

20 Tips for Creating a Safe Learning Environment

I visit a lot of classrooms. And I'm always fascinated by the variety of ways teachers launch the new school year and also with how they "run their rooms" on a daily basis. From these visits and my own experiences as an instructor, I'd like to offer my top 20 suggestions for keeping your classroom a safe, open, and inviting place to learn.

1. Community Build All Year Long.

Routinely include strategies and activities in your lessons, such as "Save the Last Word for Me", that allow students to express their thoughts and ideas, build relationships, and practice collaboration. This will help grow and maintain a feeling of emotional safety in your classroom.

2. Post Student Work.

When displays of essays, poems, projects, and exams dominate the walls, there is student ownership of the room. When they look around and see their own writing and thinking, they certainly experience a higher level of comfort than if they see store-bought posters. That said, if informational posters are needed, ask your students to create them.

3. Have Non-Negotiables.

Along with classroom rules and procedures, students must know non-negotiables right out of the gate. My biggest non-negotiable? Name calling. This resulted in an immediate consequence (a call to the dean and removal from the classroom that day). Tackle name calling head on or else kids won't feel safe to be themselves, let alone learn.

4. Admit When You Don't Know.

Students appreciate when we show our humanity. Saying "I'm not really sure. Does anyone else know or might they like to look that up for us?" is powerful stuff.

5. Read with Your Students.

The message this sends: *I like to read. I don't just tell you this and grade you on how much you read, I read side-by-side with you. You see my facial expressions as I struggle to understand something difficult and you see when I feel emotion at a sad or funny part. I am a reader, too.*

6. Remain Calm at All Times.

Once a teacher loses it with a class or student, it takes a long time to rebuild that feeling of safety and trust within those four walls. Step right outside the door and take a few breaths. It's worth it.

7. Take Every Opportunity to Model Kindness.

They will follow. You need to lead by example, students reciprocate what they see.

8. Circulate.

Mingling lets you monitor their work, yes, but it also gives you a close view of any tensions or negative energy brewing with groups or between students. Also, circulating gives you great opportunities to overhear a student sharing an idea or question that you can use with the whole class.

9. Address Grudges Early On.

If tension is building between a couple of students, create time and space for them to talk it out while you meditate.

10. Write with Your Students.

The message this sends: *I like to write. I don't just tell you this and grade you on your writing, I write side-by-side with you. You see me struggle as I am drafting a poem or letter, and you see me contemplate new words, cross-out old ones, and take chances as I revise. I am a writer, too.*

11. Model Vulnerability.

They will appreciate this. If we are asking kids to write and talk about times they have felt scared, alone, confused, etc., we need to be willing to do the same.

12. Follow Through with Consequences.

A consequence must proceed as a non-negotiable. Students need to know there's a consequence for those serious infractions. They need evidence to believe they are safe in each classroom.

13. Smile Often.

The antiquated saying in the teaching profession is *wait until Christmas to smile*. This is just plain silly. Let the children see those pearly whites often and genuinely. The more smiles we offer to students, the more we will receive.

14. Use Every Opportunity to Model Patience.

They will pick up on it and reciprocate. They will notice your kind gestures and embody your patience.

15. Give Kids a Chance to Problem Solve on Their Own.

It's so much better when ideas and solutions come from the student. This is a chance for us to ask rather than tell: "What might be some things you can start doing so you complete your homework on time? How about I write them down as you tell them to me?"

16. Laugh with your Students.

The message this sends: *Learning doesn't have to always be so serious, nor do we. Sometimes, when tensions are high, like during testing or when crazy things are happening out in the world or on campus, we need to laugh together. It's okay.*

17. Offer Options.

If we start an assignment with, "You will have three choices," kids may even get excited and are often much more willing than when we say, "The assignment is... ." By giving kids choices, we send a message that we respect their decisions.

18. Keep the Vibes Good.

Students, no matter how young, know when a teacher is not happy. Joy can be contagious, but so too can misery. Maybe a vacation, a massage, watching a TED Talk, or even changing the level of grade you teach will help rekindle the flame between you and teaching when you are in a slump.

19. Sit with Your Students.

Sitting in a chair made for a child is not the most comfortable thing for an adult. But joining a group of children at their table takes us off stage and lets us, even just for a few moments, become a member of the group. We might ask a strategic question, inquire about the group's project, or simply listen.

20. Art and Music Feed the Soul.

(And they starve the beast). Incorporate both of these routinely in your lessons as these help enhance their creative sides.

Do any of these especially resonate with you? How do you create a safe learning environment for your students? Please share your thoughts and ideas with us.

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