

What if Belonging Is Only 50% of the Answer?

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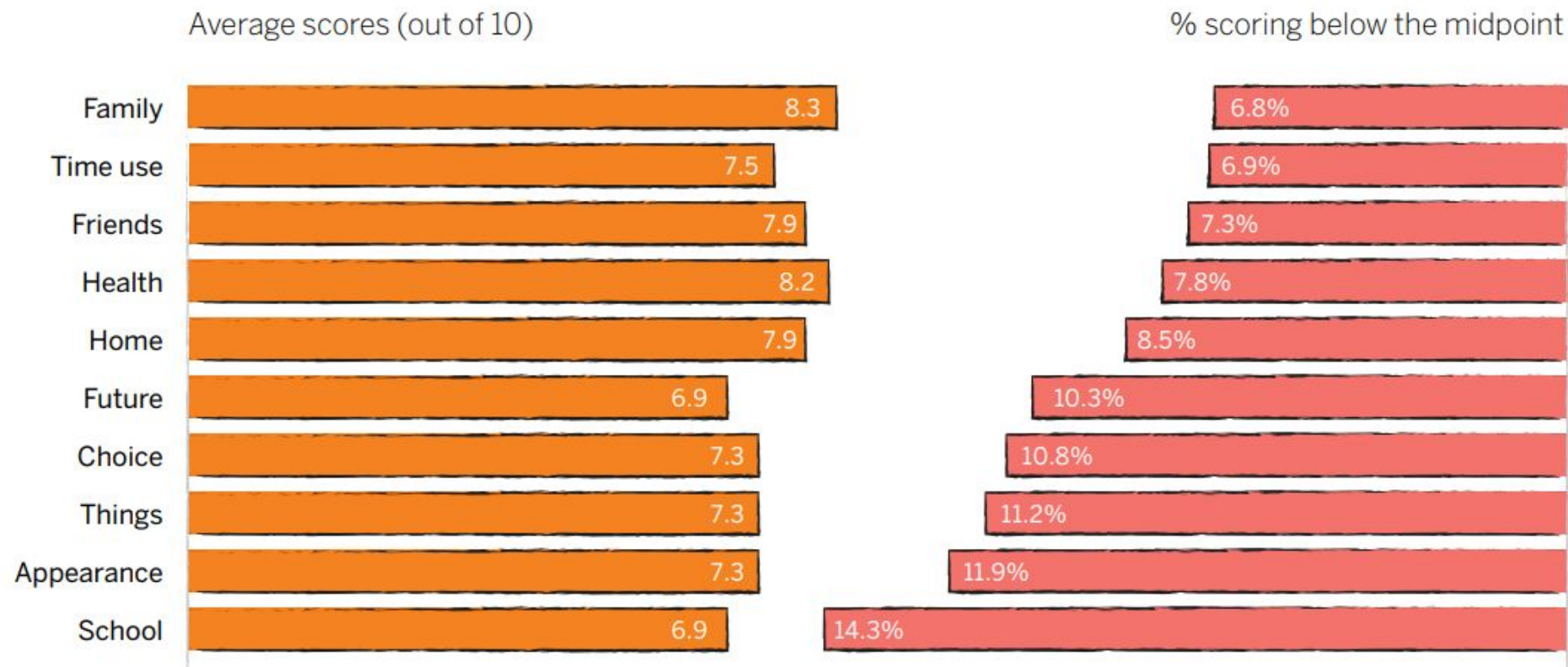
4.5 million
children living in poverty



1 million
living in destitution



Figure 1. Latest figures from the Good Childhood Index for children (aged 10 to 17).



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 23, April to June 2024, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data. Excludes missing responses (including 'prefer not to say').

The Belonging Paradox (DfE Pupil Experience, 2025)

- **69%** of pupils feel they "belong" (up from **57% in 2024**), but learning motivation has dropped to **70%**.
- Pupils feel **institutional belonging** but lack **individual significance**:
 - Only **57%** feel an adult "**really cares.**"
 - Only **61%** feel "**listened to.**"
- Demographic Disparities:
 - **SEND pupils, girls**, and those on **FSM** report significantly **lower belonging (60% avg.)** than their **peers (73%)**.



