

Building a Case for Child and Youth Belonging:

Insights from the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region



**Children and Youth
Planning Table**
of Waterloo Region

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We acknowledge that the land on which the work of the Children and Youth Planning Table is performed is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabe, and Neutral People. We acknowledge the enduring presence of the Indigenous people with whom we share this land today, their achievements, and their contributions to our community. We offer this acknowledgment as an act of reconciliation between Indigenous and non- Indigenous peoples of Canada.

“Belonging means you don’t have to hide who you are in order to fit in.”

-Mobina, Youth in Waterloo Region.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND A NOTE FOR CONSIDERATION

The Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT) would like to thank all the partners and young people who contributed to this report. In particular, we extend our gratitude and appreciation to Megan Kelly. Megan provided extensive research support on the literature review of this report, particularly looking at academic studies on the concept of belonging.

This publication is intended to be read as a working paper. It seeks to encourage the exchange of knowledge on the topic of belonging among the CYPT membership, as well as others serving children, youth and families in our community. This report also serves as a CYPT artifact, providing context on the process and route taken to land on belonging as a strategic direction for the collective. This report does not, however, read as a traditional business case, rather it is an exploratory document that collects key insights from academic publications and local resources with direct references from young people and our community.

There are many added values to investing in belonging for children and youth. While there aren't any available references to the "return on investment" that comes from increasing a sense of belonging, we know that a person's sense of belonging is closely tied to both individual and community benefits. We hope this report supports the development of shared learnings on the wholistic and empirically-proven implications of a person's sense of belonging, and that this first step prompts our reflection on how to improve child and youth belonging.

With gratitude,
Goranka Vukelich and Barb Cardow
CYPT Co-Chairs





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT) is a member-driven partnership with over 60 Voting Member Organizations across Waterloo Region and 8 Nested/Affiliated Groups¹. The CYPT works to improve the well-being of children and youth through a system of coordinated and effective services that are supported by capacity building initiatives. Recognizing the complex challenges and issues related to the well-being of children and youth, the CYPT operates through a collective impact model seeking to promote **happy, healthy children and youth—today and tomorrow**.

Child and youth well-being is understood by the CYPT as Nine Dimensions of Well-being, and the dimension of Belonging is recognized as foundational. We believe that in order to positively contribute to a young person's overall health and well-being, we must support their sense of belonging to their community and their individual social connections (i.e. feeling close and connected with others around them). *Building a Case for Child and Youth Belonging: Insights from the Children and Youth Planning Table* serves to trace the journey of how the CYPT landed on the concept of belonging as the collective's current strategic priority, and to outline why belonging is so fundamental to a young person's well-being.

The first section of this report is a brief review of belonging, why it matters, and what the local data tells us about child and youth sense of belonging in Waterloo Region. The second section is a mapping of how the CYPT landed on belonging as a key strategic area and how it leads the collective's current work through the three pillars of (1) Equity, (2) Attachment and Relationships, and (3) Children and Youth Feeling Valued, Heard and Included. Finally, the third section provides an in-depth literature review on the relationship between belonging and other areas of a young person's well-being.

Our focus on belonging comes at a critical time. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the ways in which we traditionally connect with one another. Just like adults, many young people have struggled with changes to how they connect with those around them. As a result of the insights from the Youth Impact Survey (YIS) 2020 (data available [here](#)), we know that more than a quarter of young respondents in Waterloo Region feel a very weak or somewhat weak sense of belonging to their community. We also know that over a quarter of respondents feel lonely on a regular basis. As we work through the data analysis of the 2021 Youth Impact Survey, with responses from over 1,000 children and youth in Waterloo Region aged 9 to 18, we seek to provide our community with an even greater appreciation of how young people have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic and how they perceive their overall sense of well-being.

¹ Note: Voting Member Organizations, Nested and Affiliated groups include other networks, tables, and councils working toward child and youth well-being.

Understanding belonging for children and youth within our local context, along with the COVID-19 pandemics impact on social relations, should remain a priority in our community. Highlighted in this report, empirical research suggests that there are several factors that are closely tied to an individual's positive sense of belonging, these include an individual's reported degree of social support, academic outcomes, physical and mental health, as well as their overall life satisfaction. At the same time, other factors including loneliness, anxiety, perceived stress, as well as clinical depression, are associated with more negative perceptions of belonging. Ultimately, we hope this report prompts discussions for individuals, organizations, government representatives, and private sector partners to ask: **How can we as a community promote a sense of belonging for children, youth and families across our programs, services and operating spaces?**

"In working together with the CYPT to analyze the Waterloo Region Youth Impact Survey, we have been blown away by the power of belonging. It is showing up as one of the best predictors of child and youth well-being."

-Dr. Dillon Browne, Canada Research Chair in Child and Family Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychology, U of Waterloo





INTRODUCTION: A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF BELONGING

An important part of positive well-being is that one feels loved and supported through mutually caring and respectful relationships, whether from their friends, family, companions, mentors, or other members of the community.² One way to conceptualize these feelings into a single notion is through the **concept of belonging**.

Belonging, or a person's sense of belonging, is closely related to a variety of environmental and situational factors and can have an impact on other areas of a person's well-being.³ **Those with a strong sense of belonging tend to be more engaged in their community, to have positive social networks, and to build important relationships with others, all contributing to reduced feelings of loneliness and social isolation.**⁴ When describing belonging, UNICEF Canada notes the importance of feeling supported by those with whom we have meaningful interactions. This includes family, friends, teachers, members of our communities, and even our pets. UNICEF Canada further notes that "fostering healthy family relationships from birth, reducing the separation of children from their families and cultures, and restoring relationships that are damaged by trauma, stress, poverty and other factors are all critical to belonging."⁵

"Belonging feels like you have people who have your back. It's the little things that make you feel like you belong... you feel cared for and part of something bigger than yourself."

-Youth Panelist at #KidsTakeOver,
November 18, 2020.

2 UNICEF CANADA. (2019). Where Does Canada Stand? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report. UNICEF Canada, Toronto. Available [here](#).

3 e.g., Allen & Bowles, 2012; Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015; Anant, 1966, 1969; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Choenarom et al., 2005; Daley et al., 2018; Fine, 1991; Hagerty et al., 1992; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Huang, 2020; Kitchen et al., 2012a, 2012b; Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Ma, 2003; Master & Meltzoff, 2020; McLaren & Challis, 2009; Mellor et al., 2008; Mock et al., 2010; Oberle et al., 2019; Oysterman et al., 2008; Sánchez et al., 2005; Zarobe, et al., 2017.

4 UNICEF CANADA. (2019). Where Does Canada Stand? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report. UNICEF Canada, Toronto. Available [here](#); It is important to note that while research does suggest that a sense of community belonging is highly correlated with physical and mental health, these studies are cross-sectional, and causality cannot be inferred.

5 UNICEF CANADA. (2019). Where Does Canada Stand? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report. UNICEF Canada, Toronto. Available [here](#).

What is Belonging?

