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BELONGING MATTERS

BELONGING MATTERS: BUILDING SCHOOLS WHERE EVERY CHILD THRIVES

A summary of the findings of a pilot programme from the National Children's Bureau

October 2025



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FOREWORD FROM ANNA FEUCHTWANG – CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU

As Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau, I am immensely proud to introduce this report on Belonging Matters. At NCB, we have always championed children's rights and wellbeing, and this programme shows what can be achieved when belonging is placed at the heart of school life. Too many children, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, experience school as a place where they feel overlooked or excluded. We know that when children feel they truly belong - when they are accepted, respected, and supported - they thrive. They learn with confidence, build lasting relationships, and grow into their potential. That is why belonging is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

Belonging Matters was developed by NCB, working with our specialist membership groups the Anti-Bullying Alliance and the Council for Disabled Children, and generously supported by the Kusuma Trust. In just one school year, it has transformed the culture of 10 London schools – from primaries and secondaries to special and alternative provision settings. The results are striking: more pupils now feel safe, connected, and proud to be part of their school; families report stronger trust and engagement; staff feel empowered with the skills and confidence to create truly inclusive environments. And crucially, pupils with SEND, those at greatest risk of exclusion, have shown some of the biggest gains.

This programme has demonstrated something powerful: when we focus on belonging, schools do not just improve wellbeing - they unlock achievement, resilience, and joy across the whole community.

Belonging Matters has set out a vision of what's possible. Our challenge now is to build on this success, so that every school can become a place where every child feels they belong, and every child can thrive.

Anna Feuchtwang

Chief Executive, National Children's Bureau

"Children come through the gates smiling every day."

– school staff from a Belonging Matters school



KEY FINDINGS

This report shares the findings from the pilot of **Belonging Matters**, a new whole-school programme developed by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to strengthen pupils' sense of belonging. The pilot was independently evaluated by researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London, and generously funded by the Kusuma Trust.

The results are very encouraging, especially given the short timeframe. Belonging Matters is already showing clear impact, and the progress speaks for itself.

In just one academic year, 10 diverse London schools, including primary, secondary, special and alternative provision settings, transformed how children, families, and staff experience school life. The programme showed that when schools put belonging at their core, change happens fast:



Pupils feel more connected and valued: The proportion who said they truly belonged at school rose from 65% to 71%. More children reported being happy to be part of their school community, respected by teachers, and supported by peers.



Safety and trust increased: Pupils feeling unsafe dropped from 27% to 19%, and more now have a trusted adult to turn to when they need help.



SEND inclusion improved: Pupils with SEND, who started from a more negative baseline, saw some of the biggest gains, reporting greater acceptance, support, and inclusion in activities.



Parents and carers noticed the difference: Families spoke of stronger trust, closer relationships with schools, and more opportunities to engage in school life.



Staff grew in confidence and skills: Over 400 staff received training, with nearly 100% saying they now feel equipped to create inclusive environments where every child can thrive.



Whole-school culture shifted: Practical, low-cost strategies, from breakfast clubs and peer mentoring to buddy systems and visible leadership, transformed the daily experience of children, families, and staff.



Impact was felt everywhere: Attendance improved, behaviour issues reduced, staff morale lifted, and more pupils took pride in their school identity.



As one teacher reflected: "Every day I notice thoughtful things staff do to help pupils develop a sense of belonging." Another said "Everyone takes responsibility in ensuring that we welcome everyone."



Belonging Matters has proven that when schools focus on belonging, they don't just improve wellbeing, they unlock the potential of the entire school community. And all of this was achieved in just one school year, imagine the impact if every school put belonging at the heart of their community.

WHAT IS BELONGING MATTERS AND WHO TOOK PART?

Belonging Matters was an evidence-based programme led by NCB, delivered in partnership with its specialist membership groups - the Anti-Bullying Alliance and the Council for Disabled Children. It aimed to strengthen pupils' sense of belonging, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Belonging Matters promotes inclusive school environments by strengthening teacher-student relationships, encouraging positive peer interactions, fostering parental engagement, and supporting school policies that actively promote belonging.

The programme was piloted in 10 London schools between June 2024 and July 2025. The schools included mainstream primary and secondary schools, a special school, and an alternative provision setting.

Every school taking part in Belonging Matters received a tailored programme from NCB:

- A customised, data-informed whole-school audit and action plan
- An online Pupil Belonging Questionnaire and questionnaire for parents and staff
- Access to a community of practice to share learning and resources
- A year of expert support from NCB
- Training for senior leads and all staff on the Belonging Matters framework and tailored implementation guidance
- Access to school-wide data to support improvement planning and demonstrate impact

WHAT DATA WAS USED?

The full report analysed data from the programme to ascertain its success. This data included:



Pupil feedback:

Over 1,200 children and young people completed a Belonging Matters Pupil Questionnaire at the start, and around 850 at the end. The questionnaire asked about how much pupils felt included, supported, respected and connected at school. Results were compared by gender, by SEND status, and by school type (primary, secondary, sixth form).



Parent and carer feedback:

435 parents/carers responded at the start and 366 at the end. They answered questions about their child's sense of belonging, support at school, and how much they themselves felt part of the school community. Parents could also add comments.



Teacher and staff feedback:

Nearly 250 staff completed surveys at the start and 182 at the end. These looked at staff-pupil relationships and sense of belonging in schools. Over 150 staff also gave written comments.



School leaders:

Senior leadership teams completed the Belonging Matters 360 Audit Tool at the beginning and end. This helped schools reflect on their policies and practice in four areas:

1. Creating an inclusive culture
2. Whole-school data, policies and training
3. Fostering positive relationships
4. School activities

Each school used the tool to set its own action plan, with a strong focus on supporting vulnerable pupils, including those with SEND.



Case studies:

Nine schools wrote up case studies of their belonging work. These outlined their school context, the aims of their project, the actions they took, the impact, and lessons learned for other schools.

WHY DOES BELONGING MATTER IN SCHOOLS?

Research shows that belonging in school is vital for children's wellbeing, academic success, and overall development. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are among those most at risk of feeling they don't belong in school, as they often encounter significant barriers to inclusion and participation in school life. When pupils feel accepted, respected, and included, they are more likely to engage in learning, build positive relationships, and thrive both emotionally and socially. Research shows that a strong sense of belonging is linked to higher attendance, better mental health, and reduced bullying. To foster belonging, schools can focus on nurturing positive relationships between staff and pupils, promoting inclusive practices, involving families and communities, and creating safe, supportive environments where all children feel seen and valued.

What is our definition of school belonging?

Belonging Matters has adopted the following definition of belonging:

"School belonging is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment."