‘Technical’ success

- ***c. 90% schools OFSTED ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’***
- ***PIRLS = 4th (out of 43 countries; “best in the West”)***
- ***PISA = 11th in Maths (up from 17th in 2018)***
- **Rigorous curriculum**
- **Evidence based pedagogy**

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Seth Kaplan: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/securing_trust_in_people_and_place#



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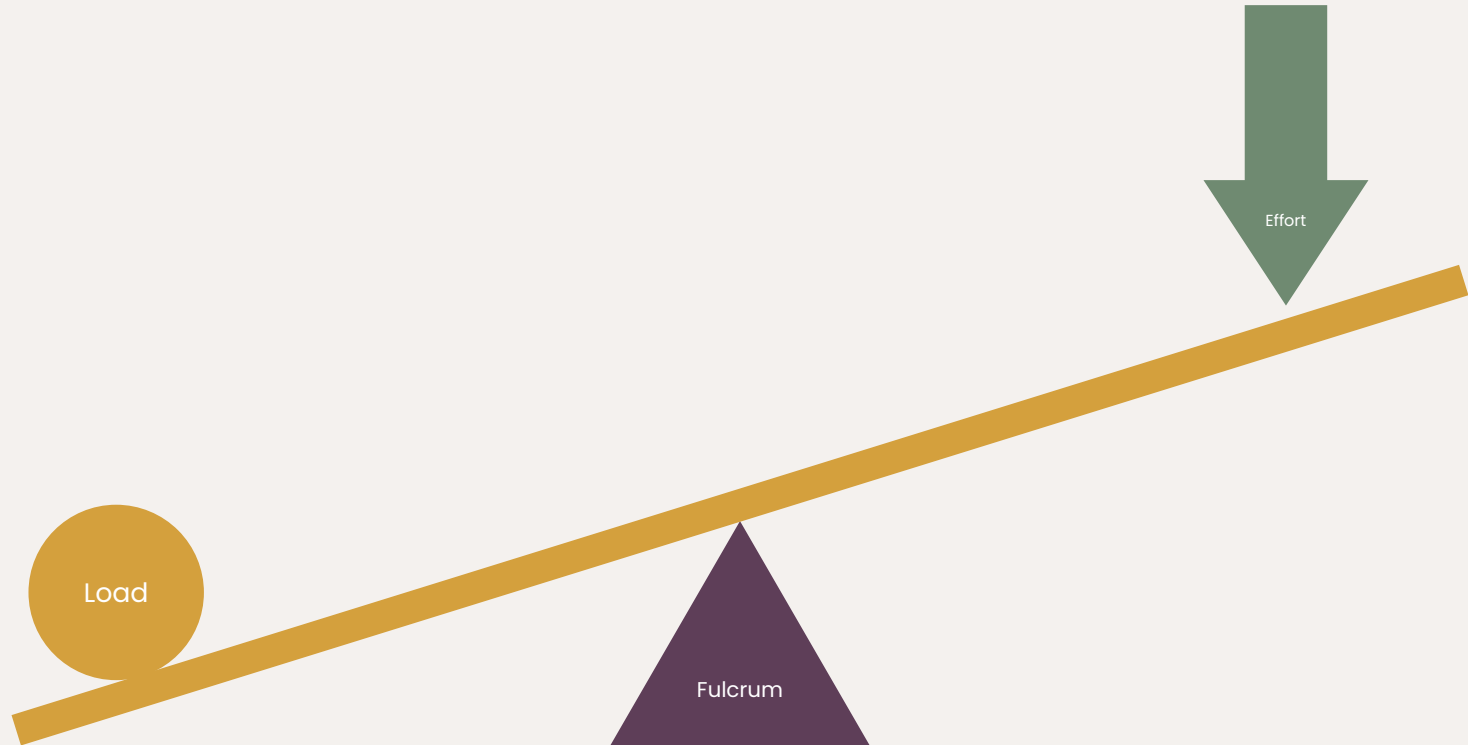
“...public institutions rarely consider the trust problem when they seek to address various social problems.

....Instead, they tend to view problems and solutions through a material or technical lens, and consequently suffer large blind spots regarding anything related to relationships.

....When they subsequently stumble, they tend to conclude that their failures originated with the group they targeted, rather than with their own approach.”



