

*REVITALIZING STUDENTS, STAFF AND SCHOOLS  
THROUGH POSITIVE SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS*

**Keith A. King, PhD, MCHES**  
**Professor of Health Promotion & Education**  
**University of Cincinnati**

**BACK to BASICS: Tools to Revitalize Staff, Students and Schools**  
**Lorain, County Community College**  
**June 13, 2011**

---

Multiple social and psychological factors are associated with risky behaviors among youth including social support, overall emotional well-being, isolation, resistance skills, and feelings of connectedness to important others (i.e. family, school, community, and peers). **Positive school connections** prevent youth involvement in violence, bullying, suicide, drug use, and other risky behaviors. Students who feel positively connected to school tend to make healthier decisions, have higher self-esteem, perform better in school, and resist negative peer pressure. Students who do not feel positively connected but instead who feel that they do not fit in, are at increased risk for risky behaviors.

Psychological Factors Associated with Youth Involvement in Risky Behaviors

- Self-concept/Self-esteem
- Emotional well-being
- Life satisfaction
- Feeling of failure or success
- Impulse control
- Decision-making autonomy
- Motivation
- Isolation
- Depressed mood
- Feeling of connectedness
- Social support
- Perceived stress/anxiety
- Helpless/hopelessness
- Communication skills
- Personal-power
- Resistance skills
- Loneliness
- Discontent

Psychological Needs

We all have basic psychological needs. Just like physical needs, our psychological needs should be nurtured, tended to and developed. This is especially true in children and adolescents. When such needs are not addressed or adequately met, problems will tend to result. Individuals, particularly children will often try to get their needs met through some form of behavior that results in immediate gratification. Such behaviors can be positive or negative.

The basic psychological needs include: 1) Belongingness/Love/Connectedness, 2) Power, 3) Freedom, and 4) Fun.

**IDENTIFY AND BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN YOUTH**

**High self-esteem** is associated with increased involvement in healthy behaviors, increased motivation in school and sports, increased adoption of positive coping skills, increased quality peer relationships, high academic achievement and career success, decreased substance use, decreased teen pregnancy, decreased suicide and depression, increased life satisfaction and much more. **THE FOUR CONDITIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM** include: a sense of uniqueness, a sense of power, a sense of positive role models and a sense of CONNECTEDNESS.

**SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS**

School connectedness is a leading protective factor against youth engagement in risky behaviors. In fact, the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health found that **SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS** is the number one school-based protective factor against 8 risky behaviors. Children who feel supported and positively connected to their school are significantly less likely than children who do not feel supported or positively connected to their school to engage in substance abuse as well as other harmful and risky behaviors. Students who feel positively connected tend to engage in healthier behaviors and resist negative peer pressure. Students who do not feel positively connected are at increased risk for drug use, violence, bullying, depression and other problems. Care and support can be devised by developing a nurturing school staff that model positive behaviors to students. Ensuring that everyone is dedicated to fostering a positive school climate is another way to develop school connectedness. School connectedness is imperative to improving youth attitudes toward school, increasing positive behaviors and decreasing student attitude toward absences, detentions, and suspensions.

**TEACHING/SCHOOL STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS**

Establish school connection-building as a priority	Encourage student commitment to learning
Encourage quality teacher-student communication	Identify students in need and offer assistance
Actively listen to students	Display positive role modeling for students
Establish a warm and caring school climate	Offer student mentoring and empowerment programs
Display an ongoing sense of care and commitment	Use team-building and peer teaching activities
Provide opportunities for student involvement	Seek for opportunities to positively impact youth

**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES THAT HELP TO BUILD A SENSE OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS**

- Positive adult qualities and characteristics
- Icebreaker activities
- Home/school/community responsibilities
- Jobs in class, school, home, and community
- Empowerment activities
- Positive role-modeling
- Mentoring programs
- Team-building
- Peer teaching
- Active Listening

**ACTIVE LISTENING**

Active Listening involves fervently focusing on another person as they communicate and trying to best understand their thoughts, feelings and emotions. It involves actively attempting to see an issue from another's point of view and perspective. Using encouraging, clarifying, restating, reflecting and summarizing statements help to enhance our communication skills and to actively listen to others. Active listening techniques include: Making eye contact; Showing you are interested; Avoiding distractions and looking around; Maintaining an open stance; Offering follow-up statements/questions

