

Workshop: Creating (Balancing) Safety and Adventure
RYAR Conference, July 21, 10:30-12:00

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Key points/notes

Finding the balance in safety and adventure is the work of parents, teachers, social workers, and therapists.

Rather than focusing on what has been referred to as “hardening responses” (e.g., metal detectors, surveillance cameras, police officers and thicker doors) at our schools and institutions we should instead focus on “felt safety” (Purvis, Cross & Sunshine, 2007). Felt safety is a *feeling* of being safe built on multiple experiences of personal safety.

Felt safety is an individual experience – it is in the eye of the beholder. An active shooter drill, for example, may help some feel safe but for others it is terrifying and potentially traumatizing.

For most, life experiences create neural pathways or neural circuits that shape a sense that “I am safe”. Falberg’s “calming cycle” or the arousal/relaxation cycle provides insight (2012) as to how safe neural pathways are built: a child expresses distress by crying because a need isn’t being met. The adult picks up the child and calms with soft words/sounds, rocking motions, food and/or facial kindness. Attending to needs, repeatedly in helpful ways, neuron circuits are built that eventually empowers the child to learn how to self-calm.

When needs are met, humans feel safe. Van Bockern used the Circle of Courage framework along with the Cal Farley Model of Leadership to develop the Schools That Matter model that he argues is how felt safety is created.

Safety is in the center of the circle and emanates to each of the needs identified in the Circle of Courage. Safety is dependent on multiple safe experiences in the context of the four needs. Reciprocally, the best experiences happen when safety is present.

Adventure (aka, risk taking, exploration, curiosity) also connects to safety. Humans both approach and retreat to stay safe. Children and adolescents explore “approach and avoid” in play. That includes rough play. If adventure or risk taking is eliminated out of concern for safety, “safetyism” takes hold. For safety reasons we might debate whether kids should play on a snow hill or throw snowballs but demanding that children not pick up snow because it might lead to a snowball which might lead to a snowball fight and someone getting hurt is an example of safetyism.



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With consistency in research and practice the four needs of the Circle of Courage, when met, converge to create cultures where safety is felt.

Three sources provide insight and collaborative support for the ideas that will follow:

Bath and Sieta suggest there are three pillars to trauma informed care: connection, coping skills and repeated experiences of safety.

The Sanctuary Model promotes safety by ensuring the community is trauma informed. It models nonviolence and civic skills of self-control, self-discipline, and administration of healthy authority.

Bessel van der Kolk argues that emotional regulation through mindfulness, communal movement, rhythms, and action is critical in managing the effects of trauma. Attachment bonds are the greatest protection against fear and helplessness. Traumatized human beings recover in the context of relationships: with family, loved ones, AA meetings, veteran’s organizations, religious communities, or professional therapists (sometimes animals are helpful therapists). The most natural way that we humans calm distress is by being touched, hugged, and rocked.

Focusing on human needs (Circle of Courage) to create felt safety.

Belonging is love experienced in trusting, positive connections with caring adults and others.

- Begin interactions with positive or empathetic statements.
- Display belonging in your eyes, face, voice, gestures, and posture.
- Create welcoming “ceremonies” for new relationships.

- Use mentors, advocates, or cadres of peers.
- Encourage and support the prosocial “gang” that offer camaraderie, pride, identity, support, excitement—normal adolescent goals.

Mastery is competency experienced through knowledge and the capacity to solve problems. It is this inner sense of satisfaction that creates self-efficacy that we suggest is connected to a sense of safety.

- Encourage creativity and self-expression through art, drama, music, poetry, and hobbies.
- Use social skills instruction to develop social competence.
- Help youth to assume problem-solving roles in peer group settings.
- Success itself is powerful “safety therapy”.
- Use the outdoors to reach students who don’t respond to typical school and social structures. “Controlled risk” (comfortable uneasiness) lets the children run around freely while in hearing and seeing distance.
- A certain amount of stress can be helpful and even motivating.
- Refrain from sarcasm and questions asked in rapid-fire game-show style with little “wait or think time,” or questions used to determine who did their homework or to put the child on guard. Tests or activities designed specifically to label or sort students don’t serve any positive purpose.

Independence can be equated with personal power, choice, responsibility, inner control, and the willingness to take risks.

- Use peer-helping groups to undertake problem solving.
- Writing names on chalkboards and taking away points for misbehavior – overt and covert threats - inhibit learning.
- Adults must be calm while setting secure limits.
- Challenge the common practice of employing punishment-based codes of conduct to manage behavior.
- Use simple statements of values such as, “Respect people, respect property.”
- Treat youth with respect even when they are disrespectful.
- Keep children informed of changing schedules and activities to help make their days predictable.
- Give developmentally appropriate power to children. Help them learn how to identify “safe people”.

Generosity translates into actions of caring, sharing, helping, and supporting; all of which add to felt safety.

- Teach social skills to foster moral development to create empathy.
- Make caring fashionable to make youth uncomfortable with selfish, hurting behaviors.
- Create service-learning projects to contribute to the community.
- Provide incremental help in “scary” situations such as learning to ride a bike or read.
- Community made rules that are easy to understand and apply provide students with a shared vision of a safe place.

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