



The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation was established in 2004 with the sole charitable purpose of improving the health and wellbeing of Australian children and young people. As such, the Foundation welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into school refusal.

Although the challenge of school refusal is not new, in the wake of natural disasters and the COVID-19 health crisis, supporting the wellbeing of children, their educators, families and communities has never been more important.

Enhancing a sense of belonging to support student attendance

Experts agree that a sense of belonging is a supportive condition for student attendance at school.

“While student disengagement is complex and varies from student to student, there is sufficient evidence now to support the view that relationships and school belonging are key factors”¹

Evidence suggests that providing hands-on, contextual learning opportunities, delivered through kitchen and garden settings, improves educational outcomes across diverse curriculum areas, while also supporting student retention, school enjoyment and parent engagement.

“School belonging is defined as feeling accepted, safe, and respected within the social, cultural, and physical surroundings of a school”²

An important predictor of mental health is social connectedness. An evaluation of the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program by the University of Melbourne³ found strong evidence of positive social outcomes for children, schools and communities involved in the Kitchen Garden Program.

Working in the kitchen and garden in groups creates opportunities for children to work with others beyond their usual friendship groups. This teaches children a valuable skill in teamwork and offers a means for widening social networks.

Further connections are built through an inclusive and immersive program which links in family and community engagement for social cohesion and community pride.

Not only did participation in the program lead to more positive attitudes towards school, it also led to an increase in children’s self-esteem, with some of the most significant outcomes seen in children at the lower end of the academic achievement scale who were considered at risk of long term disengagement from education.

Beyond the kitchen and garden sessions, newfound confidence was observed both at home and in the classroom, positively impacting children’s lives more broadly. Feeling more engaged and enthusiastic about school, a previously discouraged student demonstrated how the experience of success in the program was able to be transferred into a new growth mindset, saying ‘I’m really good at this and I can do other things as well.’

To quote the Victorian Department of Education's own learning materials for the delivery of Health and Physical Education:

“A sense of connectedness or belonging to school and to family is the single most important protective factor for young people. Several longitudinal studies have documented the way in which initiatives provided in the primary years can have a lasting effect, promoting resilience and school connectedness well into the high school years.”⁴

The Kitchen Garden Program has been described by parents and educators as an environment that facilitates the creation of a 'learning community'. Without the competitive structure of academic or sporting activities, the program creates a level playing field allowing all children the opportunity to experience success.

Being outdoors enhances feelings of calm and positivity

“...it's really, really, relaxing and it helps take your mind off things and it de-stresses you. It's really good and helpful because school can be really stressful.”⁵

As well as fostering a sense of belonging, Kitchen Garden Programs increase access to the sensory and therapeutic benefits of green spaces for children, young people and their communities, improving health and wellbeing with more time spent being physically active outdoors.

“Sometimes it's the simple tasks that bring the most happiness and calm within the space.”⁶

The Kitchen Garden Program for impact

The Kitchen Garden Program is a holistic program with significant cross-portfolio impacts in the areas of education, environment and climate change, food systems and agriculture, and health and wellbeing.

Our evidence-based program supports children and communities to proactively strengthen community resilience, improve education outcomes, strengthen social and community inclusion and address health inequities.⁷

Over the past 20 years, the Program has impacted over a million children and young people. Our national community of practice supports educators in over a thousand schools to deliver the Program in all states and territories across Australia.

With Federal Government funding, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation would be in a position to amplify its impact, supporting more children, young people their families and communities to develop positive health, wellbeing, educational and sustainability habits for life.

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¹ Dr Lyn O'Grady quoted in <https://bit.ly/3n4WwQV>

² Allen, Kelly Ann 2020, *The Psychology of Belonging*, Routledge.

³ www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/sites/default/files/Files/UoM_SAKG_Eval_Report_Final%20AUG%202019.pdf

⁴ <http://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resource/LandingPage?ObjectId=d722b857-8d78-4afd-8519-2bc7801d5590>

⁵ www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/sites/default/files/Files/SYKGP_infographic_FINAL_20201021.pdf

⁶ <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/kitchen-garden-program-wellbeing>

⁷ <https://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au/content/impact-reach>