While the concept of belonging has been described in a variety of ways, **the central idea is that belonging is feeling positively about one's place within a supportive, beneficial system that extends beyond our individual selves.** A sense of belonging goes beyond fulfilling minimal needs for social connection, and it goes beyond perceived social support(s).⁶ Instead, belonging encompasses a more wholistic approach and, therefore, should be recognized for its overarching implication across other areas of a person's well-being. Studies on belonging find that it correlates with various outcomes, including health outcomes. This is to say that those who lack a sense of belonging (e.g., report more loneliness) often have more negative health outcomes, whereas those with positive social connections and attachments have more positive health outcomes.

For those serving children, youth, and families, this suggests that understanding belonging may require looking beyond surface-level social interactions and supports in which children and youth are taking part.

Instead, **it becomes imperative to consider how our work on promoting belonging is connected to other areas of well-being and how the systemic and structural barriers (e.g., racism) faced by some young people prevent their positive engagement, equitable participation, and satisfaction in our communities and across their social relationships.**

The CYPT promotes belonging in our communities as a reflective and intersectional concept that requires direct input from young people themselves. Enabling young people to participate and feel engaged in meaningful, open, and collaborative opportunities is an integral part of our collective goal in fostering belonging within and beyond our programs and spaces. When we promote belonging, we seek to actively engage young people, to better understand the equity-related barriers that impact their quality of life, and to recognize how their sense of belonging is closely tied with other aspects of their well-being. This process is ongoing and it requires difficult conversations in our communities.

Community Belonging as an Extension of Social Inclusion and Social Capital

The concepts of 'social inclusion' and 'social capital' are also relevant in defining the factors contributing to a person's overall sense of belonging to their community. In defining social inclusion, Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation (KWCF) notes that "in a socially inclusive society, all people are able to secure a job, access services, connect with the local community, and have their voice heard, regardless of race, ability, family background, income, age, gender, belief, etc."⁷ Indeed, promoting social inclusion becomes particularly important when we consider that certain children, youth, and families in our communities do not have access to essential services or necessities, or may not have the same opportunities to participate or engage in community initiatives due to systemic barriers.



SNAPSHOT: CFC's Definition of Belonging

Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) defines belonging as "being part of a collective we. It's a two-way street: It's about communities sending signals of acceptance and inclusion, and about individuals cultivating their own connections to community. A sense of belonging is important to build safe, vibrant communities, and it brings purpose to our lives."

⁶ Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Mellor et al., 2008

⁷ KWCF (2014). We Can Design Belonging. Community Report. Available [here](#).

“[Social Inclusion] is an important place to start designing for belonging, but it is not where one finishes”.⁸

Experiencing social inclusion does not automatically mean a person experiences strong feelings of belonging. In other words, there are individuals who do, in fact, display a high degree of social inclusion but who indicate low levels of belonging. Social inclusion is the starting point not the end goal.

Some studies also point to a direct correlation between high degrees of social capital and feelings of community belonging.⁹ While the term social capital does not have a universal meaning, it relates to the perceived benefits of an individual’s social relationships and networks. So someone with a number of friendships with people that are in positions to affect change, for example, might be perceived as having high social capital. Individuals directly invest their personal time and energy to strengthen their connections and in turn feel that they are valued members of the community or group. According to various studies, high degrees of social capital have been linked to civic participation, trust in others, lower mortality rates, lower rates of crime, and positive perceptions of health.¹⁰ Additionally, there is evidence that in communities with high social capital, children and

The YMCA WorkWell team points out that: “Through decades of research, [the Harvard Study of Adult Development] has shown how healthy relationships help us through hardships, strengthen our immune system, and delay mental and physical declines. **Studies have shown that a lack of social connection over time affects our health more than smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure – even suggesting that prolonged loneliness can have the same effect on our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.** This has led many social scientists to herald social connection as our single greatest need after food and shelter.”

–YMCA WorkWell of Three Rivers: The Loneliness Epidemic How the Silent Loss of Social Connection has Impacted Our Communities During COVID-19

youth have better health and education outcomes.¹¹

Overall, it is important to consider **how our efforts can support both the social inclusion of children, youth, and families, as well as how we encourage opportunities for valuable, positive, and meaningful connections among those we serve.** Recognizing the wholistic nature of belonging, the CYPT seeks to streamline belonging as a priority across our community initiatives through the three interwoven pillars of:

“I think adults need to realize that children need to be heard and seen for who they really are.”

–YIS 2021 Feedback Form Respondent

- **Equity:** The way society and systems operate keeps certain children, youth and families out.
- **Attachment/Relationships:** Quality relationships, connection to others, and experiences of trauma, matter—right from the beginning of a person’s life.
- **Children and Youth Feeling Valued, Heard and Included:** There exists a power difference between young people and adults, and missed opportunities for young people to be heard and involved in meaningful ways.

⁸ KWCF (2014). We Can Design Belonging. Community Report. Available [here](#).

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Shields M. (2008). Community belonging and self-perceived health. Health Reports. Statistics Canada. Available [here](#); Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. (2017). Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Available [here](#).

¹¹ KWCF (2014). We Can Design Belonging. Community Report. Available [here](#).



SNAPSHOT: Moments of Belonging in Waterloo Region

According to insights gathered by Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation (KWCF) 2014 report on local belonging, it was found that **“people most often reported feeling happy, content, relaxed, included, valued and excited during a time when they were experiencing a strong sense of belonging.** People generally felt that when they truly belonged, they were able to be themselves and did not have to fear the judgment of others in the group.”

KWCF research on belonging also suggests that feelings of belonging are not necessarily dependent on the amount of time spent in a particular place or with a particular person or group. In many cases, participants still reported a high sense of belonging even when meeting new people and when exploring new physical spaces. Another interesting finding is that not all of their respondents reflected on happy moments when describing moments of belonging. In fact, **“some experienced a strong sense of belonging when their friends and family rallied to support them during a trying time,** such as, after receiving a serious injury or experiencing the death of a spouse. Others also described a heightened sense of belonging during times when they were actively working towards a goal, such as running a successful event or solving a problem. One participant mentioned that for her, belonging sometimes came as a surprise—a sudden realization that a group of people did matter and did care about her—but only as she had to leave that group.”

There are also several key themes that increase a person’s positive sense of belonging in Waterloo Region through everyday social interactions. KWCF points to the following:



AUTHENTIC INTERACTION: By looking for opportunities to develop relationships with others through positive and authentic interactions, we begin to empathize and personally connect more with those around us. These authentic interactions “can happen anywhere, generally take a few minutes to get into, and ideally will lead to long-lasting relationships.”



FEELING WELCOME: At the core of feeling a sense of belonging is feeling like you are welcomed, acknowledged and included. This can happen both through social interactions and directly through our physical environments.



SHARED EXPERIENCE: By building shared experiences through common interests, goals and traits, we prompt social connections that are meaningful. In fact, “it is not necessary for people to interact with each other in order to feel belonging. Because of [mutually positive] shared experience—just knowing that you have something in common with other people can contribute to a sense of belonging.”

What Do We Mean When We Say Community?

“[Through our CYPT] connections we can certainly contribute to connectedness, belonging and better health outcomes. I also think the work in terms of creating these connections helps to make a more connected community of service providers as they are able to better visualize their work as belonging to something bigger than themselves.”

