

Belonging Helps Empathy Grow

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Empathy does not develop in isolation.

Our ability to understand and care about others is shaped, in part, by the relationships and social environments around us. When people feel that they belong—that they are valued, accepted, and connected—they may have more opportunities to build trust, engage with others, and develop the social and emotional capacities that support empathy.

Research across childhood and adolescence points to an important connection between supportive relationships, social connectedness, and empathy-related development.

Belonging is more than feeling included. It can help create the conditions in which understanding others becomes possible—and in which important social empathy competencies begin to develop.

Through connection, participation, perspective-taking, and meaningful interaction with others, young people can begin to understand not only individual experiences, but also their place within a wider social world.



Overview

We often think of belonging as something we receive from a group: a feeling that we are welcome, accepted, or part of something larger than ourselves.

But belonging may also influence how we relate to other people.

When children and adolescents experience supportive relationships and feel connected to their families, peers, schools, and communities, they have repeated opportunities to listen, cooperate, navigate differences, recognize emotions, and consider perspectives beyond their own.

Those experiences matter because empathy develops through interaction.

A sense of belonging can provide a social foundation from which people learn not only:

“I have a place here,”

but also

“Other people have a place here too.”

This shift matters.

Belonging can help young people begin to understand that being part of a community involves both being recognized themselves and learning to recognize the experiences, perspectives, and contributions of others.

That broader awareness is an important step toward social empathy.

What the Research Tells Us

Research increasingly suggests that empathy is connected to the quality of the social environments in which young people develop.

Studies of adolescents have found associations between positive school culture and higher levels of empathy. Longitudinal research has also found that school connectedness can contribute to later empathic concern and perspective-taking for some young people.

Relationships matter as well.

A large meta-analysis examining 70 studies found positive associations between adolescents' empathy and the quality of their relationships with both parents and peers, with the association particularly strong for peer relationships.

More recent research adds another important dimension.

In a two-year longitudinal study of middle-school students, researchers examined whether teacher caring and students' sense of belonging were associated with the development of cultural respect, empathy, compassion, and integrity. A stronger sense of belonging to the school community was associated with greater growth in compassion over time.

These findings do not mean that belonging automatically produces empathy.

Human development is more complex than that.

They do suggest, however, that empathy-related capacities are influenced by social context.

Feeling connected, supported, and part of a community can provide meaningful opportunities to practice the skills and experiences through which empathy develops.

Belonging can also create opportunities for young people to participate in something larger than themselves. Through families, classrooms, peer groups, teams, organizations, and communities, young people encounter other perspectives, negotiate differences, contribute to shared goals, and learn that their actions affect other people.

These experiences begin to move empathy beyond the individual interaction.

They can help strengthen competencies that are especially important to social empathy: perspective-taking, understanding social context, engaging with difference, meaningful participation, and recognizing shared responsibility within a community.

Why It Matters

Belonging is sometimes treated primarily as an individual feeling:

Do I fit in?

Am I accepted?

Do people value me?

But belonging also has a social dimension.

When people experience environments where they feel recognized and connected, they may be better positioned to participate in relationships that require listening, cooperation, perspective-taking, and care.

For children and adolescents especially, this means that empathy development is not solely their responsibility.

The environments adults create matter.

Families matter.

Schools matter.

Peer groups matter.

Teams, clubs, neighborhoods, and community spaces matter.

An environment that communicates:

“You matter here”

can also help establish a broader expectation:

“People matter here.”

This is where belonging begins to connect more directly with social empathy.

Social empathy requires more than recognizing another person’s feelings.

It asks us to consider perspectives and experiences beyond our own, recognize that people’s lives are shaped by relationships, communities, circumstances, and social conditions, and understand ourselves as participants in a shared social world.

Belonging can help young people begin developing these capacities.

When young people experience meaningful participation, encounter different perspectives, learn that their own voice matters alongside the voices of others, and begin to understand their responsibilities within a group or community, empathy starts to extend beyond the individual relationship.

Belonging, in this sense, is not simply a feeling of inclusion.

It can become part of the developmental pathway toward social empathy.

Putting Research Into Practice

Families, educators, youth organizations, and communities can help create environments where belonging, empathy, and social empathy have room to grow. They can:

- Learn and use people's names and recognize their contributions.
- Make space for quieter voices and notice who may be left out.
- Create meaningful opportunities for participation, cooperation, and shared responsibility.
- Listen with genuine interest and welcome questions and different perspectives.
- Encourage young people to consider how the same situation may be experienced differently by others.
- Encourage curiosity before judgment and reflection before assumption.
- Build environments where young people know that their voices and experiences matter.
- Help young people recognize that other people's voices and experiences matter as well.
- Create opportunities to work with people whose backgrounds, experiences, or viewpoints may differ from their own.
- Reinforce that belonging does not require everyone to think alike or share the same experiences.

For adults working with children and young people, this means paying attention not only to what we teach about empathy, but also to the environments young people experience every day.

Do people listen to one another?

Are differences treated with curiosity or judgment?

Do young people feel that their contributions matter?

Are they encouraged to understand perspectives beyond their own?

Are they given meaningful opportunities to participate, cooperate, contribute, and care for others?

Experiences like these help young people learn not only how to belong, but how to live alongside others within a shared community.

Key Takeaway

Belonging is not only about finding our own place.

It can help us learn to recognize the place of others.

When people feel valued, connected, and included, they encounter social conditions that can support empathy, compassion, perspective-taking, and meaningful connection.

But belonging can also contribute to something broader.

Through participation in families, schools, peer groups, and communities, young people can begin developing important social empathy competencies: considering perspectives beyond their own, recognizing how experiences are shaped by social context, engaging meaningfully with difference, and understanding that they share responsibility for the communities they are part of.

Creating belonging, then, is not separate from cultivating social empathy.

It can help move empathy from:

“I understand you.”

toward a broader understanding:

“I understand that we are part of something together—and that how we treat, include, and respond to one another matters.”

That transition is one of the foundations of social empathy.

Questions for Reflection

- Where have you experienced a strong sense of belonging, and what created that feeling?
- How can families, schools, workplaces, and communities create belonging without requiring sameness?
- How can belonging help young people move from understanding individual experiences toward recognizing their role and responsibility within a wider community?

“Belonging is not only about knowing that we have a place. It can help us recognize that others have a place, too.”

Research Foundation

House of US Foundational Paper No. 1 —
Forthcoming
Understanding Social Empathy: What It Is, What It
Is Not, and Why It Matters

Central question

How do belonging, supportive relationships, and
meaningful participation contribute to the
development of empathy and social empathy?

Research fields

Developmental Psychology · Social Psychology ·
Education · Youth Development · Social-Emotional
Development

Conceptual focus

Belonging · Social Connectedness · Empathy ·
Compassion · Perspective-Taking · Participation ·
Shared Responsibility · Social Empathy

Selected Research

Barr, J. J., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2007). Adolescent empathy and prosocial behavior in the multidimensional context of school culture. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 168(3), 231–250.

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Batanova, M. D., & Loukas, A. (2012). What are the unique and interacting contributions of school and family factors to early adolescents' empathic concern and perspective taking? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Boele, S., Van der Graaff, J., de Wied, M., Van der Valk, I. E., Crocetti, E., & Branje, S. (2019). Linking parent-child and peer relationship quality to empathy in adolescence: A multilevel meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

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About the House of US Institute for Social Empathy

The House of US Institute for Social Empathy is dedicated to deepening society's understanding of social empathy and its importance in building healthier communities, stronger democracies, and a more connected world.