



## It's All About Belonging!



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No, we are not changing Kagan's motto. Our motto is still: ***It's All About Engagement!*** Student engagement remains at the heart of KaganUK's mission. Through meaningful engagement, we boost student learning and reduce classroom discipline problems. But, perhaps second to engagement, the Kagan classroom addresses the fundamental student need for belonging. Our motto very well could be, ***It's All About Belonging.*** Or maybe, ***It's All About Engagement (and Belonging)!***

Belongingness is a well-established concept in social psychology. As humans, we have a tremendous drive to belong. We want to feel connected. We want to be accepted. At the very core of our existence is the desire to feel cared about, even loved.

***Feeling like we belong gives us value. It provides safety. Belonging allows us to divide our sorrows and multiply our successes.***

Belonging is being a member. It can be a member of a family; a member of a romantic relationship; a member of a social group; a member of an sports team. In the Kagan classroom, we form student teams. Placing students together on teams helps create this sense of belonging. But we don't just stop there. We intentionally and systematically work to build team identity and affiliation. The Kagan classroom is rich in teambuilding. It is very liberal with praise, cheers, and celebrations to build and maintain positive bonds. With student teams, we meet our students' tremendous drive for belonging. Students come to feel known and valued by their teammates. Through the positive classbuilding activities, they come to feel like this is our class. I like it here. I belong.

Feeling like we belong gives us value. It provides safety. Belonging allows us to divide our sorrows and multiply our successes. Students who come into our classrooms each year don't leave their emotional baggage at the door. We work with many schools across the UK who serve students who come from very difficult situations. Abuse. Neglect. Hunger. Homelessness. Crime. Poverty. If students can't cope with their painful emotions, focusing on academics is next to impossible.

We also work with many schools that appear to have ideal conditions. Affluence. High achievement. Sporting accolades. But even students in these seemingly ideal conditions are not immune to the trials and tribulations of making the transition from dependent children to independent adults. No school is free from the harmful impacts of divorce, drugs, bullying, and racism.

Belonging to a team fills a void many children have. It gives them the feeling that they are not alone. They are surrounded by people who care about them and want them to succeed. A personal victory is great. A victory celebrated by your teammates is even greater. Take the Olympics for example. Olympic athletes are celebrated for their individual achievements, but their success is even sweeter when they have the honour of representing their nation (read: their team). That's why it was such a humiliation for Russian athletes to be stripped of their team uniform when Russia was banned for violating antidoping rules in the recent Winter Olympics.



Not belonging is a punishment. This is true for all of us, and perhaps even more so for children with delicate identities, forming their sense of self. Students have a tremendous need to belong. They want to fit in. They will go to great extremes to fit in. They will look a certain way. They will behave a certain way. They'll do just about anything to belong. We see some pretty interesting trends sweep across schools nationwide. Students will show their group affiliation by their clothes. Think baggy pants. Hoodies. Baseball Caps. Trainers. They will dress alike to show they belong together. They'll listen to the same

music. They'll style their hair to fit into a clique. They'll even engage in dangerous and deleterious behaviour to show they fit in with their social group or gang. How many kids are sent to the Headteacher's office every day because they felt pressured by their peer group to do something really stupid? This phenomenon is so common, we all know it and recognise it immediately—**peer pressure!**

Fitting in is crucial for our psychological well-being. It boggles the mind that smart people stay in toxic, even abusive relationships. Why? Because the need to belong is so strong. Rejection, or even the threat of rejection, can hurt as much as physical pain. Without connection, there is loneliness. Most of us have experienced the hollow, empty feeling of loneliness at some time in our lives. It stinks! Some of our students live there. They feel they don't belong to any social group. They feel ostracised for the way they look, act, their skin colour, language skills, or gender identity. Extreme cases of isolation can lead to depression, suicide, and violence.

Back in the late 1800's, sociologist Emile Durkheim contended that suicide—which was previously considered an individualistic act often by a sick individual—can actually be the result of social forces. “Egoistic” suicide occurs when an individual feels socially isolated. Today, that theory doesn't meet much resistance as we have come to acknowledge the power of belonging. A thread common to many school shootings is the feeling of social isolation by the perpetrators. They felt rejected by their peers. They felt bullied. They felt they didn't belong. They committed unimaginable atrocities to lash out at a group who didn't embrace them. To many, it is an act of vengeance against individuals or a system that excluded them. Suicide, depression, and school shootings are the dark side of belonging. There is a bright side, too. And this bright side is really the point of this article: We can make school a place where students feel like they belong. Kagan's team-based approach is not the only way, but it is a powerful way indeed. With Kagan we form student teams. We do teambuilding in teams to get acquainted and form social bonds. We use structures that have shared goals or require students to work together to succeed. As students collaborate in structured teamwork, they feel like they are on the same side. They no longer feel a sense of isolation. They feel they have teammates on their side, rooting for their success. In the Kagan classroom, we emphasise the social skills embedded in structures, and students practise their social skills daily as they interact with classmates over the curriculum.

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In the Kagan classroom, we combat the insidious effects of isolation and competition with cooperative and caring teams. And it works! Survey after survey, we see students prefer working in teams. We hear they prefer working side-by-side with teammates instead of facing the back of the head of a classmate they might not even know. Without close and positive interactions, students see each other as stereotypes instead of individuals. When they work together on a well-structured project, they break down those walls. They get beyond labels and looks



and get to know others for who they are. Research on cooperative learning and cross-race relations corroborates this view. Like members of a sports team, skin color is no longer a determining factor for friendship choices. We're in this together. We are a team!

The need for attention and for belonging melts away when students belong to a team and have many opportunities every day to get the attention they so crave. That's probably a big reason why teachers and schools report reduced discipline problems when they implement Kagan. For more on this, see [Dr. Kagan's article on discipline](#) in this issue. Brain research teaches us that safety is hugely important to student learning. If students perceive threat, their brains are on high alert and can't really focus on learning. Instead of worrying about stranger danger in a threatening context, students' brains relax in an environment where they feel safe. This may help explain why achievement goes up in the Kagan classroom. Not only does engagement go up, so too does the feeling of safety with teammates on your side.

In the classroom it is the teacher who ultimately makes the choice of how much students feel included or excluded. When we choose not to make concerted efforts to make our classrooms more inclusive, we have still made a choice. It is a choice to default to traditional individualistic and competitive learning that results in many students feeling disconnected.

No, we are not actually changing Kagan's motto to, ***It's All About Belonging!*** But given the powerful positive effects of belonging and the negative consequences of when students don't feel they belong, it should be the credo of every concerned educator.