We need to pull some *additional* levers



The good news is that

We know exactly what every
baby, child and young person
needs to thrive:



To be safe and well-supported

+

To be healthy

+

To achieve well academically

+

To build strong, trusting relationships

+

If you had to choose just one focus for the entire year, what would it be?

- 1. Learning beliefs (Pedagogy)**
- 2. Subject knowledge**
- 3. Self-efficacy**
- 4. Professional development**
- 5. Reflective attitude (Coaching)**
- 6. Relationships**



**Relationships are critical
infrastructure. We must invest in
them.**



To say that human beings require warm relationships is no touchy-feely idea. It is hard fact. We need nutrition, we need exercise, we need purpose, and we need each other.

Professor Robert Waldinger, Harvard Study of Adult Development



Life expectancy

148 studies examining mortality rates across all age groups, genders and ethnicities show that strong connection increases the likelihood of surviving in any given year by more than 50% (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010)



Why Do Teachers Matter? (Lopez-Martín et al, 2023)

Learning beliefs	6%
Subject knowledge	11%
Self-efficacy	14%
Professional development	16%
Reflective attitude	26%
Empathetic relationships	38%



**Think about a moment in
your life when you felt
like you belong?**



***“You can’t declare belonging
by fiat.”***

– David Yeager

Or

***Belonging is something that people
feel, not what teachers do.***



Belonging

towards a definition

“The extent to which pupils feel **personally accepted**, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.”

- *National Children's Bureau (2024), School Belonging: a literature review.*



Belonging vs Mattering

*Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky,
2021*

Belonging

Fitting in

Being included

Being present

Often passive

Mattering

Being significant

Being noticed and missed

Being valued and relied
upon

Active and relational

Significance to others

The longest running study explicitly defines the feeling of being important and significant to others as a key component of psychological well-being. The Harvard studies emphasis on close relationships demonstrates that a strong sense of mattering is essential for a good life (Vaillant, G. E., 2012)



The Four Components of Mattering

Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981)

- **Attention** — Someone notices me.
- **Importance** — I'm not invisible. I'm significant.
- **Dependence** — Others rely on me. I contribute.
- **Missedness** — If I disappeared, someone would care.



Schlossberg (1989) introduced the concept of mattering. She defined mattering as the feeling of being noticed, needed, and important to others. Suggests that people need to feel they “count, belong, and matter” to avoid marginalisation.

