



School Connectedness for Students with Disabilities: From Theory to Evidence-Based Practice

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The difficulties experienced by students with disabilities, especially those who display challenging behaviour in the school environment, have been well documented (Furlong et al., 2004; Gresham & Kern, 2004; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Kern, 2015; Lane et al., 2006). Such students often have problems creating and maintaining relationships with their teachers and peers and developing educational commitment. They are often the recipients of strict disciplinary action due to harsh school discipline policies (Evans & Lester, 2012; Gresham, 2002; Lane et al., 2006; Rivkin, 2009). While the importance of relationships and behaviour has been much discussed in the literature, very little research addresses their use as part of a comprehensive programme of intervention.

Although school connectedness is often seen as synonymous with school attachment, school bonding, school climate and school engagement, each of these are unique features, identifying the principal components of school connectedness. This presentation will provide a holistic view of school connectedness, grounded in a theoretical framework rooted in attachment theory, social control theory and social development theory.

Over several decades, a wide body of research has demonstrated that school connectedness is an important factor in reducing the likelihood that students will engage in behaviours that may compromise their well-being and health (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Additionally, researchers have linked school connectedness to an increase in student academic success (Blum & Libbey, 2004). This is imperative to students with disabilities, many of whom have difficulties in both of these areas.

Much intervention research in the area of school connectedness involves programmes designed to foster positive relationships of students who struggle in educational environments with teachers as well as their peers (Anderson-Butcher, 2010; Shippen et al., 2012). These interventions include the development of programmes that: (a) seek to promote family involvement, (b) aim to utilise culturally responsive pedagogy, (c) work to integrate community leaders from underrepresented groups into school life, and (d) focus on bullying prevention (Anderson-Butcher, 2010; O'Brennan et al., 2014; Toshalis, 2015). This presentation will provide an overview each of these different types of interventions, the research that supports their use, and their effective implementation.