

Protecting Students

The Importance of Activities for Belonging and Capability

The Suicide Prevention Action Network of Idaho (SPAN Idaho) is deeply interested in promoting factors for children that can improve their mental health and help protect them from suicidal thoughts and behaviors throughout their school careers, and often, throughout life. An abundance of research shows that two such critical factors are belongingness and capability. Students who feel a sense of belonging and capableness are more likely to do well in school, possess a better sense of self-esteem, be better citizens both in school and in their community, and grow up with self-efficacy.

Schools can promote the sense of belonging and capableness with simple, low- or no-cost activities and strategies.

Allowing classrooms to brainstorm a few rules that are needed for everyone to feel safe and included will go along way to resolving discipline as the year goes on. Keep the rules brief and positive (Do's versus Don'ts) and offer students time to discuss why these are important. Get buy-in from everyone and post the rules in a clearly visible place.

Example Activities and Strategies

Note: While activity grade levels are suggested, any activity can be modified to pertain to a different grade level.

Classroom Jobs (Elementary School)

Rotate jobs so that all students have a chance to contribute and feel important. Jobs should be age and skill appropriate. Some ideas include taking messages to the office, flag assistant, recycler, PE or music helpers, classroom helpers (pass out supplies or pick up papers), and other small jobs. A note stating how helpful the students are at the end of the day will be appreciated by them and their parents.

Recess Buddies (Elementary School)

Older students can be Recess Buddies to younger students who have a hard time making or keeping friends at recess. The older students help them with appropriate ways to interact with their peers, do special activities that help draw others to play with the child, and give positive attention. Both the older and younger students benefit.

Everyone Shines (Elementary School)

Everyone Shines is a way to let every student identify his/her strengths by drawing or writing their attributes on a tin foil star (made with cardboard and aluminum foil). Students use a school photo, or teachers can take a snapshot of the students and paste them along with the students' strengths on the stars which can be hung with strings from the ceiling or placed on a bulletin board.

Caught You Doing Something Good (Elementary School)

Students are encouraged to be "nice." When their teachers and staff notice a good deed or kind treatment that students gave to others staff gives out slips of paper to the performers of each good deed. The slips can be turned in for a reward every week or so. The reward might be something such as being first to go to lunch or a picture on the bulletin board or small treat.

Friends Through Photos (Elementary and Middle School)

Create a photo wall collage with pictures from digital cameras (ask PTA to donate). Students who are not connecting are loaned a camera and instructed to find and take pictures of as many students in the school as they can find in a variety of activities. Then the pictures are posted. These are great at the end of the year, or pasted on cardboard to go with students to their next schools. Teachers might make sure that all students are in the pictures.

Face-to-Facebook (Elementary and Middle School)

Students create a book with questions to know about each other: Where else have you lived? How many siblings do you have? What class(es) do you like? Dislike? What are your hobbies/pastimes? Where is your favorite place? What is your favorite music/band/group? Color? Food? They must sit with each other to find the answers. The goal is to get as many other students' information on a face-to-face meeting as possible. Students "friend" each other (get information) by

Sharing a lunch time with someone they haven't had lunch before

Having time in class if work is complete to work on this project.

Have "tea-time" so students can meet new people.

This could be an English/reading/social studies project, as social skills, writing, speaking, reading, and other life skills are required.

Hands across the School (Elementary and Middle School)

Make a wall or a border around the school with every student's handprint. Let them choose a color, paint their hand, and print this common wall. Students might sign their hand after the paint is dry or post digital pictures of the students on their handprint. As new students come into the school, invite them to "put their print" on the school.

School Year DVD (Middle and High School)

A group of students is responsible for catching ALL students on video cameras. These videos are edited adding the year's popular music and comments from teachers and staff, and produced on a DVD by the end of the year. Allow students to purchase a copy cheaply at year's end. This also makes a fun addition to a year-end assembly. They can be used later at graduation or at end of year parties. Schools need access to video cameras and video-editing software or may need to enlist a community member to oversee the project.

