



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 connect with the natural world.
- Perhaps you hope children will claim and master many expressive languages 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, and counting.

Whatever it is you hope to achieve, your success will depend on how fully you are able to help each child and family develop 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 open our programs fully to the people we serve? How do we create a culture in our programs that ensures each member of the community will feel a sense of belonging?

Here's what I heard when I posed this question to some of the parents, teachers, and children who have been part of our program.

Helping Children and Families Develop a Sense of Belonging

by Donna King

Welcome Me

"We felt welcomed 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 opportunity to help them feel welcome:

- Do you have a system for matching incoming families with 'buddy families' for play dates before school begins?
- At program open houses, are there plenty of teachers and parents there with smiles, handshakes, and greetings?
- 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?

"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 acknowledgment 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 is embedded in the concept of welcome." —Margie, parent

In 1990, Donna King, informed by her graduate school study of child care quality, worked with a group of teachers and parents to found Children First, a small, nonprofit early education program in Durham, North Carolina — and she has been teaching, directing, and, most of all, learning there ever since. She has three children — Cara, now 21; Anna Grace, now 18; and Josh, now 16 — all graduates of Children First.



“An absolute commitment to seeing and appreciating kids as individuals. I think recognizing each person 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, send extra clothes, sign in and out? Or do you use this opportunity to launch the profound 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.”
— Niko, age 4

“With four children over 9 years, it would have been easy (and frankly, natural) for the children to be ‘Berlin-Schulmans’ but that was not the case. They were Jake, Eli, Micah, and Becca 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? Post photos with names in a prominent place so that people have support in learning to put faces and names together. Find ways to make a project for children of learning ALL the names — not just the children, but their parents and siblings, too. Consider name quizzes in mailboxes, photo matching games, and lunchtime conversations about family names.

Show Me

“When you walk in you begin to know you are being encouraged to be in the world with sensitivity, caring, 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 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, snack 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

“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 at a time. One step at a time. That’s how I did it.” — Oliver, age 4, reflecting on how to make friends in a Welcome Book

“‘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

“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

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. Show

patience, communicate consistently, and radiate a steady confidence that everyone will surely make their way to the inside. This lays the path to belonging.

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.” — Paula, parent

“The key to feeling a true sense of belonging and moving from the outside to the inside has to do with a feeling that you are . . . not only accepted, but valued and appreciated for **all** of who you are.” — Kristine, parent and teacher

“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

“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 won’t let anyone else hurt you, either.” And then there are subtler strategies that communicate acceptance:

- Inviting families and children to be open about their challenges and difficulties.
- Generously using 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: “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. A valuable part of the experience is the invitation to give of yourself.” — Margie, 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, wash the paint brushes, fetch a washcloth for an injured friend. 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, weeding a garden, or painting outdoor blocks. Then take advantage of ongoing opportunities for shared labor.

“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 they 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 like 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 came from the heart . . . from the strong will to help one another in time of need.” — Mikele, 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.’

Inform Me

“Just saying ‘Hi, I’m gonna be your friend’ is not okay. You have to agree with the other person. You can’t just tell them to be your friend.” — Susanna, age 5, offering advice in a Welcome Book

When you give prospective families clear, complete, and unapologetic information about your program — emphasizing your high expectations for family involvement and the principles and policies you will not compromise — they know what they are getting into from the beginning. When a family makes an informed choice, they are on their 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 an acknowledgment 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.”

Allow Me

“We feel we belong when we are allowed agency, and share power. When you belong, you are part of a story.” — Margie, parent

“Belonging is not only about being accepted for who you are (or worse, tolerated for your particularity or ‘difference’), but really being valued for the way you add to and transform the collective.” — Laura, 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.
- Children 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.

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

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 things their child has learned over the years.
- invite the birthday child to name ambitions for the future.
- ask everyone else in the community to reflect on what they especially appreciate about the birthday child.

We treasure our December “Stone Soup Feast” as an opportunity to pause and celebrate this moment when we know we have evolved from being new to each other to being, as a favorite song puts it, “Friends of the Family.” And we embrace our end-of-year Graduation Celebration as one last chance to celebrate each child’s unique contributions to our community and to 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). 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

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 identify with this place and 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?

“I said it the first day and will say it again: I wish I could stay here forever.” — Kristin, parent

“I’m not a preschooler. I’m a Children Firster!” — Jack, age 4