# Creating Family Belonging Together: A Reflection and Planning Guide for Teams and Families

*Jaclyn Joseph, Dameri Watson, Aniva Lumpkins, Jennifer Sommerness, Kristin Liu, Gail Ghere, & Sally Hansen*

When families feel a sense of belonging in early childhood spaces, children are more likely to feel safe, included, and able to reach their full potential. Belonging is a mutual, collective, and shared experience created through relationships. Because belonging is emotionally and relationally experienced, it can be hard to put into words or translate into action, especially without time, space, or tools to reflect together. The personal and shared nature of belonging is why we begin by asking, "What does belonging feel like to you?"

At the same time, belonging takes more than good intentions. Even programs with strong family partnerships may fall short of the trust, connection, and shared purpose that families are looking for. For example, a program might host a Transition to Kindergarten event but provide materials that use jargon or language families do not understand. This oversight can leave some families feeling excluded or unable to meaningfully engage. Or, a caregiver balancing work and solo parenting may want to be involved but feel limited by options that do not align with their schedule or realities at home.

This resource is designed for early childhood professionals, including practitioners, specialists, and program leaders, who work with children from birth to age eight and their families. Its purpose is to support teams, with families as valued members, in reflecting on belonging and making meaningful, intentional changes to strengthen their approaches and practices.

## How This Guide is Organized

Understanding family belonging starts with a shared framework. The first section introduces and defines ten dimensions of family belonging, grounded in the Dimensions of Belonging framework (Carter, Biggs, & Boehm, 2016), supported by resources from the TIES Center and informed by the reflection tool created by Carter and Biggs (2021). For each dimension, you will find a brief description and examples.

Following the description of the dimensions, we present the Family Belonging Reflection Tool. This tool is designed to help teams and families in partnering together to explore experiences of belonging and to identify opportunities for growth. There is no pressure to address everything at once. Begin with one idea, one conversation, or one small action, and build on your efforts in partnership with families over time.

# Defining Each Dimension of Belonging

Belonging is created with families through mutual relationships and shared experiences. It is not something that practitioners offer or give to families. Here are a few essential things to keep in mind as you explore the ten dimensions of family belonging:

► Belonging is both individual and collective. What supports one family's sense of belonging may look different for another.

► Belonging is not conditional. Families should feel valued for who they are, not for meeting expectations or fitting into systems.

► Each dimension contributes to belonging. While being present is foundational, the other dimensions do not follow a set order. They are all equally important.

► Belonging is not a checklist. Belonging is built through many different experiences over time.

Whether family belonging is familiar or new, this section provides a shared language and examples for considering how belonging may be reflected in early childhood settings.

Carter, E. W., & Biggs, E. E. (2021). *Creating communities of belonging for students with significant cognitive disabilities* (Belonging Series). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, TIES Center.

| Dimension | Examples |
|---|---|
| **Present** — Families are part of what is happening throughout the day. Their presence, perspectives, and ways of communicating are woven into the spaces, routines, and relationships within the environment and program. | • Families participate in ways that feel comfortable and meaningful to them<br>• Families participate in events, meetings, and planning conversations in ways that accommodate their schedules, language preferences, and accessibility needs.<br>• Information is shared in ways families can understand using their preferred language, format, and method.<br>• Families are included in everyday routines and decision-making when possible. |
| **Invited** — Families are regularly asked to join in activities, share their ideas, and help decide what happens. | • The program's mission includes a clear promise to partner with families.<br>• Families are asked to share their ideas, goals, and preferences, beyond completing forms or surveys (e.g., through in-person conversations at drop-off, during conferences, via photo-sharing apps, on a family bulletin board).<br>• Invitations are warm and built on relationships, using language like "We'd love to learn from you about what matters to your family." |
| **Welcomed** — Families are greeted with warmth, care, and interactions that show them their presence matters. | • Families are greeted with warmth, joy, and real interest.<br>• Practitioners take time to build caring relationships, not just complete tasks.<br>• Each family's differences are seen and valued as strengths.<br>• Families know they are always welcome, even when they cannot be there. |
| **Known** — Families are partners, and practitioners take time to understand and honor what matters to each family. | • Practitioners build trust with families over time through real, positive interactions.<br>• Practitioners show care and curiosity, without making assumptions.<br>• Families are respected as the experts on their own children.<br>• Practitioners note important family details, such as family composition or medical events, and check in when appropriate. |
| **Accepted** — Families are respected as team members who bring important, often different, experiences and perspectives. | • Practitioners respect each family's caregiving style, family experiences, and communication preferences, and who they define as family.<br>• Families do not have to change who they are to be included and involved. |

| Dimension | | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Involved | Families are a meaningful part of the environment and program life, through play, routines, learning, and leadership. | • Families help create goals and plans based on what matters to them.<br>• What happens at home is used to inform and create routines, activities, and supports in the care or school environment and program.<br>• Families are encouraged and supported to consider their child's progress with the team, share their insights and questions, and celebrate growth. |
| Supported | Families receive the kind of help and information they need, in ways that work for them, to support their child and participate in their care and education. | • Families get what they need to be true partners.<br>• When possible, supports like interpreters, visual tools, flexible meeting times, and family mentors are offered.<br>• Staff check in often with families to ask, "Is this working for you?" and make changes when needed. |
| Heard | Families are listened to, and their ideas, concerns, and insights help guide what practitioners do in the classroom and across the program. | • Families help shape decisions and daily practices in the environment and program.<br>• Practitioners take time to ask families, "What do you think?" and make changes based on what families share.<br>• Families feel safe being honest, even when they disagree.<br>• Families have meaningful choice, input, and control in their child's experiences. |
| Befriended | Families feel a sense of connection with the program, practitioners, and other families. There are opportunities to build relationships in ways that feel natural and meaningful. | • Families feel connected to the program, staff, and other families.<br>• Families have chances to build relationships with both practitioners and other families.<br>• Practitioners partner with families to find ways that families can support and learn from one another. |
| Needed | Families are recognized as essential to the environment and the program and are appreciated for their contributions. | • Family contributions are valued, visible, and appreciated.<br>• Families' presence, ideas, and unique backgrounds are part of everyday life and planning in the environment and program.<br>• When a family cannot join, staff check in to let them know they were missed. |

