

A Sense of Belonging

By Donna King, 2012

Every early childhood program has its own aspirations for the children and families it serves. Maybe you care most that children make friends and resolve conflicts peacefully. Maybe your passion is helping children and their families make connect with the natural world. Perhaps you hope children will claim and master many expressive languages that allow them to make their ideas and imaginings visible to themselves and others. You may be committed to helping every child gain competence and confidence in early academics – writing, reading, counting. Whatever it is you hope to achieve, your success will depend on how fully you are able to help each child and family grow a sense of belonging in your program. To learn is to risk and to venture – and most of us won't risk and venture unless we feel fundamentally secure where we are. We must feel that we are on the "inside" of someplace safe in order to step outside of ourselves and grow.

So how, as the people already inside, do we fully open our programs to the people we aspire to serve? How do we create a culture that leads each member of the community to a sense of belonging?

Here's what I heard when I posed this question to some of the parents, teachers and children I have known over many years of teaching and directing in a small program.

Welcome Me

"We felt welcome immediately. You made us feel welcome with just the simple things like making a point of saying 'Hello' and asking 'How are you?' every morning. It felt like you really wanted to know how we were; it wasn't just the 'polite' thing to do." - Mikele, parent

"It's very easy to get friends here. Because people like you the minute you walk in. Even if they don't really, really like you, once you're really in there, they still do like you. And you don't even need to be nice to them. They just say, "Hi." I remember that it was easy to get into the school." - Noah, age 5, reflecting back on starting school when he was 3.

Whenever and however you first meet the children and families who will become *your* children and families, you have the choice to make them feel welcome. Do you have a system for matching incoming families with "buddy families" for play dates before school begins? When you host visitors, is their presence announced on your morning message board? Do you let current families know who is coming, so they will be prepared to introduce themselves? If you have an Open House, are there plenty of teachers and parents there with smiles, handshakes and greetings?

"To know that not only are people willing to have you in their circle but happy to have you is a gift." - Susan, parent

See Me

"Moving from outside to inside has to do with being received in some way... reception that involves attention and acknowledgement of who you are... The people on the inside show an interest in how you experience the world and particularly this place we share together. Respect... literally, to look back, regard, consider... Respect is embedded in the concept of welcome."

– Margie, parent

"An absolute commitment to seeing and appreciating kids as individuals - rather than acting as if it's just a matter of time and commitment before all the kids end up (fill in the blank: tranquil, polite, brainy, holding the same values, etc....) is fundamental to a sense of belonging."

– - Kristin B.B., parent

When you orient new families, do you focus on things you want them to do –finish the paperwork, follow procedures for car line, send extra clothes, sign in and out? Or, do you use this opportunity to launch the profound and privileged work of seeing that child and family with clarity and appreciation? This is the time to ask families about their hopes and dreams, their challenges and vulnerabilities, their fierce beliefs and their deep questions. You are setting the tone for a new relationship of meaningful collaboration.

And in the weeks and months and years after orientation – each time we write an e-mail, compose a newsletter, put together a required form, sit down for a parent conference, document learning for a child's portfolio, or ask about the weekend – through our tone and our choice of words, we have the opportunity to say it again: "I see you, in all your particularity, and you are more than an interchangeable part of this place."

"Here's how you make friends. You learn their names. And you learn their signs."

– Niko, age 4

With 4 children over 9 years, it would have been easy (and frankly, natural) for the children to be "Berlin-Schulman's" but that was not the case. They were Jake (shark), Eli (fire engine), Micah (drum) and Becca (sunflower) and they were each seen, each time, with fresh eyes and complete acceptance."

- Brenda, parent

It begins with names. Ask people what they would like to be called – Beatrice or Bee or Bea? Sarah, or Miss Sarah, or Ms. Meyer? Then make sure everybody – children, teachers, families - gets that information. Distribute a pronunciation guide to names when people are new to one another. Post photos with names in a prominent place so that people have support when they are learning to put faces and names together. Find ways to make a project for children of learning ALL the names – not just their classmates, but their classmates' parents and siblings. Consider quizzes in mailboxes, photo matching games, lunchtime conversation.

