

New research highlights long-term mental health benefits of school belonging

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A new [study](#) has shed light on the crucial role school belonging plays in shaping mental well-being in adolescents. School belonging—characterized by a positive affect towards school, strong

relationships with teachers, and feeling socially valued—has long been associated with immediate benefits for students' mental health.

The project was a collaboration between Monash University, Deakin University, Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the University of Melbourne. Researchers studied more than 1,500 [young adults](#) in one of Australia's longest running population-based studies of socioemotional development, to reveal the long-term mental [health](#) outcomes of school belonging on the transition to adulthood.

The research assessed school belonging at the age of 15–16 and mental health symptoms at age 19–20, 23–24, and 27–28 years.

Lead author, Associate Professor Kelly-Ann Allen from the Faculty of Education, said the findings indicate that higher levels of school belonging are linked to lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress in young adulthood.

"The study highlights the significance of adolescent school belonging, particularly the feeling of being socially valued, as a protective factor against later mental health issues. The results emphasize the need for sustained interventions and programs that extend beyond the [school setting](#), establishing a strong foundation for positive engagement in various environments during the transition to adulthood," Associate Professor Allen said.

According to Dr. Meredith O'Connor from Murdoch Children's Research Institute, these findings come at a crucial time, as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies belonging as a major trend in education with the potential to counteract increasing loneliness, social isolation and mental health problems in many societies.

"The long term follow-up of individuals within the Australian Temperament Project allowed us to examine how experiences of school belonging mattered for young adults' well-being almost a decade later, which is a unique and important contribution to the existing evidence base," Dr. O'Connor said.

Julie Young, Principal of Foundation College added, "Students have immensely different backgrounds and when students feel connected to school we find this common thread supports their growth and achievement. It builds confidence and in turn we find it supports their mental health."

Professor Andrea Reupert from the Faculty of Education and co-author of the paper said in order to prevent mental health in adulthood, change must start in school.

"Schools are opportunistic sites for mental health prevention and promotion, especially for vulnerable young people. Promoting school belonging and student well-being may protect against other vulnerabilities such as adverse home conditions," said Professor Reupert.

The research outlines the importance of school belonging as an intervention target with lasting impacts on mental health. As schools and communities seek to address the challenges faced by today's youth, focusing on initiatives that enhance students' sense of acceptance and respect within the school environment becomes paramount.

More information: Kelly-Ann Allen et al, Adolescent School Belonging and Mental Health Outcomes in Young Adulthood: Findings from a Multi-wave Prospective Cohort Study, *School Mental Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s12310-023-09626-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09626-6)

Provided by Monash University

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