

The Role of School Connectedness in Supporting the Health and Well-Being of Youth

Recommendations for School Nurses

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The importance of students feeling connected in school cannot be overstated, as this perception is crucial to support their health and well-being. A lack of school connectedness can lead to adverse physical and mental health outcomes, including bully victimization. Numerous factors, including individual, social, and environmental, influence students' perceived sense of school connectedness. School nurses are well positioned to establish and maintain school connectedness due to their knowledge, accessibility to students, and familiarity with the school

environment. This article details the importance of school connectedness and describes the associations between school connectedness, bullying, and mental health. In addition, we offer recommendations geared toward school nurses regarding strengthening school connectedness and promoting a culture of care and inclusivity within school environments, especially salient in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: school connectedness; school belonging; school nurse; mental health; bullying; COVID-19

What Is School Connectedness?

School connectedness, generally signifying the extent to which youth feel accepted, included, and cared for by staff and peers while at school (Marsh et al., 2019), is a critical factor affecting youths' health and well-being. Recent efforts to measure school connectedness include rating youths' perceptions of inclusiveness, closeness, happiness, and safety at school (Eugene et al., 2021). Tomek et al. (2018) asked youth to rate their level of agreement with statements such as "most students at school like me the way I am" and "there's at least one teacher in my

Box 1. Factors That Influence School Connectedness

Individual factors	School-related factors
Stage of development	School size
Behavioral and emotional health	Classroom management policies
Gender identity/sexuality	Discipline policies
Ethnicity	Participation in extracurricular activities
Socioeconomic status	

school I can talk to if I have a problem” (p. 5). Bersamin et al. (2018) measured school connectedness using three subscales: (1) one measuring a caring relationship with a school-based adult; (2) one gauging students’ perception of expectations held by a school-based adult; and (3) one examining meaningful participation at school. Youth responded to statements such as, “at my school, there is a teacher or some other adult who always wants me to do my best” and “at school, I do things that make a difference” (Bersamin et al., 2018, p. 13).

Various individual, social, and environmental factors affect youths’ perceptions of school connectedness. Some researchers explored the interactions between these factors through the lens of the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1997). This theory suggests that social environment is strengthened when school connectedness meets developmental needs and when youth are offered opportunities to increase autonomy, demonstrate competence, and experience developmentally appropriate care (McNeely et al., 2002). Examples of factors that influence school connectedness can be found in Box 1. As seen in Box 1, factors that influence school connectedness include individual developmental stages (Marsh et al., 2019) and those that are school related (Thapa et al., 2013), among others.

Why Does School Connectedness Matter?

According to Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, relatedness is

one of three central psychological needs (in addition to competence and autonomy) necessary to promote well-being. Because youth spend a significant portion of their day at school, forming positive social relationships at school and having a greater sense of perceived school belonging support youths’ psychological need for relatedness and well-being. School belonging can be a significant predictor of academic achievement, both directly and indirectly, especially when there is an emphasis on improving the overall school climate (Reynolds et al., 2017).

Youth well-being, including physical, mental, and emotional components, can be linked to school connectedness. In fact, school connectedness was an important protective factor in regard to various health-risk outcomes among adolescents, including emotional distress, suicidality, violence, and substance use (Resnick et al., 1997; Steiner et al., 2019). Increased school connectedness has also been associated with less anxiety and teen depression (Eugene et al., 2021), reduced suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Marraccini & Brier, 2017), less physical violence, abuse, multiple sex partners, sexually transmitted infections, prescription drug misuse (Steiner et al., 2019), and tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). Feeling connected to school can have additional positive long-term effects, including greater life satisfaction and positive health outcomes (Steiner et al., 2019).

School connectedness is particularly crucial for youth from marginalized groups. Sexual minority, gender minority, and racial/ethnic minority youth and those from low-socioeconomic status report lower school-related protective factors (including school connectedness), with even higher disparities among youth belonging to multiple marginalized groups (Coulter et al., 2021). The pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of LGBTQIA+ youth due to a lack of opportunities to socialize and build supportive, identity-affirming relationships that might bolster feelings of belongingness at school (Fish et al., 2020). These findings support school connectedness as a pivotal factor in improving the mental and physical health of youth with intersectional identities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to numerous transitions to entirely online or hybrid learning, has substantially affected the lives and well-being of school-aged youth across the globe. Restrictions put in place to minimize the spread of disease in schools, such as social distancing, mask-wearing, and remote learning, have increased students’ social isolation and limited their social interactions and abilities to form solid relationships (Rothstein & Olympia, 2020). Concerns related to cyber victimization have been particularly relevant amid the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the risk of online bullying over text messaging or social media may increase because of less in-person interaction (Imran et al., 2020). In fact, bullying, or peer victimization, is significantly and negatively associated with school connectedness. A lack of school connectedness leads to more instances of bullying, and victims of bullying report significantly less connectedness to school (Eugene et al., 2021). Of particular concern is that many students experienced decreased access to in-person healthcare and mental health resources during the pandemic, exacerbating underlying mental health conditions (Rothstein & Olympia, 2020). Thus, as the world begins its recovery from the pandemic and assumes a careful return to a sense of normalcy, the

need for school connectedness-related intervention becomes more pressing.

Why Are School Nurses Well-Suited to Address School Connectedness?