Call Groups (Middle and High School)

Arrange for four to six students per class to be aware of 4-6 other students. If any of this last group is absent, the students make a call to "check on" the student. They can offer to help the student catch up homework in the library or just let the person know that he or she was missed. The callers change every so few weeks.

Newcomers Club (Middle and High School)

Pick students who usually don't receive much recognition but who are trustworthy and ask them to take a new student around the school. Have the student meet the newcomer, take him/her to the locker, cafeteria, and gym, and to each classroom right before the class is to start. Ask the student to introduce the newcomer to the teacher, to take the newcomer to break and lunch and to introduce him/her to other students who might have similar interests. (You will need to get this approved and have hall passes ready to go.) This works by getting staff on board and by letting the student ambassador leave a couple of minutes early to meet the new student and to arrive a couple of minutes late to each class. Because you only use this student once or twice, the classroom is not seriously

impacted. In addition, hold a bi-monthly Newcomers' Meet to find out how new students are doing and to give them a chance to meet each other if they are not connecting.

VIPerson of(Middle and High School)

Enlist the student council or cheerleaders. Ask them to choose a student who hasn't been to a game or school activity. They then invite that student to be the VIP of an upcoming event. The person can be mascot for the activity, wear a crown of (school) colors, receive a free ticket to the activity or treats there, or any other means of being made to feel special.

Class Day (Middle and High School)

School staff or club sponsors sign up to "host" a school event or activity. At the event, class members receive free hotdogs or popcorn, have their picture taken as a group, maybe get free access to the event, and so on. Post the pictures with the names of the groups. Challenge each other to see who can get the most people there, such as the sophomore class against the freshman class. This has the added advantage of boosting attendance at activities and getting students interested in what is happening in their school.

Lock-In (Middle and High School)

Have a lock-in event at school, which invites students to stay overnight on the weekend. This is especially good for middle school when a new grade level is coming in or high school to welcome ninth graders. Have some team building activities to help everyone feel comfortable. Then use classrooms to offer different types of events, including an arts and crafts room, food rooms, different types of movies, such as a comedy movie room and an action movie room, and so on. Ask parents and teachers to volunteer to run the events and be sure to have much supervision, especially during the "sleeping time." Make rules clear ahead so that everyone is clear about acceptable behavior. Ask local merchants to donate food, drinks, craft supplies, and so on for the students and be sure to have a pick up time scheduled for the next morning. Be sure to take plenty of pictures to post on the bulletin board on Monday or video to share at the end of the year.

Thank You To...For...From... (All Grades)

Thank you to....for... from....is a bulletin board on which students post a "thank you" to another student or school person who did something "nice" for them. This can be left up for a quarter or a semester so that parents have a chance to see the thank you's.

Mix-it-up-Lunch (All Grades)

Students once a month (or week) eat with students whom they have not sat with before. Students each receive a questionnaire and ask questions of each other. In English or reading, they can write a brief biography of their new friend and post for all to read. Biographies can be collected into "books" to share at the end of the year. Pictures can be added to each biography. Also, students can write up their appraisal of the project and include as afterword in the book. Obviously these must be screened and edited.

Movie Club (All Grades)

Ask teachers to bring good current-run age-appropriate movie DVDs (or use a Netflix account). Enlist teachers who stay in their rooms at lunch and invite students to bring in their lunch and watch a movie over a couple of weeks at lunch. Ask teachers to give special invitations to students who seem not to fit anywhere. (Obviously, this needs to be done in a discreet way, such as, "Today the Movie Club is showing, which you might like.") A follow up activity might be to have students write

reviews of the movies to post in the library or English classes. Post their pictures and a brief biography of the students. Or, ask the students to submit their reviews to the school newspaper.

Congratulation Gauntlet (All Grades)

When students reach a milestone or achieve something to be proud of, staff--with hands extended--stands on both sides of the hall as students leave for the day, and students slap their hands or give high fives. All students feel part of the celebration.

