

BE LONG ING

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Just recently I attended a symposium organised by TeEACH Research Centre looking at Connectedness and Belonging for children and their families.

A collection of children got to ask a panel of professionals questions important to them and their classmates. 'Why can't we get free healthy food?', 'Why can't we get to see the doctors and mental health people we need to help us stay healthy?' 'Why can't we get access to free sports, both playing and watching?' 'Why cant kids travel of public transport free?' 'Why can't we get good housing that doesn't cost too much?' I don't think I have seen a more useless panel of experts in all my life.

These were ultimately questions of equality. These kids know these things exist. Good healthy food, medical care, housing, public transport, social and cultural activities (some that also benefit physical fitness) but they also see how difficult it is for them (or their peers) to get access to them.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, most of these are all lower-level needs. Meaning they form the base and need to be fulfilled. These are the basic physiological needs required for survival and when these aren't being meet other needs hardly register. Who cares about learning, when you are so hungry all you can think about is the next time you might get to eat? The second level of needs revolve around safety, be that physical safety (from wars or family violence etc) or economic safety. It is the third level, that I thought would be the focus of the day, and ultimately it was. That of belonging.

When we think of the needs of children, especially those in crisis, it is easy to think of the essential nature of food and shelter, safety and health, but how often does belonging rank up there. Yet a sense of belonging is critical to the ways in which humankind organises itself. It is within the feelings of acceptance, being loved and respected by others that children, but all of us, are happier, healthier and learn better. Belonging has shown huge improvements in mental health and increases resilience. There are some for whom, the need for belonging will even overcome the physiological and security needs they have.

I wanted to attend the symposium as I see church, Community of Christ, as a place of belonging and I was hoping it might generate some ideas on how we can better create spaces of belong for children (and youth and adults). Recognising the importance of belonging in all aspects of life.

There was a participatory discussion on how do we make kids feel safe and that they belong. What we boiled it down to was acceptance and respect. It really wasn't that hard considering these are the foundations of what belonging is. Doing it, however, might be a little harder.

Acceptance of who they are, not who we want them to be or behave, but of the little person they were created to be. This includes acceptance of the developmental spaces they are in and the life experience that they have had. It is the acceptance of the reality of humanity and learning, and emotions and mistakes. It is acceptance of the parent that is doing their best and their learning along the way. It is respecting each life journey, no matter how young or how old and modelling this in all aspects of our lives. Providing spaces and cultural expectations to keep all safe.

What does this mean for us?

It is choosing to support organisations and political agendas that uphold the dignity or all people and ensure that accessing basic needs are a priority for all people. If you want to crank it up a gear, lobby and advocate to ensure these are at the top of the agendas of those political representatives.

It is making safe spaces by speaking up against racism and discrimination. It is obtaining Working with children checks and being an advocate and a platform for children to share their voices.

It is being truly accepting of the children in our lives, congregations and wider community and reminding others to do the same.

It is ensuring every child you come in contact with knows they are loved, accepted and respected. That with you, with us, they have a place of belonging.