# Family Belonging Reflection Tool

This reflection tool supports practitioners, program leadership, and families as partners in understanding family experiences and making informed decisions to guide actions that ensure every family feels connected, valued, and included, leading to a true sense of belonging.

## Partnering with Families: Ideas for Collaboration

We strongly recommend using this tool with families whenever possible (see below for possible ideas on how to do so). We also encourage you to invite families whose voices are often missing from decision-making. Their experiences are crucial to fostering genuine belonging.

**Start by asking:** *How will we do this together?*

The way you use this tool will depend on your program structure and schedule, and the availability of families. The goal is to reflect with families, so choose an approach that fits your context. Here are a few ways you might do that:

► If you are a practitioner using this on your own, start by choosing one or two dimensions to focus on and explore them through questions during family conferences, home visits, or informal check-ins.

► Bring together a small group of staff and family members to complete part or all of the reflection tool, review responses, and guide next steps.

► As part of leadership work that includes families, use part or all of the tool to reflect together and identify next steps.

These examples are simply starting points. Every program and team will approach this work differently, and every family brings important insight. We invite you to listen closely, consider shared themes, and commit to changes that will make a real difference in how families experience your environment and program.

# Family Belonging Reflection Tool

| Dimensions of Belonging | Celebrate What's Working<br>What are we doing well right now? | Opportunities to Grow<br>What can we do more of, less of, or differently? | From Reflection to Action<br>What specific actions could we take to strengthen family belonging? |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Present**<br>Are families here and attending activities as part of the program community? | | | |
| **Invited**<br>Are we actively seeking out family presence, and is everyone encouraging it? | | | |
| **Welcomed**<br>Are families received by us and by one another with warmth, friendliness, and authentic delight? | | | |
| **Known**<br>Are families seen as unique entities, recognized by their strengths and appreciated for who they are? | | | |
| **Accepted**<br>Are families embraced without condition and supported to be equal partners? | | | |

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|---|---|---|---|
| **Involved**<br>Are families actively involved in their children's development in the program community? | | | |
| **Supported**<br>Are we helping families in ways that make everyone stronger and more confident together? | | | |
| **Heard**<br>Are the perspectives of families sought out, listened to, and respected by everyone? | | | |
| **Befriended**<br>Has the family formed relationships with other families and the practitioners within our community? | | | |
| **Needed**<br>Do we show families that they are an important and necessary part of our community? | | | |

# Next Steps

Given our ideas above for moving from reflection to action, what three actionable steps will we take next to ensure that all families feel a sense of belonging?

| Actionable Step | When will we start? | Who will take the lead? | How and when will we follow up? |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | | | |
| 2. | | | |
| 3. | | | |

## Considerations for Leadership Teams to Use This Tool

Leadership teams, including families, can use this tool at the leadership level to support thoughtful program-wide reflection and action around the routines, policies, and practices that consistently influence family belonging.

**Celebrate What's Working:** *What are we doing well right now?*

▶ What have we done that's made a positive difference for families?

▶ What specific family feedback or actions tell us that this is going well?

**Identify Opportunities to Grow:** *What can we do more of, less of, or differently?*

▶ How are we ensuring we have perspectives of all families (not just some) as we consider family experiences of belonging?

▶ Are we making assumptions about what families want, or are we asking for their input?

▶ Who is this working well for, and are there any families we might be missing?

▶ What adjustments might we need to make so that this works for more families?

**Move from Reflection to Action:** *What specific actions could we take to strengthen family belonging?*

▶ Based on the data and feedback we have gathered, what is something we could do more of, less of, or differently?

▶ How will we know if the changes we make are truly improving how families experience belonging?

▶ What is our process for ongoing reflection and checking in on the actions we take?

## Want to explore this topic further?

If you are interested in learning more about family partnership and belonging in early childhood, here are a few additional resources that can support additional reflection, spark new ideas, and guide next steps in your environment or program.

▶ NCPMI Family Belonging Webinar

▶ TIES Center Belonging Resources

## Resources:

Carter, E. W., & Biggs, E. E. (2021). *Creating communities of belonging for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Belonging Series)*. University of Minnesota, TIES Center. https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/introduction

Carter, E. W., Biggs, E. E., & Boehm, T. L. (2016). Being present versus having a presence: Dimensions of belonging for young people with disabilities and their families. *Christian Education Journal*, 13(1), 127-146.

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. (n.d.). *Introduction to belonging*. TIES Center. https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/peer-engagement/belonging/introduction

Joseph, J., Lumpkins, A., Riepe, B., Sayles, J., & von der Embse, M. (2024, July 10). *Being present to having a presence: Family belonging in the Pyramid Model* [Webinar]. National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. https://challengingbehavior.org/webinar/being-present-to-having-a-presence-family-belonging-in-the-pyramid-model/