



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Why are connection and belonging important?

Connection and belonging

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for finding and sustaining threads of connection and belonging.

Definition of 'parent'

We acknowledge that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

What is connection and belonging?

Connection and belonging means something different for everyone. For both adults and children, it can mean...

- a feeling of safety
- knowing that you're being heard, that somebody wants to spend time with you
- a shared sense of trust
- feeling comfortable
- having a link to someone or something.

Connection and belonging can be found in relationships. From the relationships you have with people or things – a special person, a place, a culture – to all sorts of things. A drive for connection that has us seeking out some sense of belonging, community, love, acknowledgement – both giving and receiving.

“

Connection is something you've formed a strong bond with. Something you love. Something you like.

ARCHER, AGE 9, PERAMANGK AND KAURNA COUNTRY



VIOLET, 7 YEARS OLD

What does connection and belonging feel like?

We think it can feel like...

- a safety net
- a security blanket; or
- a dinner table where you know there's always going to be a seat just for you, and you're always welcome to sit down, if you want to.

“

I want to feel safe.

AVA, 6 YEARS OLD, WURUNDJERI COUNTRY

What does connection and belonging feel like to you?

Some kinds of relationships make it possible for us to just be ourselves, instead of a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. They exist in a space where vulnerability can happen; where we can properly show ourselves without feeling judged. And making that possible for others through our openness and their openness. Things come together, and before we know it there's all these intertwining connections happening. We might not be able to see or explain these connections, but we feel it and know they're there.

Connection can mean being able to confide in one special person who cares and will listen to our innermost thoughts, our deepest worries. And that they also feel safe to share back with us.

Or it can mean finding belonging in a group of people where you share a common purpose, something that's bigger: bigger than yourself and everyone else. Having a common purpose allows all our unique traits to find a home.

Why do connection and belonging matter so much?

Connection and belonging matter because they help us with:

Parenting

Through connection we can find support to manage the practical and emotional demands of raising children.

Distress and loneliness

Connection to family and friends, and belonging to a community, can reduce distress and loneliness. They can make a huge difference to the wellbeing of children and families.

Safety

Connection can help us feel safer *and* actually make us be safer, because we know who we can go to in times of crisis and that others are looking out for us.

“

Being connected to family and friends matters to me because I can talk to people in times of trouble. It's pretty much like having a safety net, so you can talk to people when you're feeling down mentally or something.

JASON, LUTRUWITA COUNTRY

Learning

Connection can be a source of learning in important or difficult times. A safe space for not having the answers, asking questions, exploring.

Empathy

Feeling connected can make it easier to feel empathy. You may not have been through the same

exact experience as someone else, but you can empathise with them and learn from each other.

Practical support

Connection can help us find practical support with the kids so you and your child can get a break from being your child's only source of support or play. It can help us find practical help at home, access to free items like clothing, toys – a dinner now and then. Practical connections like these can go both ways, and we can find value being able to give back.

Strength

Connection and belonging make us strong by giving us reasons to:

- stay alive
- wake up; and
- bounce back against the odds.

They give us a sense of purpose but also of being valued for the contributions we make to the lives of other people. Hope, strength and the power to fight for what we care about.

Wellbeing

When we feel connected as a family, there can be a lightness, a calmness, a sense of ease or security. Connection makes it possible to laugh together. It's easy to be angry by yourself, but to do the opposite – to find ways to love and to be empathetic and to laugh – you need other people to do it with. Relationships run both ways.

“

I am a very social person so without social connections I feel alone and almost lost.

15-YEAR-OLD, FEMALE, VICTORIA IN CHECKING IN WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE¹

Times when connection and belonging mattered to us

The families we talked to generously shared their stories of when connection and belonging really mattered to them.

When healing intergenerational trauma

‘Growing up we didn’t have a connection like what I feel with my family. I think that’s because of intergenerational trauma. So I worked very hard to make sure that my kids feel connected to me and to each other.’

When we didn’t have enough money

‘We were not always flush with cash. I remember one time when we were really struggling and we couldn’t go out and do anything and the kids were going absolutely stir crazy feeling trapped in the house. We thought, “what do we have on hand at home that we can do together as a family?”

‘We decided we were gonna run a family Dungeons and Dragons game. That gave the kids that sort of feeling that even though they weren’t going anywhere, they were still doing something, they were actively participating together and we were all having a really good time.’

During illness

‘At one stage there was a big disconnect because I was so unwell – I mean five years in bed. And the only thing I could do was get the kids to come and sit with me, just share that moment, watch TV. I might not have been mentally present, but I was physically present in that connected space at that time.’

When we were apart

‘When my wife was really sick and was away from home quite a bit in “get well” centres, the kids were really quite young, and we did whatever we could do to keep that connection.’

‘One of the kids would go and stay with her every few weeks. Some of them weren’t all that keen on it but now when they’re older and they still talk about some of the good things that they did when they were there. It was good for my wife too because she got to see the kids and felt that she was still part of the family – still needed, still wanted.’