You might also consider ways to create a unique and compelling identity for each child *within* the program. Here, we use “signs.” A sign is a symbol unique to each child –a shoe, a turtle, a leaf, a flashlight, an orange - that the child chooses early in the orientation process. By the time children begin school, the signs are everywhere – on the big Welcome Board at the gate, on mailboxes, on coat hooks, on snack cups. There are even three dimensional versions of the signs on a shelf near the blocks to include in buildings. Signs are the first things we help kids learn to draw, and the first symbols they learn to read. Signs are about identity, community and literacy.

“A sign is a wonderful way to honor individuality and help the child feel valued. You and your sign are important and that sign belongs to you alone, but everyone has one... so you are on the ‘inside.’

- Paula, parent

“Having a sign tells me that I matter as an individual, that I am known, that I am unique (no other sign like mine) and like everyone else (everyone has a sign), that there is an order to the universe, even when things feel chaotic.”

– Judy, parent

Show Me

“When you walk in you begin to know you are being encouraged to be in the world with sensitivity, caring and support. And beauty. This is a world that encourages community as well as allowing for individual exploration.... the environment says “Yes!” It feels like all things are possible, and it does not take long to want to be there, to want to join, to leave the outside and come inside.”

- Kristin, parent

“There is external evidence that you belong here. When you first come, there are pictures of yourself and your family all over the school. Your needs are anticipated. And there is a transparency about what’s expected. ‘Can I find my way around? Can I make sense of this place? Do I know what different parts are for? Is there someone to guide me if I can’t?’ I can look around and figure out what to do... and that gives me a sense of agency.”

- Margie, parent

Crafting the environment offers countless opportunities to create a culture of belonging. An environment that is orderly, beautiful and comfortable invites the confident engagement – the feeling that, “I know what to do here, so I belong here.” An environment with spaces and materials that children and families can claim for their own – mailboxes, coat hooks, cups and bowls –establishes ownership. And prominently displayed photos of children and their families say it most clearly of all – “This is your place.”

Give Me Time

“It was very strange at first, but as the year goes by you feel that it's kind of like your home.”

--Andy, age 5, remembers being a new three year old

"Like you could just take your time making friends. You don't have to do it straight away."

– Alena, age 4, offering advice in a Welcome Book

"Well, the way I did it was just make a friend one time at a time. One step at a time. That's how I did it."

– Oliver, age 4, reflecting on "How to Make Friends"

Joe: They have to know each other for a long time like how I knowed Elliot's name for a long time, and that's making us best friends.

Elliot: They will make friends by knowing people. Well, I got to like talk and talk to Joe 'til I got friends.

- Joe and Elliot at age 5 tell the story of a friendship begun at age 2

"Feeling on the inside" to me means that I FELT completely accepted for who we are as a family, that I could talk to any parent or teacher in the community without the awkwardness of being guarded so as not to say something that may offend somebody....So I was a little scared of being my complete self, at least until I figured out how this magical community worked so well and how I could contribute to it. That took a long time."

- Mikele, parent

In order to feel on the inside, I have to experience an awareness that I am on the outside for awhile and that that is ok too. That time on the periphery, a member of the community but still not really "in," is an important and necessary phase of the process. The image that comes to my mind here is of a little kid shyly peeking out from between the fingers of both hands which are covering her eyes: she's watching, she is taking it all in, she wants to see, she needs to know that she can do it at her pace... and that whomever she's interacting with will wait patiently and not dismiss her presence just because she is not fully in yet. How could she be, all at once?"

- Judy, parent

When we came, my movement from outside to inside came slowly. I am an introvert and am genuinely intimidated by social situations that aren't structured (e.g. socializing at drop off and pick up) so my integration was slow. But ultimately, I do think I moved to the inside. I don't know how and I don't know when, but I do know that it all started by watching my children. Watching them, seeing them fully integrated, loved and valued in this community at first, was a proxy for my own acceptance. But with time, it was genuinely my own as well.

