# Working with young people to create 'ten top tips' to promote a sense of 'belonging' to their school *(Tara Midgen, Theodora Theodoratou, Kirsty Newbury & Matthew Leonard, Your opinion matters - 'School for Everyone': An exploration of children and young people's perceptions of belonging)*

**Stream 3 of the wider project: Gathering feedback and measuring outcomes and change with Children and Young People with Learning Disabilities (LD)**
*Good practice example from 'Hearing the Voice' of children and young people with moderate, severe or multiple and profound learning disabilities*

We were interested in hearing about helpful ways to listen to the 'voice' of children and young people with moderate, severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities. When we say 'voice' we mean communication, in whichever form works best for the child or young person.

We asked people to write a summary of what they are doing and send it to us. Below we list summaries of what people did, what was helpful and what were the barriers. The summaries contain lots of ideas that can be applied to working with children and young people of different ages with a range of complex needs across the levels from own life, through service development, training and research and community and cultural change.

**Find more information here:**
https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-experience-measures/feedback-and-outcome-measures-for-children-and-young-people-with-learning-disabilities/
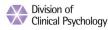
# WHAT WE DID

Following a review of provision, Wandsworth council recognised the need to strengthen its strategy for including children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in their local mainstream provision. As part of this strategy and the need to involve children with SEND in decision-making, the SCPS (Schools and Community Psychology Service) agreed to explore children and young people's understanding and thoughts regarding what helps them feel they belong in their schools, since sense of belonging has received strong support as a central characteristic of inclusion (Billingsley et al., 1996; Forest & Lusthaus, 1989; Frederickson et al., 2007). Wandsworth SCPS explored three specific questions in relation to children's belonging. Firstly, did children within the borough feel a sense of belonging in their schools? Secondly, what helped children feel that they belong? Finally, what else did children and young people think would improve their sense of school belonging within the Local Authority (LA)? In order to answer these, a two phase, mixed-methods approach was adopted. Young people's sense of belonging was explored using the Belonging Scale (Frederickson et al., 2007) and the School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997), alongside individual or group reflection sessions. In the first phase, children were asked about their understanding of inclusion and belonging, and what they felt schools were doing to support them. Focus groups of up to eight children and young people (CYP) were held in school settings. Children in nursery and Key Stage 1 attended a single session focus group, whilst those in Key Stage 2 and above attended two focus groups, held in consecutive weeks. Children and young people's understanding of belonging and inclusion was explored through group discussions.

Where it was felt that CYP did not have a clear understanding of the terms, this was explored further using differentiated games and stories and assessed with related questions. The focus groups then explored sense of belonging using further group discussions, activities, and work stations where children could write or draw their answers to questions focusing on inclusion and belonging in school.

The second phase took the themes identified in the first phase and explored these further, aiming to identify and rank the most important factors of belonging to children within the LA. CYP were shown quotes (short phrases) representing sub-themes identified from phase 1 of the research and told that these were ideas which other children in the LA felt help them belong in school.

Symbols, sorting activities and open questions were used to ensure that the students had a good grasp of the Part One: Good practice initiatives Official key themes presented. CYP were then asked to identify and prioritise the three most important themes to them and explain why they were important. Opportunities for adding further factors, which CYP felt promoted inclusion and belonging, were also provided.

Once the Phase 2 qualitative data from the young people had been categorised by sub-theme, key sub-themes began to emerge as being relatively more important (as determined by their frequency) to CYP's sense of belonging in school.
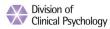
The ten most important sub-themes and quotes from the CYP were used to create the Top Ten Tips for school belonging (see below). With the support of the graphic design team a poster was created to display the young people's key ideas adopting the title 'School for Everyone: Our Ten Top Tips to help us feel we belong.'



## WHAT HELPED?

- A number of factors helped to facilitate this project and encourage the children's voices to be heard.

- The fact that this was a local authority priority provided a platform to promote and encourage schools' participation and enabled SCPS to protect time for delivery.

- Children's participation and engagement is also important to schools who recognise the importance of this for their own school development and are often keen to participate in such projects.

- Having a group of practitioners committed to the project from services and schools who are motivated to hearing children's voices is key.

- **The methods of delivery with the children and young people enabled their participation. These included:**
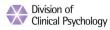
➢ providing small group opportunities to seek views including focus groups that helped children and young people to understand key concepts from the start of the project

➢ opportunities for children to record their views in a range of ways such as talking, drawing, writing etc.

➢ using creative methods to facilitate this

➢ adjusting tools to suit the needs of children

➢ providing visual support.

## WHAT WERE THE BARRIERS?

- Participants comprised a small number of children across a wide range of ages and need from each setting limiting the possibility of any generalisability.

- Whilst the majority of CYP who took part in the project reported a positive sense of belonging or connectedness in their settings, it is difficult to rule out selection effects given the method used to identify children to participate.

- Limited time for SENCos to gain consent, competing SENCo priorities and some parents' concerns regarding their children missing learning activities, also prevented some children's participation.

- The project tasks still required certain levels of communication and understanding, and this prevented children with the most profound needs from being included in the project.

- Given the clear deadlines to complete the data collection to present the findings to council stakeholders, there was limited time during phase 2 to ensure that all CYP fully understood the concept of belonging and some of the quotes chosen by the children when identifying which factors help them the most. It is therefore hard to be definitive as to whether children's choices were linked to their understanding of what promotes belonging or were things they considered made them happy or were important to them.

- Regardless of this, children without SEND are likely to be better at seeking out and accessing these precursors to belonging for themselves. Therefore, explicit and purposeful attention should be given to providing these precursors to belonging for children with SEND.

- The data appeared to suggest that where schools were providing targeted support to help children form positive relationships, the children's sense of belonging was positive. More Educational Psychology Service team members were involved in phase 2. Despite planning meetings and efforts to standardise the process, it was not possible to ensure that the delivery of the interviews did not have an impact on the quality and quantity of responses received.

# RESOURCES USED AND/OR PUBLICATIONS/WEBSITES TO SIGNPOST /REFERENCE:

- Cartmell, H. & Bond, C. (2015) What does belonging mean for young people who are International New Arrivals? Educational & Child Psychology Vol. 32 No. 2

- Frederickson, N., Simmonds, E., Evans, L. & Soulsby, C. (2007). Assessing social and affective outcomes of inclusion. British Journal of Special Education, 34, 105–115.

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- Resnick, M. D., P. S. Bearman, R. W. Blum, K. E. Bauman, K. M. Harris, J. Jones, J. Tabor, et al. 1997. "Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health." JAMA 278 (10): 823–832