–CYPT Member in 2020 Annual Report

Without a doubt, community can mean many different things for different people—and their positive sense of belonging changes depending on which group or community they interact with. For some, a positive sense of belonging to a community is based on a broader national or geographic place-based identity. A sense of belonging can also be more related to a person’s day-to-day social connections including their family, their friends, or perhaps to a more broadly defined ethnic, linguistic or cultural group(s). For others, a strong sense of belonging is associated with the social connections and networks that they find within volunteer programs or extracurricular groups, virtually or through their school. When considering how we want to promote a young person’s sense of belonging, we first have to better learn from young people on how they define belonging, then to ask ourselves, **“To whom or to which community are we trying to promote belonging?”**

What Does the Pre-Pandemic Data Tell Us About Our Local Sense of Belonging?

According to a 2016 [national report](#) released by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) at the University of Waterloo, about two out of three people in Canada have a strong sense of community belonging.¹² This reflects a steady increase from 57.8 percent in 2001 to its highest level at 66.4 percent in 2014.

According to data from the Canadian Community Health Survey, data from young people age 12 to 17 year olds indicates multiple years of favourable sense of belonging averages for young people in Waterloo Region.¹³ Across 2013-2014 (78.6 percent), 2015-2016 (87.3 percent) and 2017-2018 (83.9 percent) we see that the clear majority rated their sense of belonging as very strong or somewhat strong.¹⁴ These scores were also comparable to Provincial averages over the same time periods, as well as with the 2019 UNICEF Canada baseline report that indicated 84.6 percent of Canadian children and youth felt a strong sense of belonging to their local communities.¹⁵

When considering more recent children and youth data at the national level, UNICEF Canada reported in their 2019 [baseline report](#) that 84.6 percent of Canadian children and youth indicate a strong sense of belonging to their local communities.

As mentioned, feelings of social connection are tied closely to the broader concept of belonging. According to the UNICEF Canada baseline report, a smaller percentage (65.9) of children and youth express that they feel well supported by their friends, 57.3 percent feel well supported by their families, and 42.9 percent indicated receiving

12 CIW. (2016). How are Canadians Really Doing? The 2016 CIW National Report. Waterloo, ON: Canadian Index of Wellbeing and University of Waterloo. Available [here](#).

13 CYPT. (2018). Snapshot of Child and Youth Report. Available [here](#).

14 Please note that there are general limitations in access to localized data from Statistics Canada on children and youth’s sense of belonging based on age groups surveyed, sample sizes and considerations for geographic parameters accounting for Waterloo Region.

15 Statistics Canada. Health characteristics, two-year period estimates for Waterloo Health Unit, in Table: 13-10-0113-01. Available [here](#).

high levels of support from their teachers.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the study also indicates that approximately a quarter of those surveyed felt lonely and one in three were discriminated against or treated unfairly at home, in their schools, or in their communities.¹⁷

The CYPT Youth Impact Survey and Belonging Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

While measuring and assessing belonging through survey collection tools has increased, there is much to learn, especially in collecting more data specific to child and youth well-being in Waterloo Region. To meet this need, the CYPT partnered in 2020 and again in 2021 with UNICEF Canada, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, (with additional support from Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation in 2021), to launch our community-wide Youth Impact Survey. This local data collection tool is a valuable way to hear directly from young people about their sense of belonging and well-being. While we are working through the most recent responses from 2021, our 2020 [data briefs](#) are a timely reference to child and youth belonging in Waterloo Region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our community's ability to keep up in-person social connections. Therefore, it is not surprising that only **63.9 percent of our 2020 Youth Impact Survey respondents felt a very strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to their community.**



¹⁶ UNICEF CANADA. (2019). Where Does Canada Stand? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report. UNICEF Canada, Toronto. Available [here](#).

¹⁷ Ibid.



SNAPSHOT: Key Findings on Belonging From the 2020 Youth Impact Survey

The limiting of in-person social support systems and coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic has been pervasive, with particularly adverse effects on child development. There has been a demand by those working with children, youth and families to answer the question that has crossed everyone's mind at some point during lockdown: **How will this impact mental health in the short and long term?** Which community factors are most predictive of mental health? These questions were the foundation for a deeper analysis of the 2020 Youth Impact Survey. Under the supervision of Dr. Dillon Browne, lead researcher and professor at the University of Waterloo's Whole Family Lab and with the direct support of Ben Brown, a student at University of Waterloo, the CYPT has taken a step in better understanding the complex influences of belonging on a young person's well-being.

A first step in analyzing the numerous questions (or variables) that were presented in the Youth Impact Survey, particularly those focused on psychological areas such as mental health and the perceived strength of family relationships, was using a confirmatory factor analysis. This allowed us to explore how different variables naturally grouped together based on a desk review of existing literature on the subject. These grouped variables are called latent variables, and we identified six including satisfaction at school, peer and family relationships, well-being, mental health and finally belonging.

Using statistical analyses (Structural Equation Modelling), we put our newly created latent variables to use into regression models, discovering that a self-assessed sense of belonging has the highest correlation to positive levels of both mental health and well-being. Because of the strength of this association, we decided to conduct a follow-up test to see if belonging was the mediating variable between family, friends, school and other areas of health; this turned out to be exactly the case! **In other words, we found that belonging acts as a bridge between the contexts we live in, and how we're doing psychologically; it is the key factor that explains the relationship between ourselves and society around us.**

About three in ten (28.6 percent) 2020 Youth Impact Survey respondents felt lonely on at least a regular basis, and about four in ten (41.4 percent) indicated that they did not feel supported by their friends. The CYPT believes that when young people feel heard, their opinions and perspectives matter and as a result, they feel a stronger sense of connection and inclusion. The CYPT also recognizes that a young person's sense of belonging is strongly connected to their sense of respect and safety in their communities. The Youth Impact Survey also

"When I realized that [service providers] are willing to hear our voice instead of push us aside; [that you] want to take in what we're saying, really appreciate it and acknowledge it, I feel hopeful."

-CYPT Problem Mapping Session,
Youth Participant

asked children and youth about discrimination they faced in 2019 and 2020. Almost half (43.8 percent) faced discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, gender identity, physical appearance, and/or age. As a community, it is important we address these instances of discrimination because they have a serious, negative impact on our children and youth's sense of belonging.

The CYPT is working to disaggregate the data from the 2021 Youth Impact Survey, in order to better understand the experiences of children and youth from different demographics. This includes children and youth from different geographical locations, racial backgrounds and various gender identities, in order to identify how their level of well-being compares to

the overall, (i.e. aggregate) response. In other words, wherever possible, we will be taking the total responses and breaking it down into these different demographic sub-categories to paint a more reflective picture of the experiences of diverse children and youth from Waterloo Region.



SNAPSHOT: Limitations in Local Research and Key Insights from YMCA WorkWell

Belonging is integral to an individual's overall well-being, yet despite all the work done to date, there are clear areas where our knowledge surrounding belonging is still quite limited. Academic pursuits to understand belonging are not typically focused on local matters (with some exceptions such as Kitchen et al., 2012 for belonging and mental health in Hamilton, Ontario). Therefore, understanding belonging within a local context (e.g., Waterloo Region), especially on children and youth, should remain a priority for the local region.