When we were homeless

‘Me and my kids had been moving around. We stayed in this one horrible refuge after being shunted around refuges, we were pretty worn down by then...

‘We used to basically get out of the refuge and just find something to do. We were really lucky that we had access to public transport, which was really affordable. So we could go places.

‘We just used to do stuff together. We had this thing we used to say, we were “the happiest homeless people”. That was our saying. That was the thing that kept us going.’

When making meaning

‘When I had a child myself, I understood my family much better, and I got closer to family.

‘I wasn’t very close with my mum but she was part of the first group of people who got COVID-19 when it was really scary and in my home country COVID was equal to death. And I had that moment of: “I might not have more time!” I video-called her often. We talked about many things and began to understand each other, we got much closer. She survived.’

Take a moment to think about...



Before you read on, take a moment to think about...

- What would you add to this list of ideas?
- Times when connection and belonging mattered to you and your family

What can get in the way of connection?

Even though connection can be so valuable there might be things that really get in the way. And although in some ways we are more connected than ever through things like technology, many of us feel lonely and isolated.

Exhaustion, shame, stigma and worry

It can be hard to reach out for, or take up offers of, connection especially if doing so in the past has led to experiences of discrimination, stigma, violence, abuse, bullying and judgement. Being treated as different because of who we are or our situation, can lead us to feel uncertain about how people might respond. We might fear rejection and feel we need to make exhausting choices about how much of ourselves we share with others in order to stay safe.

Poverty and financial stress

Things like not having access to public transport, the car being broken down, and being unable to afford fuel or phone credit can keep us isolated from others, especially if we have to travel outside our community to find connection. It's even harder when you're also responsible for caring for others, are new to the local language, or are dealing with illness, distress, pain and/or disability. We can feel overwhelmed and despair that things won't get better.

Time

A lot of us are really busy. Our lives can be made even busier if we have to go to food banks to have enough to eat, are a single parent, have to work long hours or have demanding care responsibilities. This can mean we don't have time for all the relationships we might like to have and we have to choose which ones to prioritise.

Where we lived

Sometimes the people, Country, communities or places we feel connected to are far away. Our friends and extended family might be interstate. Families living in remote parts of Australia are often located hundreds of kilometres away from their loved ones or the nearest community.

Being apart

We can find it harder to feel connected to loved ones that have died, and those who we've been separated from or lost contact with. Sometimes we lose connections with people who matter to us and this causes us pain.

“

We lost connection with most people when we moved in with my uncle. I was going through a lot of stuff and when ya like 10 years old, no one wants to hear that. It was hard to keep in touch 'cause it was hard to act the same after all the stuff that happened. I got supported by my friend and her mum through that time.

14-YEAR-OLD, KINSHIP CARE, VICTORIA
IN OUT OF SIGHT²

Abuse, violence and unsafety

In some relationships we might feel love and connection at times, but fear, unsafety and disconnection at others, which can be really tricky to navigate. It might not always be possible to remain connected *and* keep ourselves safe.

Sometimes we might make new connections that are unsafe or become unsafe. There are some signs to look out for, such as if people start to:

- embarrass or put you down
- act in ways that scare you
- try to control you or keep you isolated
- intimidate or hurt you (physically, emotionally or sexually)
- tell you that you are a bad parent or threaten to harm your children; or
- blame you for their behaviour, or act like it's not really happening.

The Say It Loud website has some more information about [warning signs of unsafe behaviours](#) to look out for.

Safety of the community

The physical safety of our communities is important too. Do you feel safe in your local community when you go out or let the kids go out? This might be to do with people, but it can also be to do with access to parks and green spaces, the quality of footpaths or traffic safety concerns. In some communities, pollution or toxic hazards are also a threat. Areas with safety problems also often have more available and affordable housing.

Self-esteem

No matter our age, we can sometimes feel like we need to be a different version of ourselves in order to belong, especially on social media. We might feel like we're not good enough. It can be difficult navigating around connections because we don't want to lose the relationships we have or start new ones in case we lose them. And it never feels good when we're having to squash parts of ourselves just to fit in.

There are other things that can get in the way of connection and belonging too, like:

- not having had access to education
- housing insecurity and homelessness
- family violence and all kinds of abuse
- addiction
- grief and loss
- intergenerational trauma.

Take a moment to think about



- What are the things that can make connection and belonging harder to access for you and your family?
- Who in your life knows about the things you're up against?
- What advice would you give other families in similar situations about how to connect despite these challenges?

So what can we do?

The following resources have been created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for finding and sustaining threads of connection and belonging.

Not all of the resources will be relevant for everyone so choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Connecting and caring for each other in tough times](#)
- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#)
- [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#)
- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#)
- [See all resources on connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family? [First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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References

1. Commission for Children and Young People (2021). [Checking in with children and young people: Youth survey, November 2020 to February 2021.](#) Melbourne: CCYP.
2. Commission for Children and Young People (2021). [Out of sight: Systemic inquiry into children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care.](#) Melbourne: CCYP.