



Building Membership and Belonging

Tips for Educators is a continuing series of practical strategies that educators and other caregivers can use in their classrooms and other early learning settings. These tips are based on research evidence and professional knowledge.

What is membership?

Membership is a key feature and a goal of true inclusion. Membership includes feelings of belonging, acceptance, and support to form positive relationships with other members within the learning community.

What does membership look like?

Membership is important for all children. Becoming a member of the classroom is an essential value for general education. For children with disabilities and other special needs, being treated as a member of the class and feeling a sense of belonging creates a foundation for positive peer relationships and the development of friendships.

Shared experiences are vital to becoming a member of the class.

For young children, shared experiences include:

- Participation in the planned learning opportunities, like free play time.
- Participation in routine activities, like snack time.
- Participation in special events, like field trips and celebrations.

Creating a caring classroom community is an important step in helping children feel like they belong as true members of the class.

For young children, a sense of community means:

- Children and their educator think of themselves as a group.
- Everyone knows each other's name.
- There is a climate of kindness and respect.

Support for peer interaction and development of friendship are other indicators of classroom membership.

For young children, support for interaction means:

- Children have opportunities to get to know each other.
- Children have opportunities to interact on a regular basis.
- Educators model, encourage, and teach positive social interaction skills



How do educators give children opportunities to be members of the learning setting?

To promote shared experiences:

- Make sure that every child has a name card for the attendance chart and a space to store their belongings.
- Assign class jobs or give responsibilities to every child in the learning environment.
- Make sure that every child has the opportunity to be a leader and to be a helper.
- Make accommodations so that every child has the opportunity to answer questions, make choices, or make a comment. For example, put the names and pictures of songs on a chart so that children can make their choice by naming or pointing to the song.

To create a sense of community and belonging:

- Point out that all children are members of the classroom, and all children have strengths and things they are trying to learn.
- Start the year with an **All About Me** theme so that children get to know each other. Bring in photographs or drawings from home to share. Recognize individual children's interests and preferences.
- Make visual records of field trips or classroom events so all children see themselves within the community. Create photograph books or wall displays.
- Help children understand that all children participate in activities and routines but that some activities will be adapted for some children based on their individual needs and strengths.

To support positive peer interactions:

- Keep some groupings consistent so that children have the opportunity to get to know each other.
- Plan projects that can be done as groups or by pairs. For example, make a class mural or collage.
- Have a buddy day where children are paired up with a new peer, and buddy day activities are set up in the learning environment (i.e. handprint paintings when each child adds their handprint to a page)
- Introduce group friendship activities. Take a familiar song, like "If You're Happy and You Know It" and change the words to a friendly gesture (i.e. "If you're happy and you know it, give a high five.").
- Use social toys, like dolls and building blocks, that are more likely to encourage social interaction. Use outdoor play equipment like tandem tricycles, tire swings, trikes, and wagons that naturally prompt children to share space and interact with each other.