In light of recent major global events, it is anticipated that the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the sense of belonging for children and youth in our local region. The course of a young person's day-to-day routines have likely been considerably altered due to safety measures and precautions. While it is early to tell if belonging may buffer against any negative effects brought on by these recent events, the **CYPT's Youth Impact Survey and the Well-Being Shared Measurement Database project, as well as other community-wide research initiatives (e.g. YMCA WorkWell, the Whole Family Lab at the University of Waterloo) are pointing to interesting insights related to belonging, social connections and isolation amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.** Considering the relationship between belonging and well-being, more contemporary focused attention on the notion of belonging would prove valuable to those working with children, youth and families.

THE WORKWELL COMMUNITY REPORT ON SOCIAL CONNECTIONS: The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly affected young people's abilities to connect with their communities, particularly with their peers and extended families. According to the YMCA WorkWell [report](#) on social connections, a loss of healthy community connections likely plays a significant role in our mental health. **In fact, according to their survey of 1,453 residents in Guelph-Wellington, Stratford Perth, and Waterloo Region, students were categorized as a particularly high risk group. 67 percent of student respondents identified as having significant mental health challenges.**¹⁸

Interestingly, the YMCA WorkWell data also pointed to the fact that the respondents' average mental health scores were higher among those who:

- Felt valued in their community.
- Felt as though their community accepts them for who they are.
- Felt they were getting the support needed from personal relationships.
- Had someone to turn to if they needed help.

The report reflects that: "Our community is in dire need of connection. Most people have felt lonelier than normal during COVID-19, many are experiencing an unhealthy lack of social connection, and every form of connection was among the most commonly cited needs in our community."

"Many people don't feel seen, heard or feel hopeless during covid. I think it's taken a large toll on all youth, especially since we can't socialize and are missing out on a huge part of our lives. I for one can't think about how much time I'm missing without getting anxious and feeling my stomach sink..."

-YIS 2021 Feedback Form Respondent

¹⁸ YMCA WorkWell. (2021). The Loneliness Epidemic: How the Silent Loss of Social Connection has Impacted Our Communities During COVID-19. 2021 YMCA WorkWell Special Issue Report. Available [here](#).

A Shared Understanding of Belonging - Key Takeaways



While the concept of belonging has many different meanings, it generally encompasses feeling positive about our place within supportive, mutually caring and beneficial social systems.



While local data from young people pre-pandemic indicated relatively favourable levels of belonging, the 2020 CYPT Youth Impact Survey suggests that many children and youth in Waterloo Region are now not feeling a strong sense of belonging to our community, that they feel lonely on a regular basis and that they have experienced some sort of discrimination based on who they are.



Early evidence from our research with the Whole Family Lab at the University of Waterloo indicates that a feeling of belonging can act as a protective bridge between the day-to-day experiences of children and youth (e.g., in school, at home and when participating in extracurricular activities) and their overall mental health. These insights also align with local research at the YMCA WorkWell, suggesting that average mental health scores were higher amongst those who felt valued in their community and those who felt as though their community accepts them for who they are.



Given that feelings of belonging are associated with other key areas of well-being, the CYPT believes that it is a community responsibility to ensure that children, youth and families feel valued, heard and included and that we address systemic and structural barriers that prevent their social inclusion and participation through equity-based community engagement.



BUILDING A FOUNDATION ON BELONGING: THE CYPT'S SHARED STRATEGIC PRIORITY

The CYPT is a collective impact¹⁹ partnership seeking to improve the well-being of children and youth in Waterloo Region. The CYPT has over 800 members, including youth, adults, service providers, researchers, representatives from planning bodies and funding organizations, with a unified goal to promote opportunities that encourage a sense of belonging for children and youth in their communities and through their social connections. By focusing our efforts on improving child and youth sense of belonging, the CYPT strives towards promoting a wholistic understanding of the interconnected nature of the nine dimensions of child and youth well-being (or the shared goals) of the CYPT.

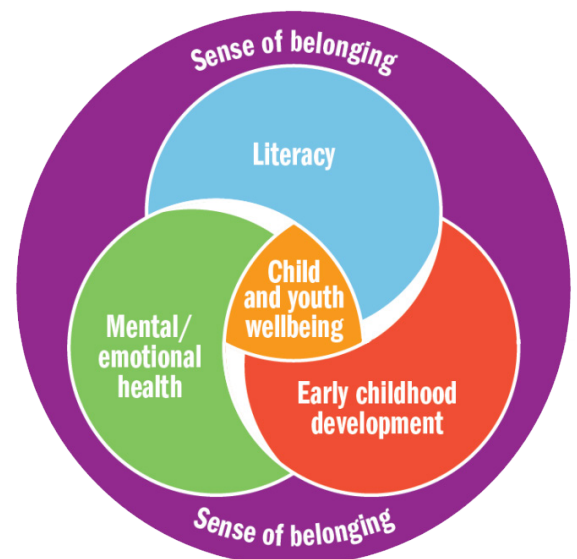
Milestones to Belonging

The focus on belonging as a CYPT priority area was based on the recommendations from the Collective Impact Recommendation Working Group (CIRWG). The CIRWG was formed and included members from the CYPT collaborative, along with other community collaboratives in Waterloo Region. They were brought together to explore six priorities identified by CYPT members and to make a recommendation for a collective area of focus.

In 2018, the CIRWG reviewed 6 potential priority areas, evaluating multiple sources of data and lessons learned from other collective impact partnerships:

- Bullying
- Early childhood development
- High school graduation rates
- Literacy
- Mental health
- **Sense of belonging**

The group completed a deep dive into the local, Provincial and National data (both qualitative and quantitative) related to each of these six areas, researched the connections between these areas, and interviewed other communities across Canada that were



¹⁹ Collective impact is a way of working together. It brings together different organizations to solve large complex problems – in our case, children and youth well-being.

invested in collective impact work. The group also made use of the results of a community input process with young people, parents and professionals that explored root causes that run underneath each of the six proposed priority areas.