Allen et al, 2018 Belonging Matters

[1] - Goodenow C, Grady KE: The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends' Values to Academic Motivation Among Urban Adolescent Students. *J Exp Educ.* 1993; 62(1): 60-71. Publisher Full Text

For more on the evidence behind what supports belonging in schools, read our full literature review here: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/belongingmatters/literaturereview>.



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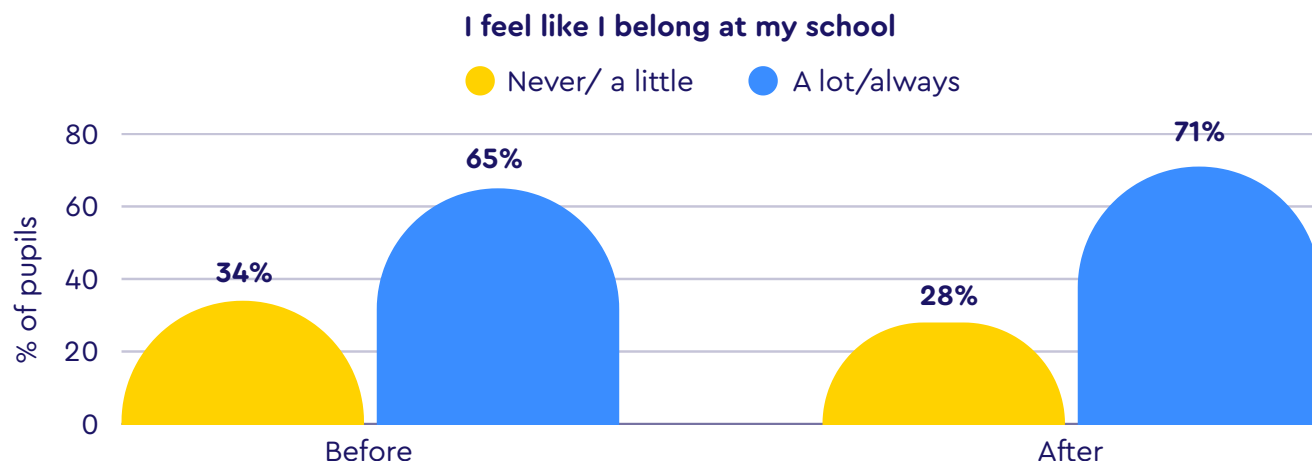
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PUPIL SURVEY DATA

Below you can read a summary of the results of the pupil surveys across all schools involved for each question. You can read the full results including the parent and school staff survey results in the full document but for the purpose of this report we will focus on pupil data.

“I feel like I belong at my school”

Positive change: Fewer pupils felt they didn't belong at school (dropping from 34% to 28%). More pupils now feel they belong most or all of the time, rising from 65% to 71%.

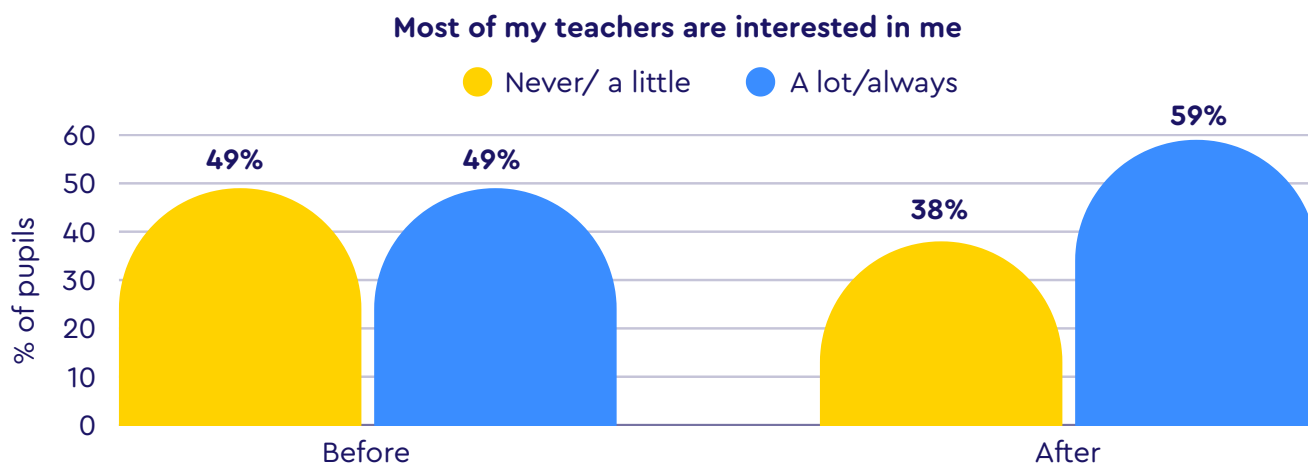


By group: Boys and girls both improved, though boys reported feeling slightly more positive overall. Pupils with SEND started from a more negative place, but improved too (negative responses down from 43% to 41%; positive up from 50% to 57%).

Why this matters*: When pupils feel they belong, they are more likely to be happy, enjoy learning, build friendships, achieve better results, and develop the confidence they need for the future.

“Most of my teachers are interested in me”

Positive change: Fewer pupils felt their teachers weren't interested in them (dropping from 49% to 38%). Positive responses rose from 49% to 59%.

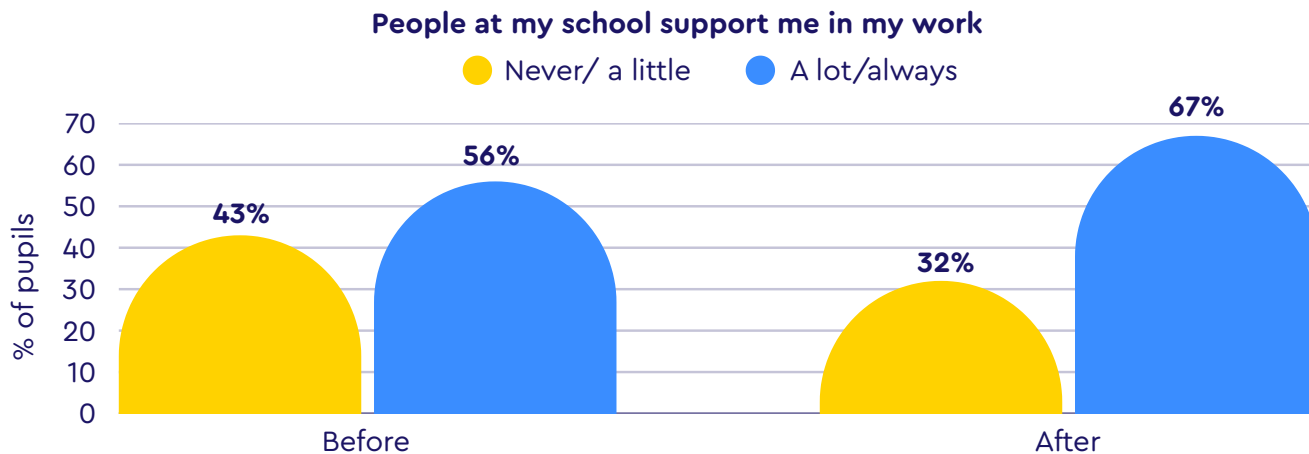


By group: Boys were more negative than girls, but both improved. Pupils with SEND also saw positive change (negative down from 46% to 39%, positive up from 50% to 59%).

