komodo

Learner safety guide: Strategies to support Psychological Safety in your school

Why learner safety matters

Learner safety is crucial in creating an environment where students feel comfortable engaging in learning, asking questions, and making mistakes without fear of embarrassment or punishment. This psychological safety theme is essential not only for academic achievement but also for emotional wellbeing.

When students feel safe to take risks in their learning, they are more likely to engage in deeper cognitive processing, show persistence, and develop a growth mindset.

Recent research demonstrates the importance of learner safety in educational settings. Edmondson (2019) found that learner safety is vital for fostering collaboration and innovation, which translates to improved student engagement, resilience, and motivation in classrooms.

Learner safety = increased engagement in the learning process.

On the flip side, a lack of learner safety can lead to disengagement, performance anxiety, and difficulty in handling academic challenges (Collie et al., 2020).

A key point in cultivating learner safety is acknowledging the importance of teacher-student relationships, which have been shown to significantly affect students' emotional and academic outcomes. Studies by Collie et al. (2020) show that positive teacher-student interactions promote emotional engagement, boosting motivation and persistence. Importantly, **learner safety can be intentionally built** through deliberate teaching practices and creating a supportive school culture.







Classroom strategies to promote learner safety

Normalise mistakes as part of learning

Why it helps:

Students often fear making mistakes, which can cause them to avoid challenging tasks. Normalising mistakes allows students to view errors as opportunities for growth rather than failures. Neuroscientific research indicates that the brain's dopaminergic system is activated when students correct mistakes, which enhances motivation and learning (Shin et al., 2017). This process improves neuroplasticity, facilitating deeper learning and the formation of new brain connections.

Mistakes also foster emotional resilience, which is critical for long-term success (Masten, 2018). Recognising mistakes as part of the learning process helps develop a growth mindset, which has been shown to improve students' persistence and achievement (Yeager et al., 2016).

What to try:

- Start the term/semester with a mantra: "Mistakes mean you're learning."
- Have signage and visual prompts of growth mindset language in your classroom
- Celebrate "best mistake of the week" moments.
- Model your own mistakes and demonstrate how you learn from them.

Process praise over outcome praise

Why it helps:

Praise focused on effort and strategy rather than results helps students develop resilience and intrinsic motivation. From a neurodevelopmental perspective, when students are praised for effort, it engages their prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for higher-level functions like decision-making and goal setting (Diamond, 2019). This kind of praise encourages self-regulation and strengthens executive functioning skills, crucial for problem-solving and impulse control.

Research by Mueller and Dweck (2017) suggests that students praised for effort are more likely to engage in adaptive learning behaviors and demonstrate increased persistence, as they rely on internal motivation rather than external validation.

What to try:

- Shift from "You're so smart" to "You worked hard on that strategy."
- Use specific feedback like, "I noticed you tried a new way to solve that problem."

Anticipate potential challenges before group work

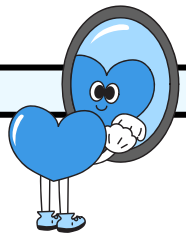
Why it helps:

Discussing potential challenges in advance helps activate cognitive flexibility, a critical skill for adapting to new information and problem-solving. Cognitive flexibility engages the frontal lobes, essential for higher-order thinking and reflection (Brocki & Bohlin, 2016). This approach also promotes self-efficacy - students' belief in their ability to succeed, which is foundational for resilience and motivation (Bandura, 2016).

By preparing students to address challenges together, they develop collaborative problem-solving skills and improve their peer relationships, both of which are vital for creating a positive, safe learning environment.

What to try:

- Before group work, ask students, "What are some barriers or speed bumps that may come up in this process? How can we address these together?"
- Use anonymous tools like the Komodo Psychological Safety Survey to collect input from all students



Check-in circles

Why it helps:

Regular check-ins or circle discussions help build relationships and trust within the classroom, reinforcing feelings of belonging - a key component of psychological safety. Empathy is enhanced by these activities, as they activate the mirror neuron system, which helps students understand each other's emotions (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2016). This social bonding promotes better academic engagement and emotional wellbeing.

Emotion regulation, a crucial skill for handling stress and maintaining cognitive function, can be developed through regular emotional check-ins (Gentzler et al., 2017). Additionally, emotional expression in a safe environment fosters social and emotional learning (SEL) skills, which have been shown to improve overall academic performance and mental health (Durlak et al., 2017). You can make use of the data and check in requests through Komodo student profiles to target students who may need this check-in more frequently.

What to try:

- Begin each week with a short circle question like, "What's one word to describe how you're feeling today?"
- Use tools like a feelings wheel or visual thermometer for younger students



The 3:1 rule

Why it helps:
The 3:1 Rule - providing 3 positive or affirming statements for every 1 critical or corrective statement - ensures that students feel valued and supported. Positive feedback reinforces self-esteem and engagement, both of which are critical for motivation (Dweck, 2006). This ratio fosters an environment where students feel psychologically safe to take academic risks without fear of excessive criticism.

Research shows that positive reinforcement leads to increased motivation and focus, while a predominance of negative feedback can lead to disengagement and anxiety (Schultz, 2015).

What to try:

- Aim for 3 positive comments (effort, progress, encouragement) for every 1 corrective comment you make.
- Ensure corrective feedback is paired with encouragement: “Let’s look at how we can improve this next time, I know you can do it!”

School-wide strategies to build learner safety



Growth culture visibility

Why it helps:
Promoting a growth mindset at the school level reinforces the idea that learning is a process, and setbacks are growth opportunities. Schools that visibly celebrate effort over achievement create a supportive environment that reduces performance anxiety and promotes neuroplasticity (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016).

What to try:

- Display quotes like “Progress, not perfection,” in hallways.
- Create a “Learning wall” in classrooms or shared spaces where students can post moments of effort, progress, or lessons learned from mistakes.
- Start the week with a “Growth mindset moment” during school-wide announcements - this could include a quote, a short story from a teacher, or a student highlight.
- Encourage staff to model vulnerability by openly reflecting on something they are learning, struggling with, or improving on.
- Celebrate effort publicly - through certificates, displays, or shout-outs that reward persistence, curiosity, collaboration, and risk-taking

Responsive feedback loops

Why it helps:

When students' feedback is actively solicited, heard, and acted upon, they feel a greater sense of agency and control, which enhances their emotional engagement and academic performance (Reeve, 2015). This process strengthens teacher-student relationships, which research has shown to directly influence academic success and resilience (Collie et al., 2015).

What to try:

- Explain why the school is gathering regular wellbeing data through Komodo. Explain (from a cohort level) some of the trends you see in the data and the actions the school is taking in response to this. This shows the students you value their information and that data is being collected and used for their benefit.
- Publicly share actions the school will take based on student surveys (cohort analytics, comment feeds or psychological safety results).

By aligning these strategies with the overarching theme of learner safety, schools can foster environments where students feel secure enough to engage in learning, take academic risks, and ultimately thrive. This comprehensive approach ensures that psychological safety is integrated into the classroom and school culture, empowering students to grow both emotionally and academically. While this document offers a strong starting point, we encourage you to make use of your internal expertise, external networks, and access to professional development to continue building your school's capability and confidence in this space.

References

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