School nurses extend the reach of public health and health services in schools. Their knowledge of health and position within schools, including an understanding of the social environment, offers school-aged youth a point of access to care. In addition to managing chronic and acute conditions, such as physical and emotional needs, school nurses promote healthy behaviors, participate in health surveillance and public health reporting, assist families with health care access and resources, and address health disparities and social determinants of health (Schroeder et al., 2018). School nurses are well-positioned to offer outreach to youth in need through strong connections to the school community (Mazyck, 2021; McCabe, 2020). For youth with chronic health conditions and mental health concerns, school nurses can support and advocate for their participation in school activities, thus helping them feel engaged, valued, and accepted. As a consistent health clinician in a child's daily life, the school nurse is in a prime position to reinforce a sense of belonging to support a youth's well-being. School nurses' availability during the school day can significantly influence students' health and well-being. Therefore, school nurses must consider and support school connectedness as a critical part of their practice.

School Connectedness: Guidance for School Nursing Practice

Guided by the CDC (2009), we offer tangible guidance for understanding, recognizing, and encouraging school connectedness in school nursing practice while working with youth to manage health and well-being. This guidance takes into consideration various COVID restrictions and a post-COVID world. In addition, this guidance supports the National Association of School Nurses *Framework for 21st Century School Nursing Practice™*, which advocates for

student-centered nursing care and evidence-based practice (National Association of School Nurses, 2016).

Build a Community With Open Communication and Trust

Schools must provide safe and supportive spaces designed to help youth learn and grow. School nurses are well-positioned to promote open communication, trust, and caring relationships among school staff, families, and community partners. Bohnenkamp et al. (2015) suggest frequent team meetings between school nurses and other staff members regarding students' mental and physical health to enhance communication, standardization of care, and level of connectedness. It is also suggested that all school staff members be trained in mental health first aid. Research has shown that school connectedness is associated with mental health and that those students who are more connected are less likely to have emotional problems, eating disorders, or experience suicidal thoughts (CDC, 2018). Nurses, who often identify and triage students at risk, provide interventions and coordinate referrals both on and off-campus, can lead this training in person or through online courses to build cooperation and coordination within teams (Bohnenkamp et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018).

While it is important to provide all staff with tools to support students' mental health, the CDC (2009) suggest that schools "ensure that school staff members have an expert they can consult with about student issues they feel are beyond their expertise, and to whom they can refer students who need assistance they are not qualified to provide" (p. 15). School nurses should be trained to serve as one of these experts (Bohnenkamp et al., 2015). When communicating with families, nurses should use various approaches, including individual meetings, assemblies, newsletters, and the school website, to inform families and promote healthy behaviors both at school and at home (Schroeder et al., 2018).

Promote School Engagement

Whether through academics, extracurriculars, or peer relationships, students' level of engagement within the school environment is crucial to promote school connectedness. School nurses are essential in helping students develop the skills they need to engage in school and school activities fully. To promote school engagement, the CDC (2009) recommends that schools encourage students to identify, label, express, and assess their feelings, as well as provide opportunities for students to engage in planning their future. School nurses can support students to reflect on their feelings about their school environment by regularly assessing and/or screening for belongingness, a practice that may assist in suicide prevention efforts.

Belongingness screenings and mental health screenings, conducted by school nurses, can highlight which students may need intervention or require referrals for follow-up care (Williams et al., 2018). One intervention recommended by Williams et al. (2018) and aligned with CDC guidance encourages students to participate in career-focused or hands-on school-to-work programs. While participation in extracurricular activities is positively associated with school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002), activities involving career exploration and future planning may help students develop new interests, foster closer relationships with school staff, and achieve personal goals (CDC, 2009; Williams et al., 2018).

Recognize the Importance of Building School Connectedness in View of COVID-19

As youth return to school, restrictions related to COVID-19 are cause for an even greater need for school connectedness and mental health resources in schools than prior to the pandemic. Many students will need additional support from trusted adults in the community, including school nurses. Collaborative efforts, promoted by school nurses, among school staff, families, and students are needed to ease transitions back to school after what may have been

a traumatic experience or stress-inducing phase of life. Given the negative impact of COVID-19 on factors that define school connectedness and the relationship between school connectedness and mental health, school nurses must have a heightened awareness of students' needs and the skill set to identify those who may be at risk (Hoffman & Miller, 2020). Nurses should be mindful of students' time away from school and time spent at home and the effects on mental health and their perceived school connectedness. This understanding should give particular attention to students' family situations, including socioeconomic status, relationships among friends and family, loss of life to near and extended family, access to healthcare, and the student's role in these situations. Finally, clear communication, care, and mindfulness need to be put into recommendations to increase school connectedness that can be adjusted and tailored to support students in a post-COVID world.

Conclusion

School connectedness refers to an individual student's belief that school members, including school nurses, other school adults, and peers, care about them. The importance of school connectedness is especially the case for those students at risk for feeling isolated or distanced from others. While the long-term effects of COVID-19 on school connectedness, mental health, and bullying remain unknown, we do know that students who feel more connected to school are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically. Healthy connections among peers can foster feelings of inclusion and belonging, while trusting relationships with school nurses and other school staff create a school environment where youth feel safe and supported. Future interventions should focus on strategies to increase students' perception of school connectedness while supporting school nurses and staff in building an environment of open communication, trust, and engagement both now and in a post-COVID world. ■

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