Why this matters*: When pupils feel teachers genuinely care, they have higher self-esteem, more motivation, and a stronger sense of belonging, boosting wellbeing and academic success.

“People at my school support me in my work”

Positive change: More pupils felt supported in their work (negative responses dropped from 43% to 32%; positive rose from 56% to 67%).

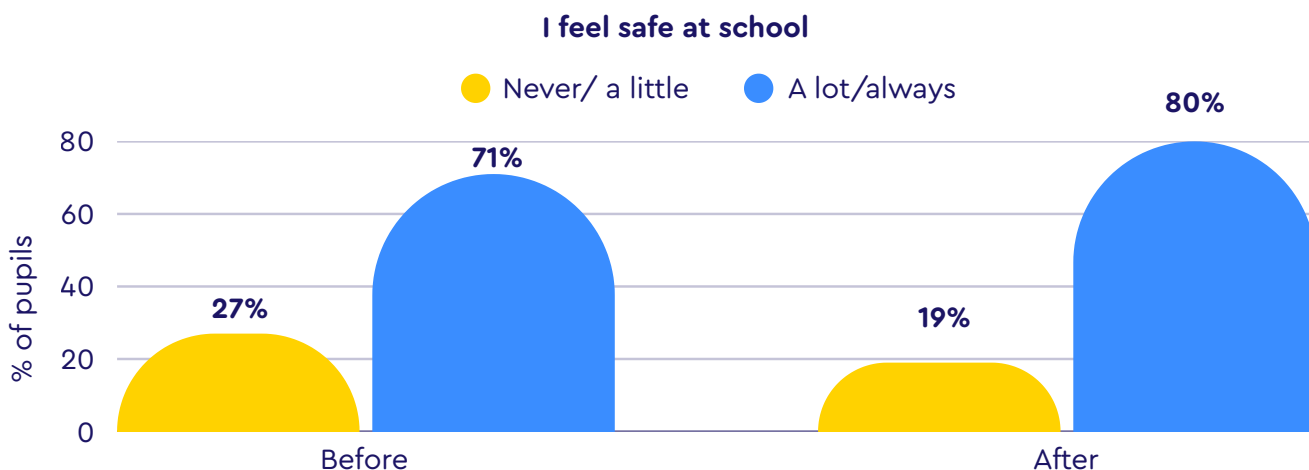


By group: Pupils with SEND showed a strong improvement (negative down from 41% to 31%).

Why this matters*: Feeling supported by teachers, friends, or staff helps pupils feel safe, connected, and confident, enabling them to enjoy learning and achieve more.

“I feel safe at school”

Strong positive change: The number of pupils who felt unsafe fell from 27% to 19%. Positive responses increased from 71% to 80%.

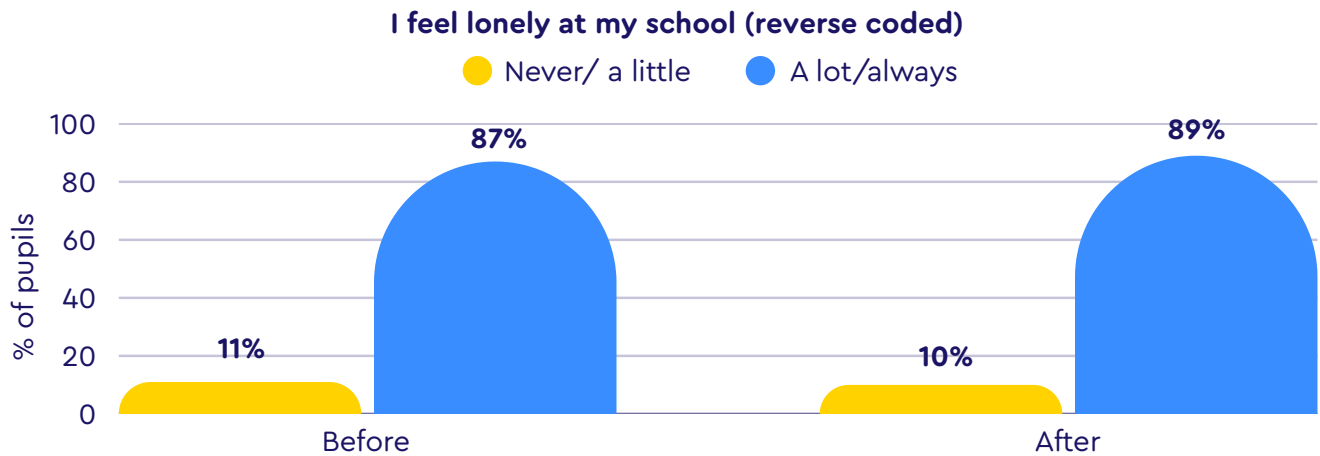


By group: Both boys and girls felt safer, though boys slightly less so. Pupils with SEND were more likely to feel unsafe but improved too (negative down from 34% to 28%, positive up from 63% to 69%).

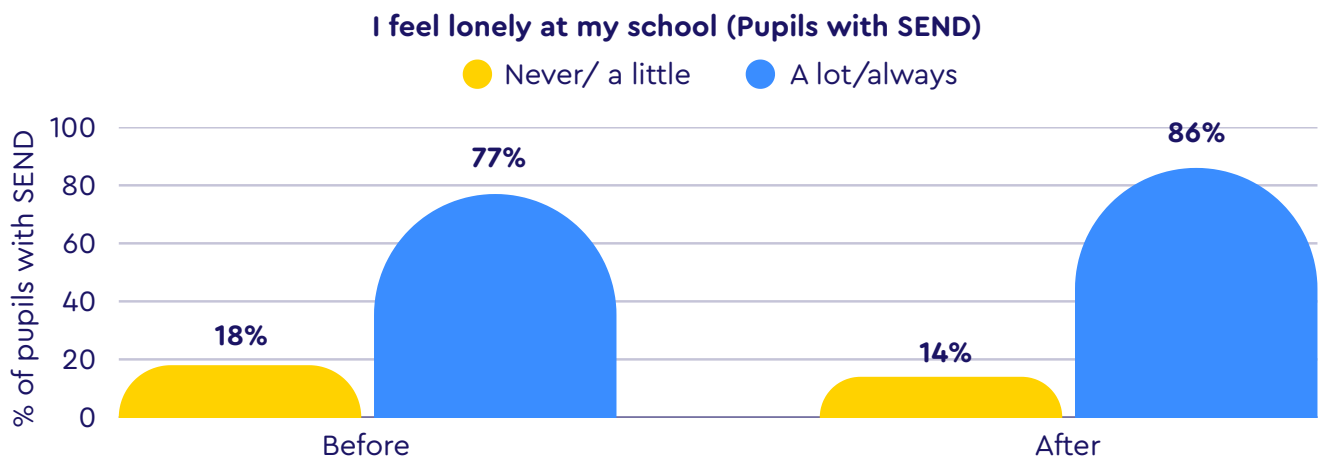
Why this matters*: Pupils who feel safe can focus on learning, build positive relationships, and join in school life with confidence. Feeling unsafe is linked to anxiety, absenteeism, and lower achievement.

