komodo

What is Psychological Safety - And where do we start?

In every classroom, some students speak up, some stay quiet, and many are in between. Sometimes, silence can be mistaken for contentment - but sometimes, it is something else: fear of being wrong, fear of judgment, or simply feeling like their voice doesn't matter.

This is where psychological safety comes in.

Psychological safety is the sense that it's safe to take interpersonal risks - to speak up, to ask questions, to say "I don't understand," or to offer an idea. It's not about making things easy or removing challenges; it's about creating an environment where challenge, learning, and connection can happen without fear of embarrassment or exclusion (Edmondson & Lei, 2019).

When students feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage, collaborate, and take ownership of their learning. One of the most hopeful things about psychological safety is that this isn't just something we hope will happen; it is something we can actively build.

So where do we start? We have run our first survey, now what?

Here are the four key levels of psychological safety and some first steps (and practical interventions) you can take to begin making a difference in your school or classroom. These strategies can make a big difference, and we encourage you to stick to any initiatives you implement for at least a term - you can then run your survey again and use the new data to see if your strategies made a difference.

These four levels: Inclusion Safety, Learner Safety, Contributor Safety, and Challenger Safety, offer a useful framework for understanding and approaching psychological safety in educational settings.

While they provide a strong foundation, we encourage educators and school leaders to explore professional development opportunities that deepen their understanding of this model. Ongoing learning can help tailor interventions to your unique school context and ensure a whole-school approach that sustains psychological safety over time.



1 - Inclusion Safety: “I belong here”

This is the foundation. Inclusion safety is about creating an environment where every student feels accepted for who they are (Keane & McCoy, 2019). Inclusion is a right, not a privilege.

How to start:

- Celebrate cultural differences, personality traits, and unique strengths in your classroom.
- Hold “spotlight days” or themed weeks where students share their heritage, family traditions, or interests.
- Use collaborative goals - like working toward a class celebration - to foster a shared sense of purpose and connection.
- Embrace the concept: "What makes us different makes us unique!"
- Co-create classroom norms regarding behaviour and respect towards each other and teachers. Including student voice and involvement gives them ownership over their environment and increases engagement and participation.



2 - Learner Safety: “It’s safe to learn here”

Learning involves risk. Answering a question, making a mistake, asking for help - all of these can feel unsafe if we’re not careful with how we respond (Edmondson & Lei, 2019).

How to start:

- Model mistakes: Make errors on purpose, talk about them, and show how you learn from them.
- Facilitate class discussions about how mistakes help us grow, and foster growth mindset principles.
- Teach and model active listening so every student feels heard and validated.
- Normalise feedback as a learning tool, not a form of judgment.
- Recognise and encourage empathy, respect, and emotional validation
- Use reflective journaling or storytelling prompts to help students process their experiences with mistakes or emotional risk-taking.
- Train staff in psychological first aid, trauma-informed responses, or emotion coaching to better support students through moments of vulnerability (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020).

3 - Contributor Safety: “My ideas matter”

Once students feel included and safe to learn, they’re more likely to contribute. Contributor safety is about making sure that students feel empowered to share their thinking and know that their input is valued.

How to start:

- Create regular opportunities for students to share ideas in small groups or whole-class discussions.
- Provide platforms for feedback, such as the Komodo Psychological Safety survey
- Celebrate risk-taking and effort, not just achievement.
- Promote peer-led initiatives or buddy systems to support inclusion and participation.
- Highlight when students speak up with new ideas or thoughtful questions - even if they’re not the “right” answer.

4 - Challenger Safety: “I can question and improve things here”

Learning involves risk. Answering a question, making a mistake, asking for help - all of these can feel unsafe if we’re not careful with how we respond (Edmondson & Lei, 2019).

How to start:

- Frame problems and disagreements as opportunities for collaboration.
- Use conflict resolution as a learning moment, not a disruption.
- Help students practice respectful disagreement and understand that differing perspectives can coexist.
- Teach emotional regulation strategies that support them during moments of frustration, challenge, or stress.
- Ask curious, open-ended questions like: “How could we work together to solve this?” or “What would you do differently?”
- Provide structured time for reflection and classroom problem-solving discussions.

Going beyond the individual

It's important to recognise that these four levels build on each other. Without a foundation of Inclusion Safety, it's difficult for students to feel safe enough to take learning risks. Without Learner Safety, students are unlikely to feel confident contributing their ideas. And without Contributor Safety, challenging the status quo feels out of reach. Schools may find themselves moving back and forth along this spectrum over time—and that's completely normal. Change takes time, and the reality of school life is that progress isn't always linear. What matters most is a continued commitment to fostering psychological safety and a willingness to adapt, reflect, and persist.

Psychological safety isn't something we build only through one-on-one interactions. In fact, the greatest long-term impact comes from embedding these principles into whole-school practices and policies. When the entire school community - teachers, leaders, students, and support staff - speaks the same language and holds the same values, the ripple effects are felt by every learner (Collie, 2022).

Start small. Celebrate differences. Listen more. Model learning. Build systems. From there, safety grows, and so does your classroom community.

References

- Collie, R. J. (2022). Teacher social and emotional competence: Links with social support, job satisfaction, and wellbeing. Teachers and Teaching, 28(2), 191–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2021.1911117
- Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2019). Psychological safety: The history, renaissance, and future of an interpersonal construct. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 6, 23–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012218-015836
- Keane, L., & McCoy, S. (2019). School culture and student voice: The role of teachers in supporting student wellbeing. Irish Educational Studies, 38(2), 165–181. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2019.1597021
- Kiefer, S. M., Alley, K. M., & Ellerbrock, C. R. (2021). Teacher support and students' social-emotional development in middle school: A teacher-student fit perspective. The Journal of Early Adolescence, 41(1), 67–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431620922482
- Mahfouz, J., Greenberg, M. T., & Rodas, N. V. (2021). Teachers' perceptions of their students' social-emotional learning and mental health needs during COVID-19. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 733905. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.733905
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2020). Connecting the brain to the rest of the body: Early childhood development and lifelong health are deeply intertwined (Working Paper No. 15). Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. https://developingchild.harvard.edu