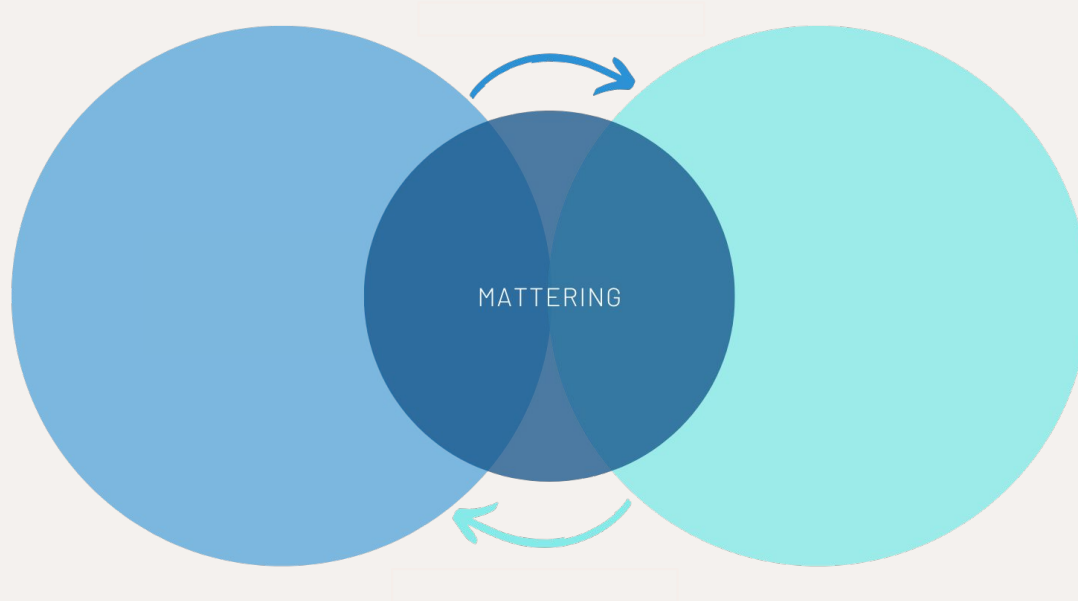


Common sense



Mattering = Belonging + Becoming

THE MATTERING MODEL



The Absence of Mattering

CONCEPT	WHAT A PERSON FEELS LIKE WHEN THIS IS ABSENT
BELONGING	Ostracised, isolated, cut off, segregated
BECOMING	Stymied, thwarted, stifled, stagnating
MATTERING	Insignificant, unimportant, belittled, humiliated, marginalised, worthless



The Absence of Mattering

Feeling **ignored/replaceable** is a stronger predictor of **harm** (Flett 2024):

- suicidal ideation
- self-harm
- aggression

DfE (2025) data shows students who feel they "**don't matter**" are **5 times more likely** to be **severely absent** than those who feel "**lonely**."



**There are young men literally dying to be
someone or something, anything but no-one
and nothing.**

(Lee Dema, Founder of St Matthew's youth project, Brixton, London)



"It is almost impossible for anything to matter to someone who doesn't first believe that they matter. Feeling valued is a precondition for personal health, but adding value is the prerequisite for a meaningful life."

Isaac Prilleltensky



Students with high "mattering scores" are 3x more likely to join extracurriculars and have higher intrinsic motivation.

Mattering can be the "social glue" that builds resilience, aiding recovery from setbacks by reinforcing that students matter to a teacher.

Gordon Flett (2024)



The Dominant Effect (adapted from Flett, 2025)

Traditional Education Assumption

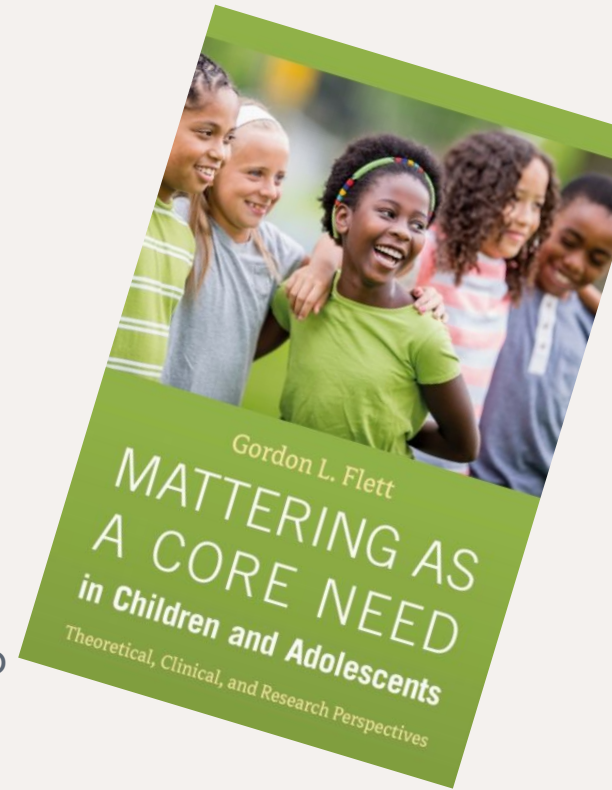


Flett's (2025) provocation



Mattering as Practice

- **Micro-Interactions:** Noticing behavioural changes (like absence or missed work) and mentioning it.
- **Giving Value:** Move from "compliance" to "contribution" by giving students meaningful roles
- **Deep Listening:** Provide moments for non-judgmental, "deep listening."
- **Autonomous Support:** Foster mattering by supporting student autonomy.
- **Explicit Value Statements:** Using clear language like "everybody counts" or "everyone matters in this class" to establish mattering as a shared classroom value.



How to create feelings of significance

- How can we embed the message in our school culture that every child's presence matters?
- What daily opportunities can we create for pupils to feel relied upon and contribute?
- If motivation links to personal significance, how must we change our strategy for disengaged pupils?
- What single, school-wide 'micro-interaction' policy can you champion to ensure every 'hidden' pupil feels noticed, important, or needed?



I have thought about...

So therefore, I will...