- Brenda, parent

When you show patience, knowing that some children and families need time to fully enter and integrate; and when you radiate a steady, quiet confidence that they *will* eventually make their way inside – you lay the path to belonging. Take a hard look at structures in your program that rush or abbreviate relationships. The more time a group of children, teachers and families are together, the better.

Accept Me

"I believe that a large part of feeling that you belong starts with the feeling of being accepted for who you are. I never felt judged and I never felt that my children were being judged.... you have the freedom to explore, learn, and experiment without feeling as if you will be punished for doing something wrong. When someone feels they are in danger of being 'wrong' or 'bad' they stay on the outside because it never feels safe to be on the inside."

Paula, parent

"As I begin to find more similarities to myself or my values, I begin to feel more on the inside. I also have noticed this with children - they seem to use the idea of what's similar and what's different to orient around their world ("You have a swirling dress on too!" Or "I have a kanteen water bottle...we match!") I feel like we could get caught in these patterns of orienting and just circle around and around how we are similar or different, but the key to feeling a true sense of belonging and moving from the outside to the inside has to do with... a feeling of acceptance. That you are accepted for who you are... all of who you are – similarities AND differences. Not only accepted but valued and appreciated for all of who you are."

- Kristine, parent and teacher

"Part of moving from the outside to the inside involves taking the risk of revealing enough of yourself to connect to someone else. You have to be willing to take that risk, whether it is talking about yourself, asking for what you want, or asking someone about themselves. We feel we belong when we feel safe."

- Margie, parent

I remember you telling us before we enrolled – 'If Niko were to bite another child, he doesn't become an anonymous biter, we talk openly about this stuff.' This put me at ease, knowing that we were all in it together and could trust in the community to work together on whatever came up, as best we could.

– Kristin B.B., parent

"Maybe it just all boils down to love. Win-Win. You can't say you can't play. The rule that says 'keep everyone safe.' These are all strategies that lead to belonging - but it is really all about love."

- B.J., parent

"I love my school so much and I want to kiss it... Because it's a safe school, that's all."

-Max, age 4

In some ways, it is simple. If you want to make your program a safe and accepting place, you simply say it, over and over: "This is a safe place, and I won't let you hurt anyone here, and I wouldn't let anyone hurt you here either." You codify safety in your agreements: "Find a way that all can play." "Solve the problem so that everyone wins." "Take as much as you need, but not more." "Tell her when you're done so she can have a turn." "Use I Statements to share your feelings." "Ask first - before you rhyme his name, or make him the bad guy in your game, or crash his bike, or give him a kiss."

And then there are subtler strategies that communicate acceptance. Inviting families and children to be open about their challenges and difficulties. Generous use of the phrase “still learning” when those challenges present themselves. Approaching families as soon as you think something may be wrong – especially when you suspect they are unhappy with you or the program. Living *with* families and children in that generative intersection of confidence and uncertainty: “I’m not completely sure what to do, but I have some ideas, and we’ll figure it out together.”

Put Me to Work

“You don’t get a sense of belonging from being catered to... you get it from contributing to the community. You belong when you feel connected through action of some kind (playing together, working together, a cause, a task). There has to be meaningful exchange for true belonging. Can I contribute here? Is what I have to offer – skills, sensibility, experience - welcome here? Is what I have to offer needed here? A valuable part of the experience is the invitation to give of yourself.”

- Margie, parent

“For me as a parent having the entry point of shared hard work (group effort) is really powerful – along with being able to do meaningful (as in useful) individual work that helps me feel as though I’m contributing.”

- Kristin B.B., parent

“The kids grow a sense of belonging through the ways that they help to plan important events, solve problems and do chores that impact the space visually.”

- Ilene, parent

“I help almost everybody in the school. I help them if they fall down, I would help them get back up. If someone gets hurt I go over and see if they need anything... I think the nicest thing the teachers do is, they’re like, ‘Seth could you please go down there and rescue that ball?’ The nicest thing is when they just ask me to help.”

