

# The Resource Room – March 2024

## Creating Safety in the Classroom

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### **Creating Safety in the Classroom**

Many of the current issues in special education center around the concept of safety in school. As educators in classrooms today, we are striving to keep ourselves and the students in our charge safe and able to access a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Everything from shelter in place drills to mediating conflict to teaching social emotional skills are a part of our day on top of teaching academics. Working in more restrictive settings or with students that have more intensive behavior needs can make learning how to create safety for ourselves and our students an absolute necessity.

### **Creating Safety for Ourselves**

- Know yourself!

Entering the classroom requires the ability to maintain your composure and make multiple decisions a minute, often in stressful situations. The first step in being able to manage a classroom is being able to manage your own emotions and actions. It is helpful to take the time to reflect on the situations or behaviors that add stress or that can be triggering for you and to identify responses that support de-escalation for both you and your students. What scenarios do you consider stressful? What could you do to prepare or prevent these scenarios? What do you communicate with your body language, your voice level, and the language you choose? How do you interact with your environment, students, other adults when those scenarios arise? How are you using your position or proximity to mitigate risk? What are your strengths and limitations around being able to respond to stressful scenarios or crisis situations? Engaging in self-reflection around these questions and specific to your classroom and students can help you to build the social emotional skills needed for self-management, regulation, and de-escalation. A powerful practice that supports this self-awareness and the building of skills and the capacity to respond productively is the practice of mindfulness and as a result self-care. Knowing yourself and being prepared with that knowledge to manage your classroom can keep you and your students safe.

- Know your students!

Practicing empathic listening in the quest to understand more about who your students are and what they are communicating with their behavior is essential in maintaining safety. Our students tell us so much about themselves throughout the school day through their words and more often through their behavior. How do you go about learning their preferences, interests, strengths, limitations, needs, and wants? Are you able to identify the behaviors that indicate whether they are feeling anxiety? Do you know what causes them anxiety and what strategies, responses, and language can help them regulate and feel safe? Behavior does not often come out of nowhere, there are signs or indications that a student is becoming agitated. Those signs are often just a change in baseline behavior and may be very subtle, but they are there. Did a student sigh, start to pace, start to hum, or make noises? What is their body language telling you? Seeking to understand and be aware of those indicators can serve as a warning and help you keep yourself and others safe.

- Know your surroundings!

It is also important to be aware of your environment and any dangers or mitigating factors that might need to be adjusted to prevent high risk situations. Are you aware of the exits in the room? Is your movement or students' movement hindered by furniture? How can you use the arrangement of the room to deter serious risk? Are there items that present a large risk, such as scissors or laptops, or items that cause issues because they are highly reinforcing for a student? How can you limit access to those items to prevent and protect those in the room? What pathways exist in the room and how do you arrange those to support safety for all students? Do you have handy the visuals and tools needed for de-escalation? Are those supports, such as a schedule, a first then, or a contingency map visible and accessible as a source of prevention and in case of a crisis? Are there routines or procedures that you can put into place that can support prevention and increase safety?

- Prepare for prevention.

The proverb, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" proves true about safety in the classroom. It is much easier to put things in place that stop something from happening in the first place, than it is to repair the damage after it has happened. That damage can be physical or emotional and destructive. How can we prepare for the prevention of that damage? When we consider this regarding behavior, we look at what antecedent strategies and interventions can be put into place to help prevent behavior or escalation. Antecedent strategies are often directly linked to the function of the behavior and help to alleviate anxiety around a demand, or provide attention pre-emptively, or even alter the environment in a way which removes the need for the behavior. What is the student attempting to communicate with the problem behavior? Are they avoiding a demand? Do they have anxiety because they perceive threats? Are they seeking attention or connection in a moment? Is there a sensory stimulus that is causing anxiety or agitation? What can you put into place that can meet that need and increase the likelihood that the behavior will occur?

- **Work as a team.**

Having the support and empathy of other adults in the classroom is invaluable. Working as a team to understand and know your students, to know each other, to develop and implement interventions and plans, and to provide support is essential in schools today, especially when working with students with intensive needs. How will you set aside time to communicate and debrief or reflect? How do you communicate during a crisis? What interventions, language, and tools will you implement together and is everyone on the same page with that implementation? How and when do you ask for help? What is the role of each of you in prevention or de-escalation? How can you communicate in a way that supports dignity and the dignity of risk for your students? How will you foster that teamwork to support safety, trust, and respect in your classroom?

### **Creating “Felt” Safety for Students**

For a student to be prepared to learn, there must be a sense of “felt” safety devoid of perceived threat. Perceived threats can come from many sources, and understanding your students’ needs is key in supporting safety. “Felt” safety merely expands the concept of safety beyond purely physical safety, but also looks at emotional safety, which in turn is a part of regulation. We know that students must be regulated to be ready to learn. How do we create that “felt safety”?

- **Provide Consistency and Predictability**

We provide consistency and predictability through teaching expectations, using consistent procedures and routines, using schedules and instructional tools with visual supports, and being consistent and predictable in our reactions. Are your expectations clear and concise and do you teach, model, practice, and reinforce those expectations regularly? Are students able to navigate through routines and procedures with ease and order? Do students know what is happening, when, where, how, and even why? Do you use visuals to support communication of expectations, routines, and content? Have you attempted timers to support the predictability aspect in your schedule? Are you consistent with your responses to all students? Do students know how to ask questions, ask for help, or ask for what they need in your classroom?

- **Provide Empathy**

Another wonderful way to build relationships and trust with students is to demonstrate empathy. Often students just want to be heard, to have their needs validated, and to know that you care. Taking the time to listen to what they are communicating and seeking to understand what they need can prevent situations from escalating. Do you have common phrases and language that you use to show that you have heard your students? How do you help them meet their needs or help them to use prosocial communication to ask? Do they have access to the tools and language that they need to communicate their needs and wants? How do you honor and support those requests?

- **Communicate Respect**

We can also support that feeling of safety by being intentional and aware of how and what we communicate. The body language we use, our tone, our voice level, and the words we use, can all help prevent a behavior and support de-escalation. A fantastic way to approach language with students that need a perceived level of autonomy as a part of their perceived safety, is to use declarative language. Using choice throughout the day in our instruction and in the completion of demands communicates respect and offers a segue into “felt safety”. What body language do you portray? What is the tone of your language and communication? How do you respond to students so that they might retain dignity and autonomy? How do you push yourself to use choice across the instructional day? How do you reflect on the battles you pick and how you react?