

# School Connectedness: Acceptance, respect and support



## Background

School connectedness is the extent to which a student feels accepted, valued, and supported in their school environment. It is an important protective factor for current and future mental wellbeing and positive adolescent development.



## Aim

### Focus 1

Survey the experiences and perspectives of school connectedness in students on the spectrum, their parents and teachers in urban, rural and remote schools in Australia so as to identify the individual, school, community and system factors that contribute to or threaten school connectedness in this population.

### Focus 2

Develop and implement a multi-level School Connectedness Program in south-east Queensland schools to support an inclusive school culture and promote wellbeing at an individual student, family and school level.

### Focus 3

Support school connectedness in rural, remote and urban locations.



## Who took part?

### Focus 1

Students with an autism diagnosis aged 11-16 years, their parents, and educators with experience of teaching students on the spectrum within this age group. Data was collected from 106 participants (24 mothers, 27 students and 55 educators) from urban, rural and remote communities in the NT, WA and NSW.

### Focus 2

86 participants from six schools in Brisbane, Queensland (30 adolescents on the spectrum aged 11-14 years, 40 parents/caregivers and 16 teachers).

### Focus 3

11 Indigenous community workers who work directly with Indigenous populations in Bourke, NSW.

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### How we did the research

#### Focus 1

Semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or via telephone or videoconferencing.

#### Focus 2

A pilot study evaluated a School Connectedness Program, using elements of the Index for Inclusion and adaptations of the Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP)

- Adolescents attended 11-14 one-on-one weekly sessions of the RAP adapted for adolescents on the autism spectrum (RAP-A-ASD)
- 31 parents/caregivers of adolescent participants attended up to 4 workshop sessions of the Resourceful Adolescent Program for parents of adolescents on the spectrum (RAP-P-ASD)
- Teachers attended a 2-hour RAP for Teachers (RAP-T) workshop
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents who participated in RAP-A-ASD, and with parents who attended RAP-P-ASD
- Participants completed questionnaires about the adolescents' mental wellbeing before and after RAP-A-ASD was implemented, and 3, 6 and 12 months later
- A School Connectedness Committee was formed at each participating school, and identified and implemented a project to increase school connectedness.

#### Focus 3

A community-based participatory research (CBPR) project was conducted in remote Australia. Researchers developed the Resourceful Adolescent Parent and Caregiver Program (RAP-PC), delivered via a 3 day program in a strength-based workshop for Indigenous community workers, and gathered qualitative data from participants.

#### Autism Teen Wellbeing website

An online resource was developed to provide a range of strategies, resources and cultural considerations that communities, schools, teachers, and parents worldwide can use to increase school connectedness for diverse learners in early adolescence. See [autismteenwellbeing.com.au](http://autismteenwellbeing.com.au)



### What did we find?

#### Focus 1



An inclusive culture and community, a supportive peer group, family and staff involvement, and implementation of appropriate supports that address the autism-specific needs of students are important factors that contribute to school connectedness in this population.



Nine key themes were identified around factors at an individual, class, whole school, and school community level that influenced their experiences of school connectedness.

#### Focus 2

Young adolescents who participated in RAP-A-ASD showed an increase in school connectedness and improved mental wellbeing.

Parents reflecting on changes they had noticed in their young adolescents as a result of their participation in RAP-A-ASD, most frequently identified:



diminished stress in the family system which they attributed to reduced conflict



a greater sense of connectedness with their adolescent



improvements in their adolescents' emotion regulation



enhanced parent-adolescent communication.

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### What did we find?

Parents who participated in RAP-P-ASD reported that feeling isolated and unsupported by existing services motivated their participation, and that they valued interacting with other parent participants.

They reported that RAP-P-ASD:



diminished their sense of isolation



validated their parenting difficulties



boosted their self-efficacy



increased their empathy for their young adolescent



enhanced parent-adolescent communication and connectedness



increased their understanding of how to better assist their child to navigate the developmental phase of adolescence, and



boosted their own wellbeing.

Schools that implemented the Index for Inclusion reported that they had developed an understanding of school connectedness, and an increase in inclusive culture and practice in their schools as a result of the collaboration between school staff and students required for implementation.



### What did we find?

#### Focus 3

Indigenous community workers who attended the RAP-PC workshop consistently described:



a lack of awareness, services, and resources specific to Indigenous people on the spectrum



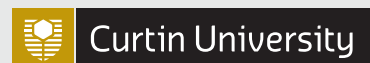
multiple challenges that parents and caregivers encounter when attempting to obtain a diagnosis and support for their child with autistic traits



a need for programs, workshops or resources to support Indigenous people on the spectrum and their parents/ caregivers.



### Who did the research?



### Find out more

Download the final report and executive summary on the Autism CRC website:

[autismcrc.com.au/reports/school-connected](https://autismcrc.com.au/reports/school-connected)

Visit Autism Teen Wellbeing at:

[autismteenwellbeing.com.au](https://autismteenwellbeing.com.au)

