

Students with a greater sense of school belonging are less likely to become bullies

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The Christopher Slaten Research Lab is a collaborative research group that examines the need to belong in the lives of youth and emerging adults with an emphasis on educational settings and marginalized populations. Credit: University of Missouri

Research has shown that, despite great efforts, one in three children

continue to experience bullying in school. However, research also has indicated that environmental and psychological factors might play an important role in minimizing bullying behaviors.

Now, researchers at the University of Missouri have found that students who feel a greater sense of belonging with their peers, family and school community are less likely to become bullies. Their findings suggest that parents and teachers should consider ways to create a supportive and accepting environment both at home and at school.

Christopher Slaten and Chad Rose, associate professors in the MU College of Education, along with Jonathan Ferguson, a graduate candidate in the counseling psychology program, analyzed survey responses from more than 900 [middle school students](#) from rural schools throughout the U.S. The survey addressed their sense of belonging among peers, family and school community as well as bullying behavior. For example, they were asked if they upset others for the fun of it or if they spread rumors.

The results indicate that the more a student feels like they belong among their peers and family, the more likely they will feel like they belong at school. In addition, the more they feel like they belong within their school community, the less likely they were to report bullying behaviors. This indicates that parents might be able to play a proactive role in increasing their child's sense of belonging at school by focusing on improving family belongingness. Slaten suggests that one of the ways parents can increase a child's sense of family belonging is to organize activities that cater to every child's interests.

"If you have children with varying interests, it might be beneficial to suggest the whole family get together to attend each other's events and activities, even if it doesn't please the whole crowd every time," Slaten said. "By encouraging siblings to support each other, parents can help

their children feel like their interests are accepted and that they fit within the [family](#) unit."

Rose adds that teachers and school leaders also should consider techniques and programs that create a supportive environment for students. Some examples include starting clubs for students with various interests, offering to lend an ear to students who need someone to talk to and consider community-building events.

"What we have found is that students' perceptions of how supportive and accepting their [school](#) environment is has the power to alter bullying behavior," Rose said. "This means that even acts of simple compassion and efforts to create an accepting and supportive space for students can help prevent bullying in schools. This is empowering news for teachers, students and their families."

"Understanding the relationship between youths' belonging and bullying [behavior](#): An SEM Model," was published in *Educational & Child Psychology*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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