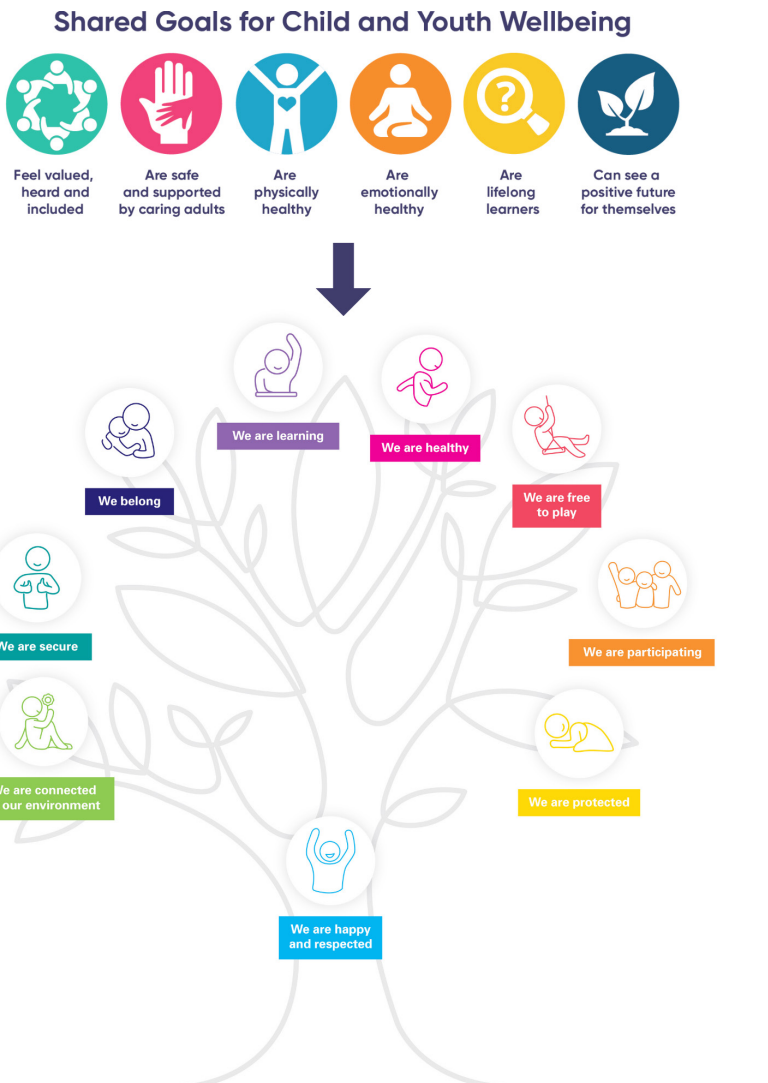
Following an independent scoring process, **sense of belonging** was the highest scoring area. Members noted in particular its connectivity to the other 5 potential areas of focus, and that it was foundational to child and youth well-being. As the Working Group learned through the process, feeling a social and environmental connection gives children and youth of all ages a sense of stability - helping them deal with challenges and uncertainty. Those with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to have social networks and be engaged in their community. The recommendation was adopted by the Voting Members of CYPT as the official area of priority focus and work continued from there to expand into action and shared measurement.

The CYPT’s system-wide Shared Measurement Framework evolution also allows us to better track and report on child and youth’s sense of belonging and well-being in Waterloo Region. In 2019, the CYPT’s Data, Research, and Evaluation Team recommended adapting the 6 Shared Goals to align with the 9 dimensions of the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being developed by UNICEF Canada. These dimensions represent a systems approach in understanding the well-being of children and youth through 9 interdependent areas, including belonging.²⁰ This recommendation was adopted and implemented in January 2020.

Today, the CYPT’s 9 Shared Goals align with UNICEF Canada’s 9 Dimensions of Child and Youth Well-being. This evolution directly helps the CYPT monitor empirical research and data at the local Waterloo Region level. The Youth Impact Survey is one way that the CYPT continues to gather and report on local child and youth well-being data as it compares to our national picture. We believe that when the CYPT collaborative uses the same data to understand child and youth well-being, look at trends, and make sense of what youth are saying, we can better work together from a shared understanding of well-being.

In March of 2020, CYPT Voting Members spent time exploring the concept of belonging in the CYPT context, landing on three key pillars for belonging-related activities: Equity, Attachment and Relationships, and Children and Youth Feeling Valued, Heard and Included.

Note: Current CYPT-related activities on Belonging can be found on the CYPT website.



²⁰ UNICEF CANADA. (2019). Where Does Canada Stand? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being 2019 Baseline Report. UNICEF Canada, Toronto. Available [here](#).



SNAPSHOT: Benefits of Belonging in Groups and Organizations

Feelings of Belonging in Groups: Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation highlights that “belonging is not purely an individual need. It is also a need of communities and organizations. When people feel a strong sense of belonging to a group, they are more willing to contribute and they take ownership of the group’s struggles. They show concern for other members of the group and will try to help them overcome their problems. For a community, civic engagement and belonging go together: citizens who feel like they belong will be more likely to be involved in the governance of the community, donate their time and money to improving the community, and show caring for the other people who live there.”²¹

Feelings of Belonging within Organizations²²: According to a study by Zeldin (2004), 62.5 percent of the sampled youth expressed positive feelings of pride, importance, and appreciation when asked by organizations to take on governance roles. Feelings of belonging increased especially when adults actively supported them, oriented them in their roles and responsibilities and expressed interest and value toward their input. A core insight was that a sense of connection to people in the organization gave young people surveyed the confidence to take leadership initiatives in organizational planning.

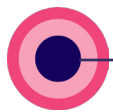
A Timeline



April to September 2018: In 2018, the Collective Impact Recommendation Working Group (CIRWG) was started with the goal of making a recommendation for the CYPT on a priority area of focus for collective impact. After several months of deliberating, the CIRWG felt that sense of belonging was very much the foundation of well-being and recommended it as the starting point.



Late 2018: Representatives from the CYPT joined Wellbeing Waterloo Region’s Social Inclusion Working Group and worked with them to align community action related to belonging.



September 2019: The CYPT Data, Research and Evaluation (DRE) team reviewed and recommended the expansion of the CYPT’s existing Shared Measurement Framework to align with UNICEF Canada’s Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being. The recommendation was accepted and the CYPT adopted the 9 Shared Goals with UNICEF Canada’s 125 child and youth-related indicators and also include 17 additional indicators specific to Waterloo Region.



March 2020: The CYPT Voting Members adopted UNICEF’s definitions of belonging for children and youth. At this meeting the three pillars of belonging were built out. The collective agreed that the three pillars below influence a young person’s sense of belonging in an interconnected and complementary way.

²¹ KWCF (2014). We Can Design Belonging. Community Report. Available [here](#).

²² Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. Applied Developmental Science.

BELONGING FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

THURSDAY, MARCH 12TH 2020



Think Link graphics

Graphic Recording based on Voting Member conversations at a meeting held on March 12, 2020.

CYPT'S Three Pillars of Belonging

EQUITY

The way society and systems operate keeps certain children, youth and families out.

ATTACHMENT

Quality relationships, connection to others, and experiences of trauma matter – and they matter right from the beginning of a person's life.

& CHILDREN... & YOUTH FEEL VALUED, HEARD and INCLUDED

There exists a power difference between young people and adults, and missed opportunities for young people to be heard and involved in meaningful ways.



SNAPSHOT: Factors Impacting Belonging in the Canadian Context

The Community Foundations of Canada's (CFC) 2017 Vital Signs [report](#) on belonging provides an extensive visual reflection of what influences belonging in the Canadian context.



WHERE WE LIVE: More than half of Canadians no longer live in the community where they grew up. Moreover, CFC notes that there are more people living alone today and that housing is less affordable than ever.



PUBLIC SPACES: Public spaces and shared environments around us influence opportunities to experience belonging. In referring to a number of research studies, CFC notes that "child-friendly planning helps create communities where children can play outside and go places independently and safely, which is important for healthy child development."



ECONOMIC INCLUSION: The foundation of social inclusion requires individuals to have access to resources and services. Unfortunately, in Canada, there is a growing economic gap between the rich and the poor which has implications for the growing poverty rates experienced by children. Those who have less access to resources may face additional barriers to their belonging at the community level.



MIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP: Discrimination, racism and xenophobia present barriers to an individual's sense of belonging to a broader geographic or national community. (e.g., feeling as though we are accepted as Canadians no matter where we come from).








SAFETY AND SECURITY: The CFC highlights that "while crime rates are falling, racial discrimination, gender inequality and cultural assimilation continue to influence how unwelcome people sometimes feel in their communities." This has a significant impact on an individual's sense of belonging at school, in their neighbourhoods, as well as when they access services or programs.



FAMILIES: Competing priorities and heavy financial burdens are challenging the time that families spend together. The CFC highlights that "[...] there are many opportunities to do better, for example, to address low-income children and parents' concern about the future, to lower depression rates among family caregivers, and to keep Indigenous children closely connected with their families and cultures."

Building a Foundation on Belonging - Key Takeaways

-  Belonging as a CYPT priority is based on the recommendations of the Collective Impact Recommendation Working Group (CIRWG). The Group conducted a comprehensive assessment of local and broader data. Sense of belonging scored the highest against a variety of other potential areas of collective focus.
-  The members of the CYPT consider sense of belonging as foundational to the well-being of young people and are working to build out a related measurement framework and actions.
-  The CYPT Voting Members expanded on the concept of belonging to include its corresponding three pillars: Equity, Attachment and Relationships, and Feeling Valued, Heard and Included. These three pillars are considered interconnected and complementary aspects of belonging.
-  According to studies focusing on youth engagement in organizational settings, youth expressed positive feelings of pride, importance, and appreciation when they were given leadership roles, when they felt their input mattered and when adults actively and authentically supported them.
-  There are several factors that influence belonging in the Canadian context. The CFC highlights that where we live, how we access public space, as well as economic and social inclusion are all key factors that contribute to how we, as Canadians, feel a sense of belonging.



BUILDING OUR KNOWLEDGE OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE: BELONGING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER AREAS OF CHILD AND YOUTH WELL-BEING



SNAPSHOT: A Quick Glance at Belonging in Academic Research:

Early efforts in studying belonging defined it as personal involvement (in a social system) where the person feels they are an important part of the system.²³ Research elaborated that belonging means feeling valued, and fitting in well within a system.²⁴ Consistent with these ideas is the concept of need(ing) to belong, which focuses on the needs for (1) frequent, pleasant interactions and for (2) the interactions to take place in the context of a stable and enduring relationship with explicit concern for each other's welfare.²⁵ **While individuals likely vary in how much they feel they "need to belong", research has long recognized a person's sense of belonging as a fundamental human need.**²⁶

It is also important to note that while research does suggest that a sense of community belonging is highly correlated with physical and mental health, as well as several other areas, the nature of many of these studies precludes drawing causal conclusions about the direction of these relationships. For example, weak community ties could lead to poorer health, however, poorer health may also negatively affect one's sense of community belonging.²⁷ **An important step is to highlight the relations between belonging and other well-being measures, despite often being able to draw casual inferences, it is an important step to highlight the relationships between belonging and other aspects of well-being, to support our collective learning.**

23 Anant, 1966, 1969

24 Hagerty et al., 1992

25 Baumeister & Leary, 1995

26 Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Maslow, 1954

27 Statistics Canada. Community Belonging Memo. Available [here](#).

Connections to Belonging

Belonging is connected to a wide variety of factors related (positively or negatively) to social and psychological functioning and well-being.²⁸

Factors that positively impact belonging include:

- An individual's reported degree of social support²⁹
- Academic outcomes³⁰
- Physical health³¹
- Mental health³²
- Social and psychological functioning³³
- Relationship satisfaction³⁴
- Life satisfaction³⁵
- Meaning in life³⁶
- Other notions of general well-being³⁷

Factors that negatively impact belonging include:

- Loneliness³⁸
- Anxiety³⁹
- Perceived stress⁴⁰
- Clinical depression⁴¹

In children and youth specifically, belonging is positively associated with:

- Extra-curricular participation⁴²
- Self-esteem⁴³
- Parent-child closeness⁴⁴
- Life satisfaction⁴⁵
- General well-being⁴⁶

In children and youth specifically, belonging is negatively associated with:

- Peer victimization
- Teacher unfairness
- School work-related anxiety⁴⁷
- Emotional distress⁴⁸
- Lower graduation rates⁴⁹
- Loneliness⁵⁰



28 Allen & Bowles, 2012; Anant, 1969

29 Choenarom et al., 2005; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; McLaren & Challis, 2009

30 Master & Meltzoff, 2020; Oysterman et al., 2008; Sánchez et al., 2005

31 Hale Ma et al. 2005; Mock et al. 2010; Jetten et al. 2009

32 Kitchen et al., 2012a, 2012b; Mock et al., 2010

33 Hagerty et al., 1996

34 Mellor et al., 2008

35 Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015

36 Lambert et al., 2013

37 Berry & Hou, 2017; Salles et al., 2019

38 Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012; Mellor et al., 2008; Yıldız, 2017

39 Anant, 1969

40 Choenarom et al., 2005

41 Choenarom et al., 2005; Hagerty & Williams, 1999; McLaren & Challis, 2009

42 Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Oberle et al., 2019

43 Ma, 2003

44 King & Boyd, 2016; King et al., 2015; King et al., 2018; Yıldız, 2017

45 Daley et al., 2018; Huang, 2020; Yıldız, 2017

46 Arslan 2018; Daley et al., 2018; King et al., 2018

47 Huang, 2020

48 Arslan, 2018

49 Fine, 1991; Ma, 2003

50 Liu et al., 2014; Palikara et al., 2021; Yıldız, 2017

Through the Concepts of Health and Well-Being

Health and Well-being

One way to better understand the importance of belonging is to look at the effects low levels or a lack of belonging can have. Baumeister and Leary (1995) present the **Belongingness Hypothesis**, which explains that "...human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Research by Baumeister et al. (2002) further suggests that threatening one's sense of belonging can be enough to cause short-term cognitive impairments. More specifically, the research indicates that individuals who received feedback meant to cause feelings of social exclusion were at a greater risk of performing with a limited degree of logic and reason.

Spaces of Belonging

Community belonging, an important area of the CYPT's work, has been associated with social capital, neighbourhood characteristics,⁵¹ and self-reported indices of general health.⁵² Belonging can also apply to other priority areas for the CYPT, including workplaces, schooling, and even within the family unit.⁵³ Furthermore, belonging is not limited to only physical social spaces as discussed so far. In more recent years, research has investigated belonging in virtual environments (e.g., via online social media and instant messaging).⁵⁴

With its broad connection to various domains, belonging should be valued as a community-wide priority. Where and why certain children and youth may express negative or lower sense of belonging should be considered. Collective efforts made by various community organizations will aid in ensuring a comprehensive understanding of belonging and that the efforts made to prioritize and promote it are effective across several domains.

Provided all the various factors with which belonging is associated, an enhanced understanding of belonging seems key in assessing, maintaining, and improving the overall situation of children, youth and families.

