

# Helping kids to feel they belong

Why do some children seem to have a relatively smooth path to adulthood, while others experience a rocky road?

While there is no simple answer, research in the past 15 years has found that what we call in psychological terms “risk and protective factors” have a big influence.

Risk factors are the bad conditions in kids’ lives that make them vulnerable, while the protective factors are those things that help them have more resilience and the ability to weather the storms of adolescence.

Put simply, a child who experiences more mixed and unfortunate challenges is likely to be more at risk of going off the rails than one whose experiences have led them to value themselves and feel they have a well-defined place in the world.

Up until a few years ago, behavioural experts would focus on a child’s behaviour in isolation from what was happening in the rest of the child’s life. If a teenager was starting to smoke, they would worry about the smoking, without looking for a possible cause.

If a child was looking moody or depressed, they might try to get them to snap out of it or jolly them along, rather than looking at where the depression fitted into the bigger picture of the child’s life. Today we realise negative behaviour is usually a symptom of other problems.

If young people see themselves as safe and secure and free to express themselves, they usually have a real sense of belonging in their schools, their families and within their peer group.

If they feel valued and accepted for who they are they tend to be fairly settled and able to achieve academically.

Conversely, if a child feels he or she doesn’t belong anywhere and is not valued for anything, the academic results tend to be poor.

What this means is that an important protective factor to help smooth the path to adulthood is having a sense of belonging; feeling they are worth something as individuals.

It’s important that a child feels he or she is good at something, because usually when we are good at something, other people recognise that. Many schools these days focus on fostering a sense of self-achievement in extra-curricular activities as well as in the classroom.

If a child has attained a new belt in his judo class, that is something that needs to be recognised and applauded by the school and his family. The fact that he has been struggling to read and write has no impact on the fact that in judo class he was king for a day when he passed the latest test with flying colours.

Children like this need to be acknowledged by the whole school for what they can do, because they know only too well what they can’t do. Everyone likes to be recognised for something they do well, but for vulnerable children this recognition is an essential part of feeling they are valued and that they belong to their community.

The importance of this positive recognition of small achievements in their lives is that it gives them a foundation to draw on when times get tough. Remembering their achievements reminds them they are worth something and that people value their other abilities, so that becomes a protective factor that helps prevent them slipping into a vortex of negativity, hopelessness and resulting risky behaviour, such as drinking binges or other substance abuse.

For parents, it's matter of looking at their children and thinking "does my child feel comfortable inside?" if the answer seems to be no, how can a child who doesn't seem to fit within his or her own skin hope to achieve at school if other parts of life are out of kilter?

Helping kids to achieve a sense of belonging and achievement is a major step to giving them strong protective factors on their journey through adolescence.

## Survival tips

- Helping a child to feel secure, and that they belong to their world, is crucial
- Honour their achievements, no matter how small
- If your child just doesn't seem comfortable inside, don't ignore it ...get some help from a sympathetic counsellor.