“I feel lonely at my school” (reverse coded)

Positive change: Slightly fewer pupils reported feeling lonely most or all of the time (down from 11% to 10%). The majority (89%) now say they rarely or never feel lonely.



By group: Pupils with SEND saw notable improvement (those feeling lonely most or all of the time dropped from 18% to 14%; positive responses rose from 77% to 86%). Secondary pupils were more likely to feel lonely than primary or sixth form pupils.

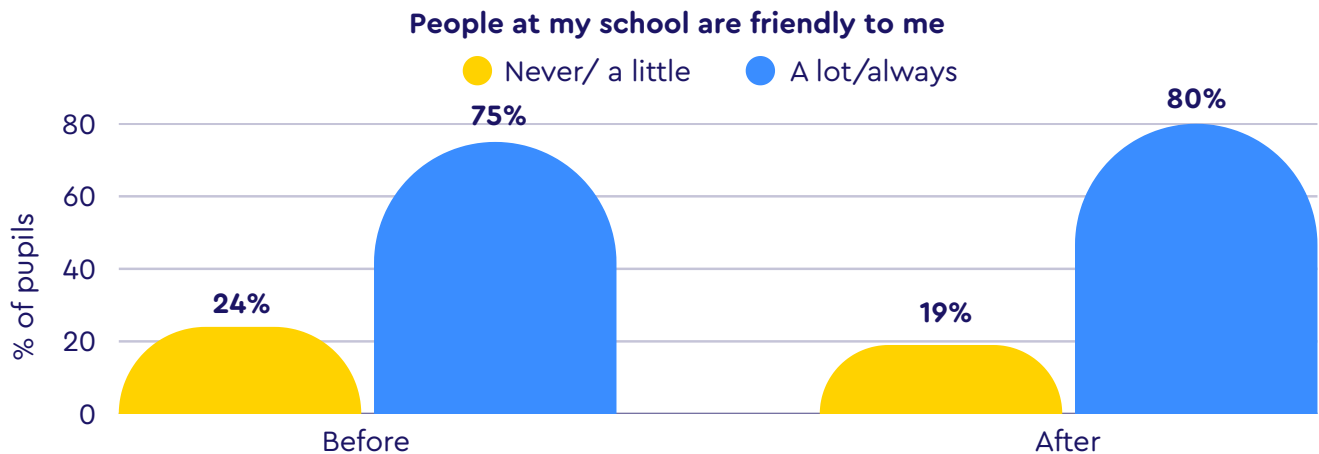


Why this matters*: Reducing loneliness supports good mental health, friendships, and engagement in learning. Loneliness is linked to depression, poor wellbeing, and lower achievement.

* For references see our [Belonging Matters Literature Review](#).

“People at my school are friendly to me”

Positive change: Fewer pupils felt people at school were unfriendly (dropping from 24% to 19%). Positive responses rose from 75% to 80%.

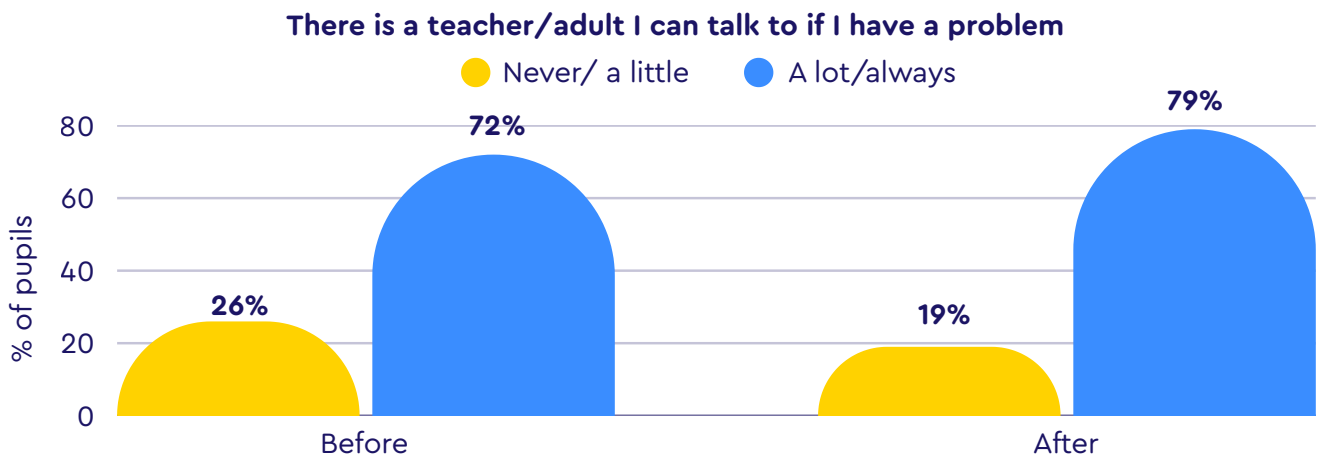


By group: Both boys and girls improved, though girls were slightly more negative. Pupils with SEND also improved (positive from 69% to 73%).

Why this matters*: When pupils feel others are friendly, they feel included and respected, which strengthens belonging, wellbeing, and positive engagement in learning.

“There is a teacher/adult I can talk to if I have a problem”

Positive change: Fewer pupils said they had no one to talk to (negative dropped from 26% to 19%). More pupils now say they have someone to turn to (positive up from 72% to 79%).