"When an individual or a family encounters a school classroom, a government form, a potential landlady, or an immigration official, what are the messages of belonging that are communicated? Are the messages positive, neutral or negative? Are they the same for everyone? What happens when you add up the sum of these experiences over a lifetime?"

-Community Foundations of Canada

51 Schellenberg et al., 2018

52 Michalski et al., 2020

53 Arslan, 2018; Hagerty et al., 2002; Mavili et al., 2021

54 Barker, 2018; Charmaraman et al., 2018; Davis, 2012; Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2012; Schneider et al., 2017



SNAPSHOT: Challenges to Placed-based Concepts of Community in Waterloo Region

KWCF's [report](#) points to a number of interesting insights on local residents' sense of community belonging to Waterloo Region. Promoting a strong sense of belonging to a place-based notion of community can promote feelings of community involvement, attachments, resiliency and safety.⁵⁵ The following are some areas outlined in their report that point to potential challenges to community belonging:

MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE: According to the 2011 National Household Survey, Waterloo Region had a slightly higher number of individuals who changed locations within the last five years in comparison to the provincial and national average. The region has recently experienced a significant population growth with booming technology, finance, education and business sectors. The 2011 National Household Survey indicates that many Waterloo Region residents travel outside the region for employment which can directly inhibit their sense of belonging to their area of residence. According to the report from KWCF, this movement has significant impacts on people's sense of belonging to Waterloo Region.

FEAR OF DIFFERENCE: Waterloo Region is a growing and diverse area made up of people from around the world. The report points to the challenges that those who migrated to our region face. For some there are positive stories but others continue to face xenophobia and discrimination. As a diverse and growing region, it is important to address the challenges that Newcomers face in building their relationships with other people and an overall sense of belonging to the Waterloo Region community.

TRANSIENT STOP: With three well known post-secondary institutions, there is a large student population in Waterloo Region. Travel and movement are often realities for students and for some, the notion of what is considered home or their local community can be complex. KWCF's report asks: "how do we make [students] feel part of our community, when they're likely returning to their hometowns for the summer or travelling every four months on co-op, and living inside the bubble of their campus?"

OUR IDENTITY CRISIS: According to interviews held by KWCF, a significant challenge is the disconnection between the tri-cities and townships. For example, there are distinct differences when reflecting on what it means to belong to Kitchener versus Waterloo or Cambridge. Moreover, respondents noted that the townships are often excluded when thinking about our regional identity. This geographic identity challenge becomes more apparent when residents envisioned what the future of the region should look like: "Many want to see Kitchener-Waterloo move towards a bustling, urban, big-city feel, while others are fighting to remain a quiet, peaceful small town."

Life Factors Associated with Belonging: Community Resources and Infrastructure, and Childhood Perceptions and Experiences

The following are a number of key considerations that have been explored in academic research. The first and second sections provide insights on general belonging for adults whereas the final part centres factors relevant for children and youth.

Community Resources and Infrastructure

Stewart and colleagues (2009) conducted informational interviews with various individuals in Toronto and Edmonton to compare perspectives on community belonging between those with lower and higher income. Their

⁵⁵ Chavis, D. M., & Wandersman, A. (2002). Sense of community in the urban environment: A catalyst for participation and community development. *A Quarter Century of Community Psychology.*

findings suggest that those with lower income tended to rely on more physically-oriented factors that influence a local sense of belonging. For example, they used local community organizations/programs more, which likely reflects a larger reliance on their immediate environment, compared to individuals with higher income.

Urban infrastructure is also associated with belonging. Kitchen et al. (2012b), who look at sense of belonging and mental health in Hamilton, found that sense of belonging tended to be lower for individuals living more towards the city core. A study conducted by Rugel and colleagues (2019) in Vancouver, suggests that there are a variety of indirect benefits of having access to natural spaces (e.g., green spaces, trees, bodies of water, etc.) on mental health. They also found a direct effect on sense of community belonging—and that a higher sense of community belonging was associated with better mental health. This research provides insights into the effects of lower socioeconomic status⁵⁶ and urban infrastructure on belonging, and the role of community in shaping or maintaining belonging.⁵⁷

Childhood Perceptions and Experiences

Like socio-economic status, childhood experiences (and perceptions of those experiences) are also thought to be related to sense of belonging. In adults, Hagerty et al. (2002) found that positive sense of belonging was associated with perceived levels of caring by both parents growing up, as well as a young person's participation in high school athletic activity. On the other hand, negative sense of belonging was associated with perceived overprotection of an individual's father, their experience with high-school pregnancy, and family financial problems throughout their adolescence. While this work is helpful in providing insights, these results should be interpreted with some caution, since they rely on adult recollections of childhood, and not directly from children and youth as they experience it. Moreover, the study was conducted in 2002 and may not directly relate to the children and youth of today.



SNAPSHOT: Measuring Belonging in Community Surveys

Respondents to the Canadian Community Health Survey were asked, "How would you describe your sense of belonging to your local community? Would you say it is: very strong? somewhat strong? somewhat weak? very weak?"⁵⁸

In our local Youth Impact Surveys, we ask children and youth this exact same question. This allows us to compare the results of our survey to other surveys using a standardized question and scale. The Youth Impact Survey also includes a number of questions on social inclusion and social capital to provide a more comprehensive insight on young people's self-perceived sense of belonging. Some of these questions reflect experiences of isolation, feelings of loneliness, emotional support from family and friends, feeling valued, experiences of discrimination and life satisfaction.

Psychologists have measured belonging with the Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychological Scale.⁵⁹ Using a 4-point Likert scale (4 = very relevant to 1 = not relevant), the scale includes items such as "I have no place in this world", "I feel left out", "I feel like an outsider". Similarly, the General Belongingness Scale includes items such as "When I am with other people, I feel included", "I feel connected with others", "When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger", "I feel isolated from the rest of the world".⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Stewart et al., 2009

⁵⁷ Kitchen et al., 2012b; Rugel et al., 2019

⁵⁸ Statistics Canada. Community Belonging Note. Available here.

⁵⁹ SOBI-P; Hagerty & Patuskay, 1995

⁶⁰ GBS; Malone et al., 2012

Key Life Factors for Children and Youth: School Based Experiences, Extracurricular-based Experiences, Immediate Family Social Circle, Technology and Social Media, and Certain Identity-based Groups

An analysis by Kitchen et al. (2012a) found that youth were the least likely of any age group to report a strong sense of community belonging. Children and youth face their own unique challenges compared to those in later developmental stages, which in turn can affect their sense of belonging. Several additional factors influencing child and youth belonging are described in more detail below:



School-based experiences: Most children and youth spend a great deal of time in their school and academic programs; thus, their school-based experiences factor heavily in their feelings of belonging.⁶¹ Much research has focused on the sense of belonging within the context of school programs, for example, sense of belonging at school,⁶² bullying,⁶³ emotional health⁶⁴ and high school drop-out rates.⁶⁵ Palikara et al. (2021) examined the sense of school belonging in primary school aged children, finding that **feelings of school belonging influenced both loneliness and well-being**. Based on the conclusions found by Palikara et al, it was suggested that effective early interventions that promote belonging may reduce experiences of loneliness and increase general well-being for children.



