

Vulnerable students: The four domains of safety

Safety is a theme that I return to again and again in my work, whether it is about taking a trauma-informed approach, enabling children with SEN to thrive, or simply about creating an environment in which every child can flourish.

One of the most basic needs that must be met for every child is a feeling of safety, so in this article I will pick that apart and go beyond the built environment, exploring how we can enable a child to feel safe across four domains: physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively.

I most recently talked about these domains of safety during [a a SecEd webinar focused on responding to emotionally based school avoidance](#) and many of the colleagues tuning in have since asked me for a summary. Before I get started, you can still access the webinar online (see below for more information or click the hyperlink above).

Physical safety

When we think of health and safety, it is physical safety that usually springs to mind, and this is not a trivial issue. Children need to know that they are physically safe, that they are not going to face danger, and that the worry of physical safety sits with their trusted adults. We generally meet this need well and our risk assessments and health and safety policies and procedures ensure that our children are physically safe. However, when it comes to physical safety it is not just about a child's reality, it is also about a child's perception of their reality. They do not just need to be safe – they need to “feel” safe.

Clear communication and reassurance both with children and with their families can make all the difference here.

Remember, some children are not used to feeling safe so it can take time to build trust and for children to learn that they are genuinely safe within your setting. It is only once this basic need for physical safety is met that a child can begin to engage with and focus on other things such as learning or play.

Consider: How can you make sure that children feel safe?

Social safety

Children need to feel socially safe too. They need to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of others. While feeling socially safe is something many of us take for granted, this can be trickier if the rules of engagement change due to pandemic protections, starting in a new class or setting, or for those children who generally find it harder to make sense of social situations, such as those on the autistic spectrum.

A lack of social safety is the feeling we get when we enter a new environment and don't quite know how to act, you may have felt this when visiting a country with a very different culture than the one you are used to. This undercurrent of uncertainty can lead to anxiety and worry. There are several things that can help:

- Clear, concrete communication of what is expected.
- Consistency, predictability and clear boundaries.
- Social stories, scripts and role-playing.
- Communicating any changes clearly and in good time.
- Not just teaching a child what to do, but also helping them understand why.

Consider: Does every child have a concrete understanding of exactly what is expected of them and what they can expect of you in return?

Emotional safety

Children need to feel seen and heard. They need to know that it is normal and healthy to experience a range of different thoughts and feelings and that these thoughts and feelings do not need to control them and that if they need help with them, help will be given.

A child who feels emotionally safe will know that they can experience a whole range of different feelings without fear of punishment, ridicule or simply not feeling seen or heard. Sometimes this is about having safe adults with whom they can explore emotions and who will remain physically and emotionally present if a child is distressed. Sometimes it is about a child learning to manage their feelings and to emotionally regulate within your school/classroom without specific support every time.

Emotional literacy and learning a few simple self-soothing skills can help; it is also important that children know when and where to seek help if needed.

Consider: How can we ensure children feel genuinely seen and heard?

Cognitive safety

At a point in time where perfection seems to be the new norm, how can we create a learning environment where exploration is encouraged? Where children feel empowered to try new things and do not fear failure? Classrooms and playgrounds where children feel cognitively safe are spaces where children feel able to be bold and brave in their learning and to try new things.

This feeling of cognitive safety is something we are used to re-establishing after long holidays, but we also need to be mindful about re-establishing it for learning in new ways (e.g. remotely) or after periods of uncertainty or change.

To create cognitive safety there are several things you can do:

- Become a learning role model – talk about how you learn and help seek.
- Consider the behaviours you want to praise – e.g. help-seeking, research, effort.
- Explore these behaviours in low-stakes activities.
- Take the fear out of failure by celebrating and sharing mistakes.
- Actively encourage children to step outside their comfort zone.

For children for whom cognitive safety is a significant issue, such as some children experiencing school-based anxiety, take a step back and consider how to enable them to

experience learning about topics that may not be on your curriculum, but which really enthuse them.

For example, if a child has a special interest, passion or hobby, use this as a way in, encourage them to find their flow and remember that learning can be engaging and fun – this side-step towards the learning goals you have for them may build their confidence and help them develop the transferable skills they need to re-engage with the curriculum with fewer fears.

Consider: How can you become a learning role model to your students?

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This article was originally written for [SecEd Magazine](#). You can [read my past SecEd articles here](#).