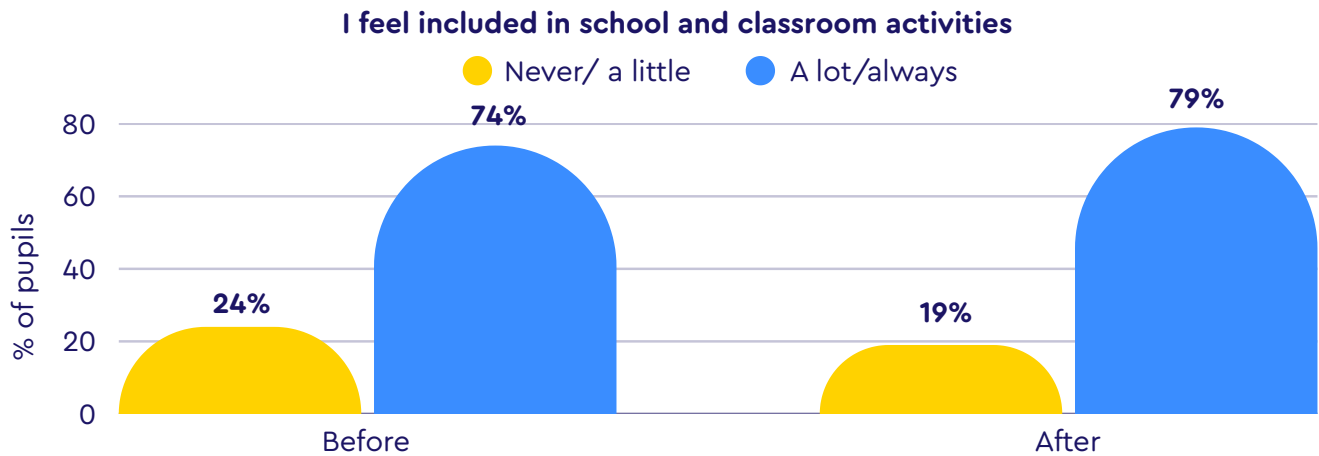
By group: Pupils with SEND saw smaller improvements compared to others.

Why this matters*: Having a trusted adult to talk to builds emotional safety and resilience, helping pupils manage challenges and feel supported.

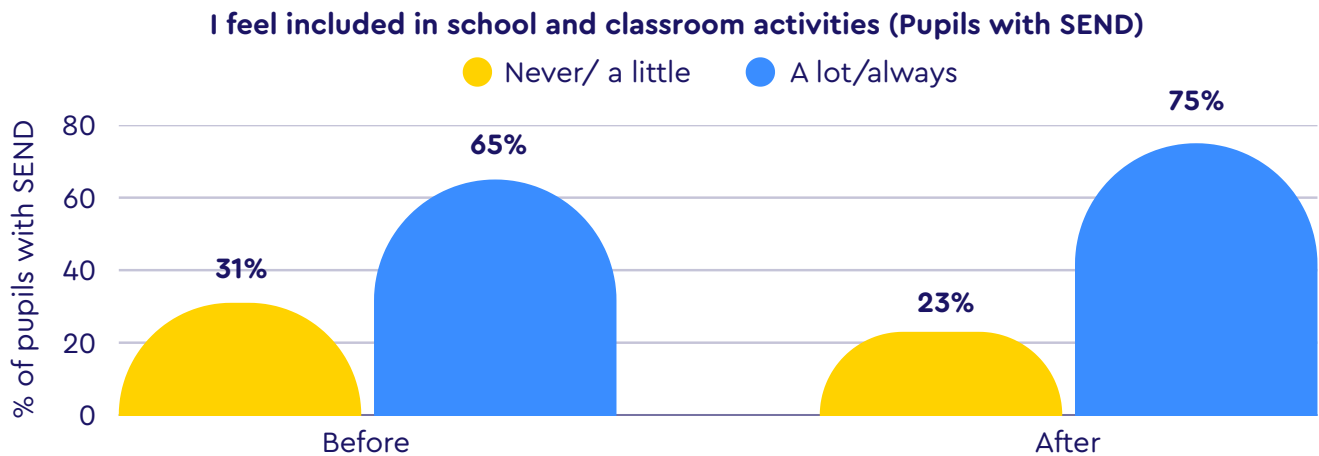
* For references see our [Belonging Matters Literature Review](#).

"I feel included in school and classroom activities"

Positive change: Fewer pupils felt excluded (negative dropped from 24% to 19%). Positive responses rose from 74% to 79%.



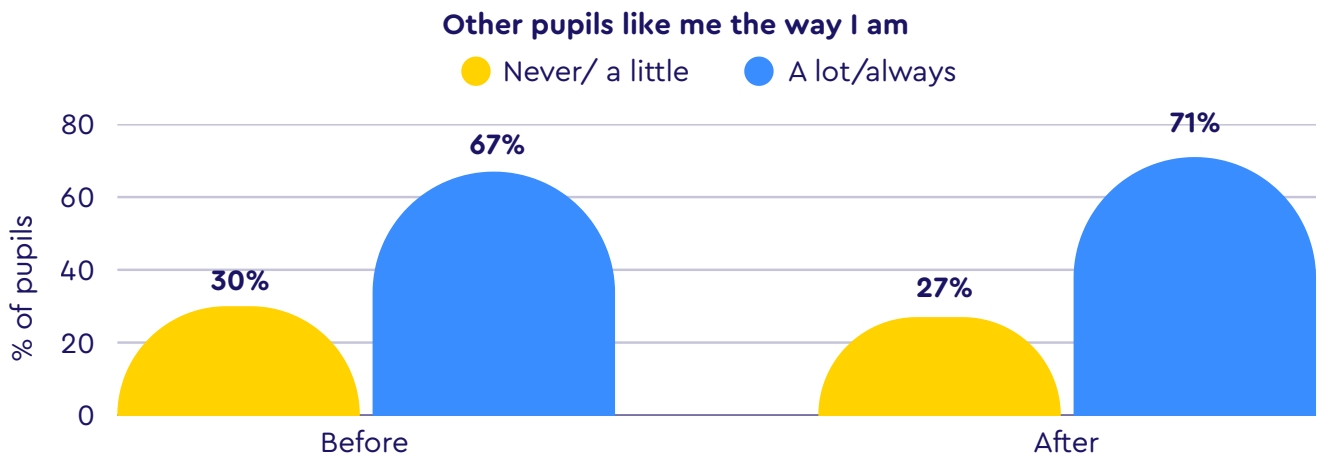
By group: Both boys and girls improved, though girls were more negative overall. Pupils with SEND improved significantly (negative down from 31% to 23%, positive up from 65% to 75%).



Why this matters*: Inclusion helps pupils take part fully in school life, enjoy learning, and build strong peer relationships. Exclusion is linked to disengagement and poorer wellbeing.

"Other pupils like me the way I am"

Positive change: Negative responses dropped from 30% to 27%. Positive responses rose from 67% to 71%.

