

A Sense of Belonging

How do children learn what it means to belong to a community? It happens in everyday activities. When they watch what their parents do and listen to what they say, children are getting to know the people they belong with, the people who help them and whom they help. They learn that when we are part of a community, we share our good times and our bad times. We belong together.

Belonging to family

Your baby's first community is the people she lives with. Your smiles and gentle touch give your baby the message: "We're happy you're part of our family!" She knows her needs are important to you when you feed and comfort her. Older children also need to know that you're glad they are part of your family, even when sometimes you want them to change their behaviour.

You can also connect your children to their extended family, whether near or far away. Family dinners, outings and celebrations build life-long ties with grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. In between get-togethers, you can keep in touch by phone, the Internet and old-fashioned notes in the mail. Keep the memories alive by putting grandparents' photos on the fridge, looking at photo albums together and retelling family stories.

Neighbours and friends

As children get older, neighbours and friends become part of their circle of belonging. One way to foster community feeling is to start an exchange of babysitting services with other families in your neighbourhood. You'll find a resource sheet called "How to Start a Babysitting Coop" under "Resources for Parents" at www.parentsmatter.ca. You can also build a web of security for your children by becoming a Block Parent® (www.blockparent.ca) or by joining a walking school bus program (see www.saferoutestoschool.ca). Community becomes "the adults who live in the houses where I know I can get help" and "the friends I travel to school with."

Wider circles

We also define community by our various roles and identities, for instance school, religious affiliation, cultural and language traditions, musical groups, clubs, hobbies and sports. Look for ways to build a sense of

belonging around your and your children's activities and interests. Here are some ideas:

- Get to know the parents of other children at your children's activities and help each other out by sharing the driving.
- Invite your child's teammates and their families to a potluck picnic in the park after a game.
- Volunteer at your children's school or child care centre. Whether you accompany a group on an outing, help at a fundraising event or are on the parent-teacher committee, you will find out about the community where your children spend their days.
- Attend the activities of your own cultural, religious or language groups to show children what they share with many others. You can also discuss the importance of learning about and respecting the traditions of other groups.

Helping others

Part of belonging together is helping each other; children learn about this at home too. Little children imitate what you do and they want to help out. Even if sometimes their "help" makes the job take longer, give them the chance to contribute to the family's well-being in whatever way they can. Think of it as time invested in their understanding of community. Give your preschooler the job of tearing up lettuce for a salad; an older child can carry a small bag of groceries in after shopping. Don't forget to tell them how their help is important to you and the whole family. Get them involved in helping others too when you:

- make gifts and cards for family and friends
- bring soup to a sick relative
- welcome a new family in the neighbourhood
- sort through outgrown clothes and toys to give to other children

Seeds bear fruit

Starting with these small gestures when children are young, the feeling of belonging grows outward, so that when disaster strikes people on the other side of the globe, our help extends to them too, as members of our world-wide community.

by Betsy Mann