The Steve Fund

How Families Can Help Their Student with Belonging

The following guidance is an adaptation of tips for bolstering our sense of belonging developed by Angela Theisen, a Wisconsin-based therapist. The list below spells out several elements of what it takes to build a sense of belonging. These five pointers can help parents and families support students from communities of color transitioning to college and promote their thriving on campus.

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Put forth an effort:

Convey to your student that the most important element of achieving a sense of belonging is to put in the work and try. The rationale is that belonging requires that we reach out and connect with others, even if it initially feels uncomfortable. Utilizing positive self-talk and affirmations can facilitate taking this first step. It is also useful to employ techniques like behavioral activation, in which we use our actions to drive our emotional state and opposite action to override our anxiety to do the things we typically avoid. Encourage your young person by reminding them that practicing engaging with others will ultimately lead

to greater comfort and ease in connecting.

Be conscious of the needs of others:

Instead of focusing solely on ourselves, think more about the other person or the group you want to join. Find ways of initiating conversation, a critical skill in enhancing your feeling of belonging. Posing questions, sharing things about ourselves, stimulating discussion, and listening to answers and comments from others are all components of balanced communication that can lead to a sense of belonging.

Maintain an open mind:

It is important to embrace opportunities to try new things, become acquainted with new people, and contemplate new ways of thinking. Teach your child to seek out people with whom they share interests. Urge them to involve themselves in activities. This can open the door to connection and belonging.

About the Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is the nation's leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people. We work with colleges and universities, nonprofits, researchers, mental health experts, families, and young people to promote programs and strategies that build understanding and assistance for the mental and emotional health of young people of color

Accept others:

Be aware that people have different worldviews and that we do not need to change ourselves to conform to the ways of being of others. Because of the tense political climate and many students and their families are facing war at home, we understand this can be a very difficult thing to do. You don't need to agree with others' stances or opinions, but try to see them as people first. There is diversity in our society and on campus, yet we all have similarities which can increase the likelihood of bonding. When we discover that people are different from us, one strategy is to identify mutual goals and focus on that commonality.

Praise action:

Since achieving a sense of belonging is challenging for us as adults, it is not surprising that pursuing this goal would be challenging for our children who are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. This is why it is imperative that we encourage our children the same way we encourage ourselves. Recognize and validate their efforts and remind them that even though the journey to belonging may occasionally be difficult, it is necessary to stay the course, keep on keeping on, and maintain optimism that they will reach
their goals.

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