- Seth, age 5

In a community, everybody pitches in. If children are to feel competent and valued, they need to do real work every day –put away blocks, set the snack table, wash the paint brushes. It’s equally important to match families with tasks that are satisfying for them and genuinely important to the functioning of your program. Give parents some ideas about what you need, and ask what they can do. Web page? Fence repair? Legal advice? Laundry? Hold your first Saturday workday early in the year so that families can connect as they work beside each other moving mulch or weeding a garden or painting outdoor blocks. Take advantage ongoing opportunities for shared labor – do children and families work together on clean up when you have community gatherings? Who cleans up your playground in the afternoons? Who rakes leaves in the fall, and pulls weeds in the spring?

“What makes a good school is clean-up time, so you can learn to cooperate.” - Sam, age 5

Help Me

How some people meet their friends is by, once you get to school, somebody might help you with something and that might become your new friend. Friends play with you, friends help you when you need help, friends do a lot of stuff to make you feel like you've always been there.

– Anna Grace, age 5

"It wasn't until the immense outpouring of support that our family received after my father died, that I really felt an insider. The amount of love and care that every family showed for us sent me the message loud and clear: we were loved, we were supported. These actions really felt like they care from the heart... from the strong will to help one another in time of need."

– Mikele, parent

Belonging grew from the emphasis teachers put on kids talking to and helping each other (as opposed to all conversation and requests for help being directed toward teachers).

- Laura, parent

When you belong, you know who and how to ask for help. You trust that if you are hurt or upset, someone will stop and check on you and offer aid. When you belong, you know people will listen when you speak, and they trust you to listen, too. You feel surrounded by what we call "the caring conspiracy." Usually children need direct instruction, clear expectations and supported practice to develop helpful habits – checking in, empathic listening, respectful argument, agreeing to disagree, asking for help without blaming or complaining. And adults need structures that help them channel and direct their impulse to take care of one another – a parent leader who makes sure we provide meals for families with new babies or families facing illness or loss; a constantly updated roster including cell phone numbers so that families can call one another for help if they are delayed getting to school.

Inform Me

"Just saying 'Hi, I'm gonna be your friend' is not OK. You have to agree with the other person, you can't just tell them to be your friend."

- Susanna, age 5

"A commitment to clearly-articulated norms and expectations both helps families decide if a place is a good match and creates a safer environment for everyone."

– Kristin BB, parent

*"I remember reading through all the stuff prior to Alexandra entering Children First. I mentioned to my wife how involved we'll **have** to get. In hindsight, we were involved but in all the right ways. Because we were so involved and Children First felt like a family, we felt like we belonged."*

- James, parent

When you give prospective families clear, complete and unapologetic information about your program –emphasizing your high expectations for family involvement - they are more likely to participate in a whole-hearted way when they come. Likewise, if you encourage prospective families

to ask hard questions, and are frank with them about principles and policies you will not compromise — perhaps your particular approach to curriculum, or the hours children can attend, or your commitment to having children will spend a good part of each day outdoors — they know what they are getting into from the beginning. When you make an informed choice, you are on your way to belonging.

After the choice is made, a steady flow of information keeps the path to belonging clear. For children, you can provide a “Welcome Book,” a collection of photographs and words from teachers and children outlining routines, introducing spaces and materials, and even explaining rules — all in a tone that balances genuine excitement about the opportunities ahead with acknowledgement of how tender and scary it can feel to be new. Families will need plenty of written information, including clear instructions about required paperwork — but also something more playful, like an invitation to work with their child on pages for the program’s “Family Book.” Again, the tone is confident, cheerful and warm. Everything communicates, “You have work to do, and things to learn, but being here will definitely be worth the effort!”

Allow Me

“We feel we belong when we are allowed agency, and share power.” — Margie, parent

Belonging is not only about being accepted for who you are (or worse, tolerated for your particularity or “difference”) but really valued for the way you add to and transform the collective.... I remember a story I overheard you tell about Noam one afternoon. When playing babies with a big group of girls, he said he wanted to be the dad. Alexandra told him no, there was no dad and he should be the doctor, and he started to be the doctor. But you checked in and asked him if that was what he wanted and when he said he wanted to be the dad you made sure that happened. It was not anyone’s game, in other words, but something that changed as each player jumped in.

