationship building skills as being weak or "selling out." Reframing these skills as a superpower that allows them to experience success, belonging, and respect is an important first part of these conversations.

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Balancing ideas about not compromising their individuality with adapting to their environment are important conversations for young adults. Helping them see everyday examples of ways they adapt their behavior to the context in their daily life can be helpful. Finding examples of the ways teens act and talk differently around their grandmother, teacher, friends, sibling, and parents can be fun activities that lead to important insights. Ultimately, the goal in these sessions is to help young adults learn to approach new environments with confidence. We practice analyzing new social environments identifying the social hierarchy, group norms, and context cues to give them a framework for creating community. Teaching them to assess a new social environment can minimize the risk of hypervigilance and prevent them from taking ambiguous statements or behaviors as personal attacks. With this perspective, we brainstorm how they can adapt to this environment and thrive. As they identify ways they can influence these relationships, their confidence and willingness to put themselves in uncomfortable situations increases. This willingness and the understanding of the hidden curriculum is a skill that can empower young adults to transcend humble beginnings.

NEXT STEPS AND LOOKING AHEAD

In the Minnesota study, the authors found a consistent theme in the youth that transcended their difficult early circumstances. It was the presence of a consistent and caring adult outside of the home; relatives, teachers, coaches,

and so forth. These long-term relationships have the potential to empower young people, provide them role models, guidance in times of struggle, and social support that many young people do not get elsewhere.

The quality of the student-teacher relationship plays a critical role in motivating and engaging students. When teachers are perceived as safe, trusting, and helpful, transformative effects can be seen (Wentzel, 2009). These traits are associated with improvements in students' emotional well-being, positive sense of self, motivation to achieve social and academic goals, and ultimately their social and academic skills. This sense of belonging can be the pathway by which social support builds a positive sense of self, shapes the goals and values students adopt, as well as improving social and academic skills (Gray et al., 2018).

As we go forward, we will further examine ways teachers can leverage the power of belonging to empower students and become the transformative educator many of us dream of being. The purpose of this chapter was to provide a foundational understanding of the fundamental role belonging plays in the biology, neurology, and development. As a result of these powerful influences a sense of belonging heavily shapes each students' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. However, this sense of belonging isn't only critical to the health and well-being of individuals. It also plays a role in the health and success of our communities. Additionally, understanding how our communities have changed may help us understand why so many young people are struggling.

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