**School Classroom Strategies to Build Positive Connections**

Teacher/adult qualities and characteristics	Mentoring programs; Peer teaching
Icebreaker activities; Boundary breakers	Interviewing Classmates & Family Members
Class contracts; Cooperative learning	Pat on the Back
Jobs in class, school, home, and community	Catch Somebody Doing Something Good

**Teacher/Staff Strategies to Build Positive Connections**

Try to act as a positive role model for students	Spend time engaging students in conversations about their daily lives
Call students by their first names	Allow students to make low-level decisions in class
Enforce rules of student respect	Encourage students to share their feelings
Try to show your students that you respect them	Tell your students that you care about them
Actively listen to your students when they are speaking to you	Use icebreakers to get students to know one another
Smile when teaching in class	Divide students into small groups in class
Offer praise to your students	Encourage students to talk to their parents
Show your students that you care about them	Involve parents in student activities (such as homework assignments)
Encourage and motivate your students to do their best in class	Encourage students to get positively involved in their community
Set high expectations for student achievement	Use authoritative teaching skills
Use cooperative learning	Develop a positive rapport and relationship with your students
Use humor when interacting with students	Talk to your students about positive behaviors
Set rules for students to show respect for one another	Enforce set limits
Encourage student discussion in class	Teach your students how to effectively communicate with individuals (small talk skills)
Make small talk with students before/after class	Teach your students how to use time constructively
Try to relate to your students and get to know them	Help your students to set career and life goals
Provide students with opportunities to show responsibility in the classroom	Give your students responsibilities (empower them)
Use strategies to try to get your students positively connected in your class	Monitor your students' behavior
Shake hands with your students	Communicate with other teachers and staff
Share personal stories or experiences during class to reach students	Be a positive role model

Share with your students (from the heart)  
Be authentic and genuine  
Let your students know that you care about them  
Display student's work  
Give each student a responsibility in the classroom  
Point out positive aspects of children's work  
Never criticize a child's question  
Take time to help struggling children to understand  
Try to get to know about a child's life  
Learn and listen to each child's story  
Ask children about their outside activities  
Help children turn failure into positive learning experiences

Encourage children to exit their comfort zones  
Provide opportunities for children to make their own decisions about certain aspects of your class  
Provide opportunities for children to work with each other  
Do not make assumptions  
Allow children to experience the consequences of their behavior  
Allow children to explore options in different situations  
Celebrate your child's achievements

### **School-Wide Strategies**

Cultivating a positive emotional climate; Increasing student-to-student respect; Offering school-wide activities and events; Displaying posters on connectedness; Offering public school announcements on the importance of student connectedness; Developing school teams devoted to connection building;

### **Student Ideas to Build Connections**

Mentoring programs; Peer to peer mentoring; Student to student activities; Student involvement in decision-making  
Cooperative learning; Peer teaching; Class activities; Group work/projects; Class mix up days; Counselor/designated adult to share problems with; Parental involvement' Community involvement

### **Strategies Important for School Connectedness**

Administration support and encouragement; School based committee; Teacher and staff training; Teacher connection to students; Emotional climate of the school; Bullying prevention and safety assurance

A high level of school connectedness is associated with: Increased academic achievement; Increased civic competence; Increased sense of community; Increased pro-social attitudes; and Increased healthy behaviors

### **Additional Strategies to Increase Connectedness**

- Actively involve youth in researching and taking action on issues important to them within their schools and communities
- Empower young people to promote peaceful solutions to problems by creating their own solutions to issues
- Increase family and community involvement

**FINAL NOTE:** Please remember that protective factors are of utmost importance in positive youth development. Research concerning protective factors continues to highlight the importance of positive school connections in the lives of youth. Remember that your perception of the world affects your outlook and behavior. Look for ways to connect with and positively impact youth. Positive connections are critical to overall life satisfaction. As humans, we have an inherent desire to connect with others. This is important, especially for youth. Please remember this and search for opportunities to connect. I wish you all the best!

For more information on building positive connections among youth and/or to schedule an educational workshop in your area, please feel free to contact me.

---

Keith A. King, PhD, MCHES  
Professor of Health Promotion & Education  
University of Cincinnati  
Cincinnati, OH 4521-0068  
Phone 513/556-3859  
Email [keith.king@uc.edu](mailto:keith.king@uc.edu)