

# Social-belonging activity

## Background information

Action Tutoring and the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) are trialling a promising method for improving pupil engagement in tutoring sessions.

The approach that will be tested is a **social-belonging activity**; a short warm-up activity to be completed in pupils' third or fourth tutoring session, which aims to help improve pupils' sense of belonging.

## What's in this guide?

<a href="#">What is the Activity?</a> .....	2
<a href="#">The research behind the belonging activity</a> .....	3
<a href="#">Support and frequently asked questions</a> .....	4

## What is the activity?

This **social-belonging activity** is designed to help pupils feel like they belong and can thrive in the Action Tutoring programme.

It is a short, one-off 15 minute activity to replace the usual warm-up activity in session three or session four with Year 10 and 11 pupils.

Pupils will:

1. **Read three messages** from previous Action Tutoring pupils,
2. **Reflect on their own experiences and feelings of tutoring so far,** and,
3. **Write a short message to help future Action Tutoring pupils** who might be worried about starting the programme.

## Why does it matter?

Evidence shows that feelings of non-belonging are common in education settings, especially around 'transitions', like starting a new school or tutor group.

Starting tutoring can be nerve-racking and when things feel difficult, pupils who feel like they don't belong may assume it's a sign they don't belong and can't succeed, rather than a normal challenge that everyone goes through.

**Reading messages from past pupils who have experienced and overcome similar challenges, helps pupils see that these feelings are normal, they lessen over time, and that they can succeed too.**

**Writing advice to future pupils helps them to internalise this message and makes it more likely that they will engage in positive behaviours that can help them thrive in tutoring.**

Research has shown that these types of short activities can reduce belonging uncertainty and improve academic attainment, especially for disadvantaged pupils.

## The research behind the belonging activity

Pupils' sense of belonging is their perception of their relationship with a community they're part of, like their school. It's more than just having good relationships with their peers, it's about **feeling accepted, included, respected, and able to contribute.**<sup>1</sup>

Belonging uncertainty is when an individual is unsure if they fully belong, or will ever fully belong in an environment. **When people experience belonging uncertainty, they interpret everyday adversity as a consequence of their lack of belonging, rather than a common challenge to be overcome.**

There is a breadth of evidence that shows that **feelings of not belonging can cause and exacerbate inequalities in education** by negatively impacting affected pupils' attainment, enrolment and persistence.<sup>2</sup>

Disadvantaged and negatively stereotyped pupils are more likely to be impacted by feelings of non-belonging than their peers. When facing everyday challenges, particularly during periods of transition (like starting a tutoring programme), these pupils are more likely to reach the conclusion that they do not belong.<sup>3</sup>

**Social-belonging activities have been shown to increase pupils' sense of belonging** in academic settings by offering pupils an alternative way of understanding adversities and how they can be overcome.<sup>4</sup>

This protects pupils' sense of belonging, helping them recognise adversities as normal and faced by all pupils, rather than a result of their own lack of belonging in the setting. **This understanding helps pupils continue to engage in positive academic practices (i.e. regular attendance, building positive relationships with their peers, teachers, and tutors, and seeking support when needed).** Previous interventions have helped significantly increase disadvantaged groups' participation and attainment in education.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Walton, G. M., & Brady, S. T. (2021). The social-belonging intervention. In G. M. Walton & A. J. Crum (Eds.), *Handbook of wise interventions: How social-psychological insights can help solve real-world problems* (pp. 36–62). The Guilford Press.

<sup>2</sup> Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613–629 <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.52.6.613>; see also Walton, G. M., & Spencer, S. J. (2009). Latent Ability: Grades and Test Scores Systematically Underestimate the Intellectual Ability of Negatively Stereotyped Students. *Psychological Science*, 20(9), 1132–1139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02417.x>

<sup>3</sup> Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(1), 82–96 <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.82>; see also Walton, G. M., & Brady, S. T. (2021). The social-belonging intervention.

<sup>4</sup> Walton, G. M., & Brady, S. T. (2021). The social-belonging intervention.

<sup>5</sup> Walton, G. M., et al. (2023). Where and with whom does a brief social-belonging intervention promote progress in college?. *Science*, 380(6644), 499–505. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade4420>

## Support and frequently asked questions

If you can't find an answer below then please get in touch with us: [callum.omahony@bi.team](mailto:callum.omahony@bi.team).

### A pupils' message has raised a safeguarding concern, what should I do?

You should follow the safeguarding procedures set out in Action Tutoring's safeguarding policies: [actiontutoring.org.uk/for-schools/safeguarding/](https://actiontutoring.org.uk/for-schools/safeguarding/)

### What if we run out of time to complete the activity?

It is really important that pupils **read/listen to the messages from previous pupils** and **write their own message to future pupils**. Remind pupils that their messages don't need to be long or perfect - they should just try to be honest and kind!

### Can I change the introduction script to suit my pupils?

Yes - just make sure you **keep the key idea: that they're helping others by sharing their honest experience**.

### What should I say to a pupil who asks who will read their message and why they will read them?

Reassure them that their message won't be shared with teachers or classmates, and it will only be shared with another pupil in the future with their explicit permission.

### How much should I help pupils with the reading or writing sections?

Support pupils as you would in any other part of the sessions. You can explain words, read aloud, or help them get started with their message if they're stuck. Your Programme Coordinator will share a worksheet with you before the session, which will guide you with pointers on how to support pupils.

### **What if some pupils are absent from the session - should I repeat the activity in a later session?**

No—the activity has been specifically designed for session three or four. So please only deliver it to pupils who are present in the week you are instructed to complete the activity by your Programme Coordinator.

### **What if pupils find the messages from past pupils unrelatable or unhelpful?**

They might not connect with everything - you could ask them to look for just one part that feels familiar to them.

Remind them that this is their chance to write the kind of message they'd find helpful if they were starting tutoring for the first time - one that might really help a future pupil who feels the same way they do now.