

Belonging

Question

'What is it like to be a part of a group?'

Context

The feeling of belonging to a group is one of the most essential human needs. The family is the first place where we 'belong' but as we grow older we join or form many other groups as part of our working life or social activity. As we join groups we check constantly our place, by asking ourselves: 'What do I need to do to feel safe and accepted here?'

Conformity is a natural pressure, for children and teenagers especially. Whether they are 'in' or 'out' can affect them emotionally. Along with the joy and wellbeing of sensing they belong, they are all highly sensitive to the pain that comes from feeling left out, often experiencing exclusion as abandonment.

Often our loyalty to different groups creates conflict for us, as we have to make choices and priorities. Teachers and parents can help children to recognise the pull of certain loyalties and to find healthy ways of belonging to different human systems.

Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is to heighten your sensitivity to 'belonging' so you can better explore with children and young people the situations they are in that offer them resource or difficulty. The exercise helps you understand your sense of belonging by focusing on some of the different groups you have been part of in the past – and are part presently. It is likely that the clarity of your memory and the strength of feelings will be different as you consider your relationship with each group you are asked to consider.

You will need

A quiet, comfortable space without interruption to reflect in

A pen and a paper (ideally a personal journal)

About 30 minutes

Notice

Look out for how the different degrees of belonging that you identify create feelings of security, confidence or unease.

What to do

- Sit comfortably in a chair, with both feet firmly on the floor. Breathe deeply and slowly. You may wish to close your eyes. Take a moment to relax and let go of any thoughts, concerns or tensions you may be carrying currently.



- Recall some of the many groups that you have or still belong to over the course of your life. Which do you remember most clearly... your family, friendship groups, sports teams, associations, clubs? The groups might be from your past or might be still active in the present
- From the groups that have come to mind, choose two or three where you felt (or feel) a very strong sense of belonging, of being included by the others in the group. Note down the groups in your journal
- Slowly consider each group, one-by-one. Allow yourself to relive some of your memories. You might be able to see faces and places, or remember conversations. Where were you? When was it? Remember some of the moments when you were with that group. Notice the feelings and sensations that this may induce in your body
- Note what it feels like to be part of that group. What did you value? How did you relate to the others, and they to you? Did someone say or do something that helped your feeling of 'belonging'? If a vivid image of a place, situation or experience comes to mind, or a strong feeling, capture it in your journal
- Next bring your attention to one group that you were a part of but where it was more difficult or challenging to fit in. And repeat the process of bringing the group to mind and identifying what it was like to be a part of it. Can you identify why it was hard to feel as if you 'belonged'? This part of the exercise may provoke feelings of unease, unpleasantness, sadness or even anger
- Once again jot down any thoughts or feelings in your journal.

Building on the experience

Over the next few days, start to view some of your work and social activities through a 'lens' of belonging. Ask yourself:

- Do I feel included here?
- What is the nature of my belonging to this group?
- Do I feel safe?
- How important is this group to me?
- Am I loyal to the group and is it loyal to me?

Capture what you notice. What in particular enhances your own feelings of belonging in positive ways?

After a few days, summarise in your journal what you have discovered about your own experience of belonging and what insight this gives you about children's experience of joining and being a part of groups.