— Laura, parent

“To create a sense of belonging, a place needs a leader who is so comfortable in who is comfortable in who she is, so that that she can truly collaborate.... a leader willing to admit to challenges and explore them.... with no defensiveness. ‘Let’s just learn from what happened.’”

— Kristin, parent

“When you belong, You are part of a story.”

— Margie, parent

How does your program change from day to day and year to year in response to the actual people who inhabit it? For both children and their families, a sense of belonging comes from making an impact. Children see their work displayed with care. They watch their friends act out their dictated stories, knowing that later all the families will be reading those same stories at home via e-mail. Parents claim a territory or a task— the compost, the flower garden, shelving books - and get public acknowledgement for what they contribute. Families see the odds and ends they donate to “creation station” end up as fancy spaceships and baby food and magic wands. Flip through the big “Book of Agreements” — the rules for the school — and see the names of children who have, over many years,

inspire and write and illustrate those agreements. See policies re-considered and practices altered because you express your concerns or ideas. How visible is the history of your program and the ways it has been shaped over time by individual children, parents and teachers?

Celebrate Me

The feeling that you are welcome and respected – celebrated even – happens in layers and deepens over time. – Susan, parent

Belonging comes through thoughtful rituals that include parents - by having families create important presents, and including us in special days – not as spectators but as singing participants. – Ilene, parent

“Having rituals and having them be fun and having them be easy enough to learn but yet really needing to be learned creates a sense of community. I am thinking here of the circle with the song where everyone is named and of the birthday song (which now, in our family, any birthday forever and ever would be incomplete without).” – Judy, parent

"I'm not a preschooler. I'm a Children Firster!" – Jack, age 4

Ritual is a powerful and versatile tool for creating a culture of belonging. Carefully consider the occasions you choose to celebrate. Do your rituals clearly reflect your values? Do they deepen people’s connection to those values and their connection to each other? We love birthdays as an opportunity to hear stories from families about all the things the child has learned over the years; to invite the birthday child to name ambitions for the future; and to ask everyone else in the community to reflect on what they especially appreciate about the birthday child. We treasure our December Stone Stoup Feast as an opportunity to pause and celebrate this moment when we can see that we have gone from being new to each other to being, as our favorite song puts it, “Friends of the Family.” And we embrace our end of year Graduation Celebration as one last chance to celebrate the individual child’s unique contributions to our community and express our absolute belief in their potential to make the most of whatever comes next.

Inspire Me

And of course, belonging is about the way being with others in the collective transforms you . – Laura, parent

I remember the very first meeting where you asked us what we wanted for our children (all huddled up in a small space together) and this made me feel like we were going to take a preschool parenting voyage together (and it was going to be a fun trip). – Ilene, parent

I feel a sense of belonging when I am invited to be my best self.

– Sarah, parent and teacher

I said it the first day and will say it again: I wish I could stay here forever.

- Kristin, parent

Inspiration happens where your intention to create a culture of belonging meets up with the broader purpose of your work: Why should someone *want* to belong here? What in your program speaks to the best in people? How does your program invite people to identify and reach for their own highest aspirations?

Remember Me

"Just last week I mentioned in a meeting that we are lifelong members of the community. I said, "Gigi went to Children First, and it is our lifelong community."

- Kristin, parent

"I discovered Alexandra hiding behind my recliner flipping through one of her Children First notebooks after a visit to her new school. I explained to her that she didn't have to hide. They are your books to look at whenever you want. All of them are proudly displayed in our den/office for her to look over."

- James, parent

When I think about belonging... I think about loyalty.

- Melanie, parent

We make it clear – our kids are Children Firsters forever. Instead of erasing the old group with the start of a new year, we ask each graduate to leave us a painted tile to hang in the classroom. We hang photos of each graduating class on the Old Friends wall in our bathroom. At meeting, we call Old Friends to sing happy birthday. We invite alumnae to pizza potlucks and camping weekends. These small gestures give the kids who are here today, the kids making the phone calls and studying the tiles, a reassuring sense of continuity and abundance. They can welcome new friends and honor the old; they can look forward to graduation and kindergarten, and know they will be remembered. They will always belong.