Extracurricular-based experiences: A growing literature is devoted to investigating the effect of extracurricular involvement and “peer belonging” in terms of positive development for children and youth.⁶⁶ Oberle et al. (2019) found evidence consistent with the idea that **extracurricular activity participation promotes and maintains mental health in children and adolescents, providing opportunities for belonging among peers to develop**. That said, there is some evidence that there is such thing as “too much” extracurricular involvement, wherein grades and sense of belonging may begin to decrease with an increase in time dedicated to extracurriculars.⁶⁷



Immediate familial social circle: Most children and youth spend a significant amount of time with family, compared to individuals in later stages of development. Therefore, their sense of belonging may be heavily dependent on the interactions within this more immediate social circle. Indeed, the family unit has been the focus of some belonging research.⁶⁸

King and Boyd (2016) specifically define family belonging as “feelings of inclusion within one’s family, including feelings of being understood, of having fun together, and of being paid attention to” (p. 1114). Aslantürk and Mavili (2020) found that family structure (e.g. single-parent, two-biological-parent, step-family, foster family) played a significant role in university students’ feelings of family belonging, such that those from single-parent families (due to divorce or separation) tended to report lower family belonging. Similarly, King and colleagues (2015; 2016; 2018) suggest that experiences of family belonging for children are influenced by parent/step-parent-child relationship.⁶⁹ In other words, these findings suggest that **children perceive the relationships they have with their parents to be vital in understanding family belonging and important to general well-being**.

61 Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2016, Arslan, 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ma, 2003

62 Arslan, 2018; Gillen-O’Neel, & Fuligni, 2013; Ma, 2003; Palikara et al. 2021

63 Davis et al., 2019

64 Arslan, 2018

65 Fine, 1991; Ma, 2003

66 e.g., Oberle et al., 2019; Zarobe, et al., 2017

67 Knifsend & Graham, 2012

68 Aslantürk & Mavili, 2020; Chubb & Fertman, 1992; Hagerty et al., 2002; King & Boyd, 2016; Mavili et al., 2021

69 King & Boyd, 2016



Technology and social media: Virtual communication can provide further opportunities to develop and enhance peer-bonding by promoting self-disclosure and a greater sense of belonging.⁷⁰ However, belonging may also be associated with more negative issues such as initiating cyberbullying.⁷¹ Feeling ignored or excluded over the Internet (e.g., via social media outlets) can also lead to reduced feelings of belonging.⁷² Since **there are both positive and negative impacts of virtual communication**, it is important to consider the type of communication, the type of technology used, as well as other life factors when trying to understand how the individual and their belonging may be affected.⁷³



Certain identity-based groups: Groups that might be at risk for a lower sense of belonging could include those who have experienced more adverse life events, such as repeated familial uprooting. There are, however, groups which are especially likely to have experienced negative and/or traumatic experiences based on their identity, such as disproportionate rates of discrimination, abuse, or other social hardships. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, children and youth identifying with at least one of the following groups: Indigenous, immigrant, refugee, a racial minority, lower socio-economic status, 2SLGBTQ+, those with disabilities, teen mothers, or those who have experienced trauma. While being part of an at-risk group or identity is not solely a challenge unique to children and youth, experiences of social hardship can have a strong impact on children and youth due to their stages of development.

A sense of belonging may promote protective benefits against negative life factors for youth experiencing challenges. For example, Daley and colleagues (2018; see also Baskin et al., 2010) studied Canadian youth living with a disability, finding that they tended to have lower life satisfaction than their non-disabled peers. While youth with disabilities experienced discrimination, which negatively affects life satisfaction, lower life satisfaction was not reported by those who identified a strong sense of belonging to their community, even if they experienced a lot of discrimination. From this, we see **belonging might offer protective benefits against negative life factors such as discrimination**, which is a challenge faced by many individuals identifying as part of a marginalized group.

Lastly, an important facet of social identity for many children and youth can be found in their participation in faith-based and/or cultural-based groups and activities. These opportunities offer more spaces for belonging, much like school-based programs and extra-curriculars. Petrasek MacDonald et al. (2015) identified that relationships with family and friends, strong sense of community and engagement with their specific Inuit culture were all key protective factors against low mental health and poorer well-being in Inuit youth of Canada.



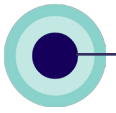
70 Charmaraman et al., 2018; Davis, 2012; Smith et al., 2021

71 Kircaburun, et al., 2019

72 Schneider et al., 2017

73 Smith et al., 2021

Building our Knowledge of Academic Literature - Key Takeaways



An important step in deconstructing the concept of belonging is to highlight the relationships between belonging and other areas of well-being, despite our limits in being able to draw cause-and-effect conclusions.



According to several research studies, belonging is connected to a wide variety of factors related to social and psychological functioning and well-being. Some positively impact belonging (e.g., physical health, social and psychological functioning, etc), while other factors negatively impact belonging (e.g., loneliness, perceived stress, etc).



The summary of a non-exhaustive list of academic studies on belonging and mental health suggests that:

- Those with lower income tend to rely more on physically-oriented factors that influence a local sense of belonging.
- There are a variety of indirect benefits of having access to natural spaces (e.g., green spaces, trees, bodies of water, etc.) on mental health.
- The school-based experiences of children and youth factor heavily in their feelings of belonging as they spend a great deal of time in these environments.
- A reasonable amount of participation in extracurricular activity promotes and maintains mental health for children and youth, providing opportunities for peer-to-peer belonging.
- Children and youth's perceived relationships with their parents is vital in understanding their at-home sense of belonging.
- Virtual communication can have both positive (e.g., opportunities to connect and bond with peers) and negative (e.g., cyberbullying) implications on a young person's sense of belonging.
- Those who have experienced disproportionate rates of discrimination, abuse, or other social hardships will typically indicate a lower sense of belonging. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, children and youth who have experienced trauma and those who are marginalized due to their identities. Studies, however, have suggested that a sense of belonging may promote protective benefits against negative life factors for those who experience discrimination, abuse or other social hardships.



FINAL NOTE ON THE CYPT AND BELONGING

CYPT members are all working towards a shared understanding of belonging, and our goal is to increase the sense of belonging for children and youth in Waterloo Region. We recognize that the concept of belonging is complex and connected with a number of other factors that impact child and youth well-being. Since a strong sense of belonging can be foundational to other positive outcomes, we believe that the added values to investing in belonging for children and youth indicate a positive return on investment. This report supports our shared learning and our ability to de-construct this topic through various resources, including academic research, local publications and insightful data.

Focusing community-based efforts towards understanding and promoting healthy perceptions of belonging is imperative to our shared mission: **To collectively mobilize as one system, for children and youth, that relentlessly strives to maximize well-being throughout generations.** To learn more about the work currently being done in the area of belonging, and to be part of the journey, please visit our [website](#).

"I think that CYPT is making real impacts in terms of connecting community resources so that people can make better referrals when they encounter someone with an issue that is beyond the first service providers resources to support with. These connections can certainly contribute to connectedness, belonging and better health outcomes. I also think the work in terms of creating these connections helps to make a more connected community of service providers as they are able to better visualize their work as belonging to something bigger than themselves."

-CYPT Member



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