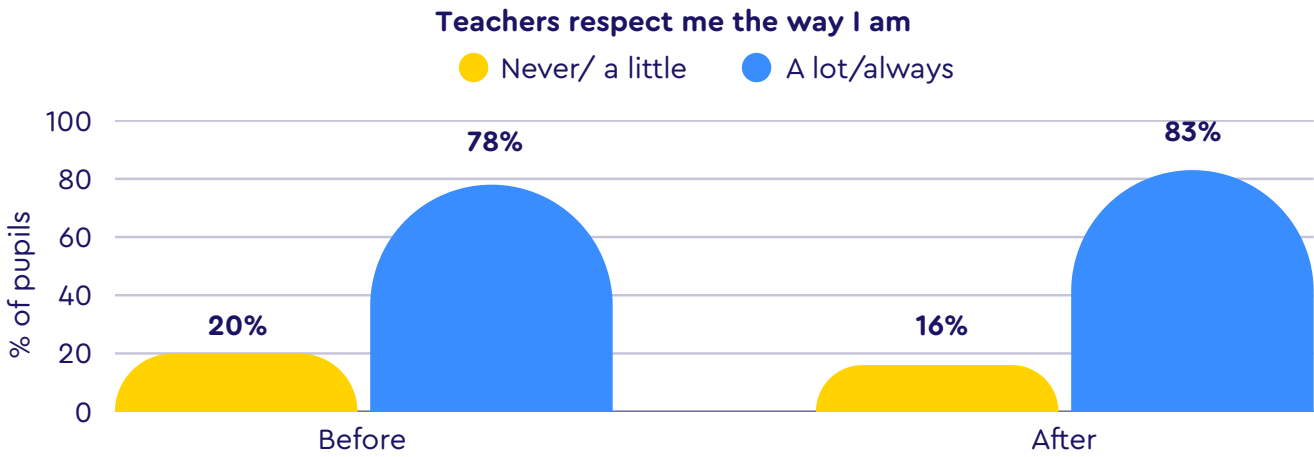


By group: Pupils with SEND saw the biggest improvement (negative down from 47% to 33%, positive up from 50% to 65%).

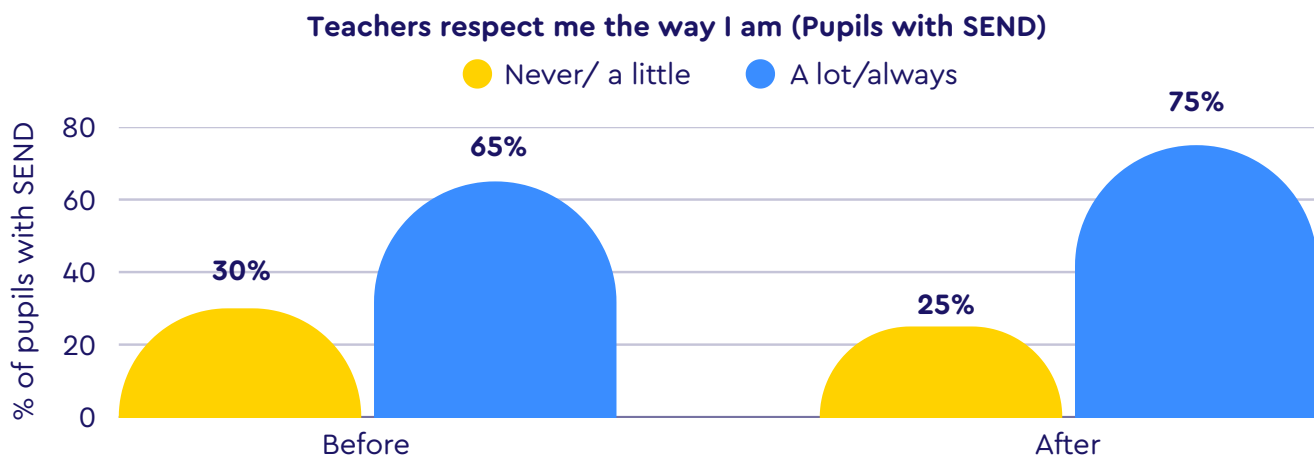
Why this matters*: When pupils feel accepted for who they are, their self-esteem, belonging, and wellbeing improve, which supports friendships, engagement, and learning outcomes.

“Teachers respect me the way I am”

Positive change: Fewer pupils felt disrespected (negative dropped from 20% to 16%). Positive responses rose from 78% to 83%.



By group: Pupils with SEND improved despite starting lower (negative down from 30% to 25%, positive up from 65% to 75%).



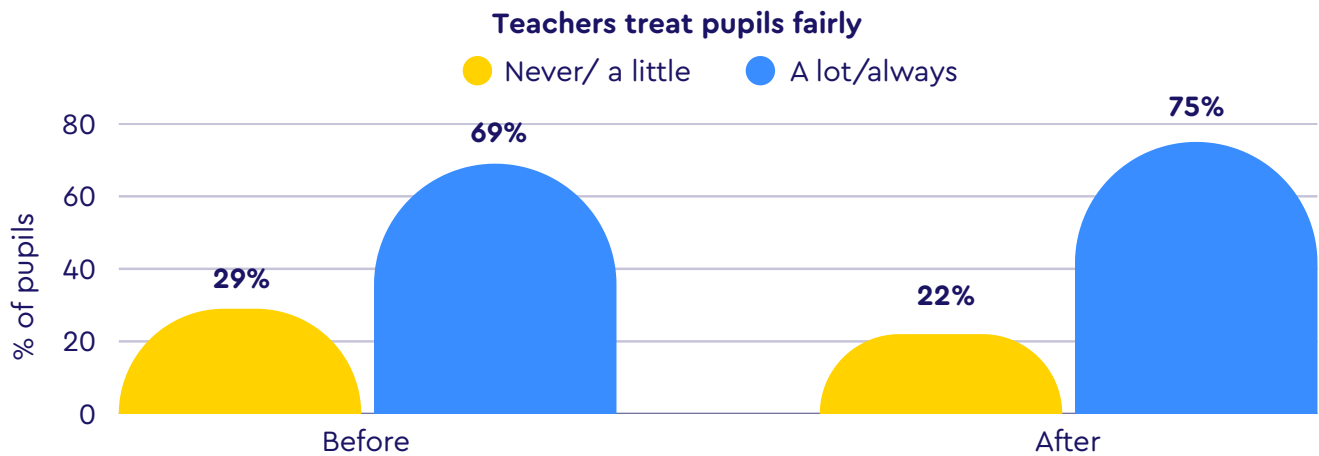
Why this matters*: Respect from teachers builds trust and positive relationships, leading to higher motivation, wellbeing, and achievement, while reducing disengagement.