Game Club (All Grades)

Game Club meets two or three lunch hours a week with a teacher or parent volunteer. Students can join in playing a game (ask parents or PTA to donate these). This is a way for students to be part of something at lunch if they don't have friends and is a way to get to know other students. In good weather, these can be games outside, such as kick ball, softball, or soccer. Just have vests to differentiate one team from another. Players do not choose up teams.

Discussion Group (All Grades)

Invite students to listen to community speakers a couple of times per month. Students bring their lunch and hear experts on a variety of topics. The next day students meet to discuss their ideas related to the topic. This can be connected to academic classes like English, social studies, history, etc.

Hobby/Skill Share (All Grades)

Staff and students share a hobby or two with students once a week at lunch, or feature a teacher each week. Some hobbies might include fly fishing, quilting, knitting, painting, and so on. Students bring their lunches and sit around and learn a new skill while meeting new people who are interested in learning the same skill.

Everyone's a Part (All Grades)

With the help of an art teacher or community artist, design a wall-sized mural for your school. This can be either inside or out. Divide the mural into as many parts as there are students, draw it out on the wall, and graph it out (like paint by number). Each student is assigned a square, the color of paint that needs to be in the square, and a time to do the part. You will need volunteers to keep students safe (not too high) and find equipment that will not let students fall. The mural requires every student's participation to complete.

Walk Club (All Grades)

Ask a merchant to supply step counters and meet with students two to three times per week to walk outside (or in the gym if it is cold). Students set a goal of walking so many steps or miles. This can be tied to a fund-raiser or to break some type of record or to set a challenge against a neighboring school. As it is easy to walk and talk, students should be able to make friends while becoming physically fit. Ensure no student walks alone.

Life Gets Better Project (All Grades)

Teachers/staff share with their students about times they were bullied or treated unfairly as youth. They tell how they managed to deal with their situations (resiliency) and encourage students to come talk with them if they are having troubles of their own. This can be a writing project, but be sure to read all of the students' papers and report any concerns to the school counselor or administrator, or the Department of Health and Welfare. The final message is life does get better.

Take a Kid On (All Grades)

Staff members each pick a student or two whom they feel has problems fitting in or is at risk in another way. Discuss which student(s) will be selected so that many students might receive some extra attention. During the year, without the students' knowledge, staff members do nice things for the student each school day. They might be sure the student is given some special errand, like taking a note to the office, or let the students know that they are proud of them for turning in all their work or not being tardy. Drop a treat into their locker or have the office give them a ticket to a school activity.

Guinness Book of Records (All Grades)

Either find a record that could be broken or ask students to think of a project that no one has done. Check at www.guinnessworldrecords.com to find a project feasible for inclusion. Enlist parents and community to work with students on the project. When going for a record, media—including Guinness—will probably be involved. Some ideas: the biggest number of people to jump at the same time, the most people to hold hands, the longest chain of Lifesaver candies, the most balloons (blown up by students) in a gym, etc. This might turn into a fund-raiser and/or a corporation might like to provide the balloons, Lifesavers, whatever your group decides or to be a sponsor. The key is that all students must help to achieve record status. This might even be directed toward a goal of the school—no tardies, most students with perfect attendance, most students working on a painting project, etc.

Deeds Club (All Grades)

Ask students to meet once a week at lunch and settle on a project to do that will make the school or the community better. Students commit to carrying out a part of the project. Note what is happening in the community and enlist the support of the community organizations involved. Some ideas include Valentines for Vets, Paint the Town, Rake Up for Elders, and so on. School projects might include making sure everyone has a friend at lunch, planting flowers in the fall for spring, volunteering to show people around, and so on.

Community Service (All Grades)

Ask a group like Kiwanis Club to come in once a month and set up community activities that students can do (parent permission and volunteers needed). This might include writing cards to Veterans, planting flowers or bulbs around the school, or an elder care home, helping to raise money for an animal shelter, or working on a food drive. Have students keep logs of the hours they put in volunteering. Honor these students at the end of year assembly and offer letters for their college portfolio.

Use nationally-developed programs or use your own creative ideas to develop more activities.

*Small activities like these
have the power
to positively affect every student
and
may make all the difference
for a student at risk.*