* For references see our [Belonging Matters Literature Review](#).



“Teachers treat pupils fairly”

Positive change: Fewer pupils felt treated unfairly (negative dropped from 29% to 22%). Positive responses rose from 69% to 75%.

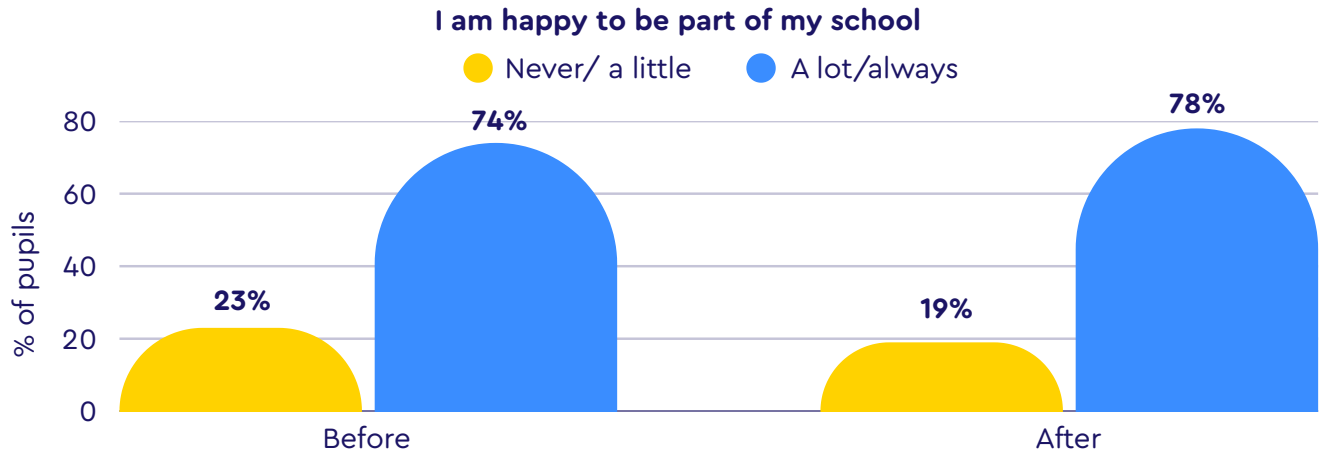


By group: Pupils with SEND improved, though less than others.

Why this matters*: When pupils are treated fairly, they feel valued and included. This builds trust, improves behaviour, and boosts motivation and achievement.

“I am happy to be part of my school”

Positive change: Negative responses fell from 23% to 19%. Positive responses rose from 74% to 78%.



By group: Pupils with SEND improved more modestly, but the number who said they were never happy at school dropped significantly (from 13% to 6%).

Why this matters*: Feeling happy to be part of school builds pride and belonging, strengthens wellbeing, and supports positive relationships and engagement in learning.

* For references see our [Belonging Matters Literature Review](#).

FEEDBACK FROM BELONGING MATTERS TRAINING SESSIONS

As part of the programme, 19 training sessions on belonging have been delivered - 4 in person and 15 online. 408 members of staff across 10 schools have been trained, including 27 senior leaders. The results from this training have proven very promising:



88.3%

of senior leaders trained said the training had a **significant or transformative** impact on their understanding of how to promote **emotional and physical safety for pupils**



Nearly 80%

of all staff trained said they feel extremely or very **equipped to identify and support pupils at risk of being excluded or isolated**



97.2%

of staff said they feel very or somewhat **confident to foster an inclusive and welcoming environment**



100%

of senior leaders said they are extremely or very likely to use the **daily strategies shared to foster belonging**



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360° AUDIT TOOL WHOLE-SCHOOL PRACTICE

What the audit was and how it was used?

- The BM 360 audit is a simple self-check for schools on belonging, with a focus on pupils with SEND.
- Schools rated items in four areas as fully met, partially met, or not yet met.
- They gave brief evidence of how they knew and picked actions for their plan.
- 11 schools began. 10 completed the final audit.
- You can see the full audit tool in the [research report](#).

How much schools improved

- Improvement was seen across all four areas.
- The biggest gains were in [creating an inclusive school culture](#).
- The smallest gains were in [fostering positive relationships](#).



"Identify priorities and give us a focus."

– School feedback on audit tool



Where schools are strongest at programme end

- [Safety and monitoring](#) at key times and places: all schools fully met this by the programme end.
- [High expectations for every pupil](#) with smart adjustments: all schools fully met this by the end.
- [Transitions](#) are much better planned, especially for pupils with SEND.
- [Use of surveys and data](#) is more routine, with visible 'you said we did' responses.

Where schools still need to work

- [Pupil leadership and peer programmes](#) are uneven and need widening and training.
- [Extracurricular access](#) still has barriers such as cost, confidence, and sensory needs.
- [Policies and training](#) need deeper day to day embedding.
- [Parental engagement](#) is improving but remains patchy in some schools.
- [Curriculum representation](#) is good overall but a few schools plan further work at the next review.



"In a motivating way it helped us to build and see the things we were already doing and an opportunity to be more reflective in what belonging means in our school community."

– School feedback on audit tool



END OF PROGRAMME SCHOOL STAFF LEADS SURVEY

While these results were not included in the Goldsmiths report, due to delays in securing feedback, we've received incredibly positive feedback from schools in their end of programme survey. 10 schools took part in the end of programme survey.

Audit and Action Plan

- **100%** found it useful (60% agree, 40% strongly agree)
- Schools feedback that it helped them prioritise inclusion, identify gaps, and plan interventions

"It allowed us to really unpick the gaps in our school's sense of belonging and go through what we could do to build it going forward."

"It allowed us to clearly see which areas were within our shortcomings and allowed us to plan our strategic interventions accordingly."

Action Learning Set reflection sessions

- **100%** found them useful (80% agree, 20% strongly agree)
- School feedback that they provided ideas, strategies, and accountability

"Allowed us to have a message across staff and a shared vision."

"A chance to discuss our data and start thinking about the best way to approach our priorities."

Staff training (also see page 14)

- Staff reported greater awareness, confidence, and commitment to creating inclusive environments.

"We all have belonging at the forefront of our minds when considering all children."

"The training helped our staff to create a more inclusive and supportive environment in our school."

"We now more consciously look at ways to make the school experience more welcoming for the school community as a whole."

Use of the pupil questionnaire:



"It pinpoint the different concerns around the school for different groups of people. It also highlighted where we need to make some changes."



Belonging Matters Hub

- 70% accessed resources
- Of those, 100% found them useful (86% agree, 14% strongly agree)



"We really enjoyed the programme, it changed our focus and is something we will continue to implement as we move forward."



Pupils with SEND

- 90% agreed that pupils with SEND feel a greater sense of belonging (70% agree, 20% strongly agree)
- Schools responses reported:
 - More participation in after-school clubs
 - Focused interventions beyond academics
 - Parents more involved and listened to



"Children are able to access a much wider, richer enrichment curriculum and parents of children with SEND feel much more involved."

"Being able to access a range of after school clubs - nearly all of our SEN children now take part in at least 1 after school activity."



"More involvement in clubs and better relationships with staff. Feeling listened to."



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Impact across whole school communities

- Individual school responses showed:
 - Improved pupil behaviour, engagement and attendance
 - Stronger parental engagement, with more families attending school events
 - Consistent use of belonging-focused language
 - Greater student voice and opportunities for staff reflection
 - Improved staff morale

“Improvement in behaviour of students who would’ve been at risk of expulsion. Fewer behaviour and uniform issues.”

“Use of vocabulary around belonging. Identification of things that affect inclusion belonging and also impact exclusion.”

“Better engagement with lessons and attendance to lessons. Staff morale improved.”

“Increased student voice. Better understanding of belonging - really thought about it how different people in school feel and tried to reduce inequality.”

Overall programme impact

- **100%** of schools would recommend Belonging Matters
- **50%** rated it Excellent | **50%** Good

“The programme was a fantastic opportunity for us to be reflective... it has enabled us to focus on celebrating our special school community.”

“It really makes you think about each group in school, pupils and staff, to see what they really feel and what you can do to improve it.”



INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL PRACTICE

Every school that took part in the programme was unique in terms of type, demographic, and practice. Yet across the board we were impressed with the creative and thoughtful approaches schools took to embedding belonging within their whole-school culture.

As part of the final audit, schools submitted case studies evidencing the impact of their work. These demonstrated that fostering belonging does not require large budgets but can be achieved through practical, cost-effective initiatives that fit into busy school schedules. Importantly, schools showed that even small changes can have a big impact on the whole community, sparking reflection and meaningful discussion among pupils, staff, parents and carers.

For pupils, the initiatives created opportunities to connect with their school and feel pride in their identity – whether through extracurricular clubs, peer mentoring, or leadership roles. One school reflected: "It's more than just a place they go to learn – the teams and clubs help them feel part of a community." Parents and carers reported increased trust, engagement, and communication with schools, with one commenting: "Families feel welcomed into school and have reported increased trust due to the positive relationships developed with leaders and teachers." For staff, involvement in shaping what belonging should look like placed it firmly at the heart of school life. Staff training and regular curriculum reviews were also seen as crucial for ensuring a consistent, inclusive approach.

The range of projects developed by schools was wide-ranging, innovative, and inclusive



Free after-school and breakfast clubs that boosted attendance and inclusion – one school's SEND breakfast club attracted 118 pupils and reduced absenteeism.



Peer mentoring, Friendship Ambassador programmes, and young carers' groups that built confidence, leadership skills, and pride in identity. One pupil explained: "Focus groups are instrumental in supporting connectedness between groups. [They] encourage pride in identity."



Wellbeing and resilience programmes that supported lifelong skills such as confidence, self-esteem, and emotional regulation.



Family engagement activities – from coffee mornings and workshops to cultural celebrations – that strengthened partnerships between home and school. Parents highlighted the difference these made, with one saying: "School [redacted] is the only school in the area that genuinely upholds its core values, creating an environment where children feel safe, valued and well supported."



Welcoming environments, including buddy systems, visible leadership presence, and SEND hubs, which helped all children feel included and supported.



Schools particularly emphasised that belonging should not be treated as an “add-on” but must be embedded in policy, everyday practice, and staff attitudes. As one school put it: “Be brave. If change is necessary, then do it. A sense of belonging is needed by all – don’t miss anyone out.” Reported impacts were significant. Pupils showed increased confidence, wellbeing, and participation, alongside improved attendance and reduced exclusions in some contexts. Parents and carers felt more connected to schools through greater trust and communication. Staff developed stronger relationships with pupils and families and a deeper understanding of what belonging means in practice.

The shared learning from schools highlights key messages: small, low-cost changes can transform culture; belonging requires engaging all stakeholders; regular reflection ensures initiatives remain meaningful and sustainable; and targeted support for vulnerable groups is essential. Above all, belonging is not a one-off project – it is a long-term commitment to building inclusive, connected school communities.



BELONGING IS NOT AN OPTIONAL EXTRA

Belonging is not an optional extra. It is the foundation of a thriving school.

This pilot has shown that even small, cost-effective changes can ripple across a school – boosting confidence, improving behaviour, raising attendance, and making pupils, families, and staff proud to be part of their community. Schools told us again and again: belonging isn't something to "add on" – it has to sit at the heart of everything we do.

Looking ahead, the challenge is clear: we must help every school to embed belonging so no child feels invisible or left behind. That means:



Making belonging part of everyday practice:

from classroom activities to playground culture, every pupil must feel seen, respected, and included.



Investing in staff training and leadership:

teachers and leaders need the tools, confidence, and support to make belonging central to their school's vision.



Removing barriers to participation:

whether financial, social, or cultural, no child should be prevented from joining in clubs, activities, or leadership roles.



Strengthening family and community partnerships:

when parents and carers feel they belong too, schools become stronger, more trusted places for children.



Prioritising vulnerable pupils:

especially those with SEND or facing disadvantage, who stand to gain the most from targeted support.

Belonging Matters has shown what's possible. Now, together, we can ensure that every child, in every school, walks through the gates each morning knowing: "I am safe here, I am valued here, I belong here."

TAKE PART!

We are now exploring ways to build on this success and expand Belonging Matters so that more schools can benefit from the programme. If your school would like to be part of the next stage, we'd love to hear from you.

Please express your interest by completing this short form!



ABOUT THE NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU

For 60 years, the National Children's Bureau has worked to champion the rights of children and young people in the UK. We interrogate policy and uncover evidence to shape future legislation and develop more effective ways of supporting children and families. As a leading children's charity, we take the voices of children to the heart of Government, bringing people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We are united for a better childhood.

We bring people and organisations together under the umbrella of the NCB family to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood across the UK. Our membership groups draw partners together to drive change in key areas where we need to make childhood better. *Belonging Matters* is run by the following NCB family members:

- **Anti-Bullying Alliance:** The Anti-Bullying Alliance is a unique coalition of organisations and individuals working together to stop bullying and create safer environments in which children and young people can live, grow, play and learn. - anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/
- **Council for Disabled Children:** The Council for Disabled Children, as part of the NCB family, operates a number of different networks, programmes and special interest groups that focus on specific aspects of the SEND sector. - www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/our-ncb-family/council-disabled-children



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