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# Creating Safe, Strength-Based Classrooms

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# Creating Safe, Strength-Based Classrooms

 [www.edutopia.org/blog/creating-safe-strength-based-classrooms-lori-desautels](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/creating-safe-strength-based-classrooms-lori-desautels)

Photo credit: Edutopia

Schools are not machines. Schools are a network of human beings who feel, think, behave, and function within a human system that is alive and never static. Inside living systems, we need to feel safe and felt. This system is wired to thrive, even through difficult times. We're here for deep learning, which is profoundly relational, and connection to one another is a prerequisite for our collective emotional, social, spiritual, and cognitive growth and development.

In creating an environment that feels safe and relational, behavior management develops into behavior engagement. During the past two years, as I returned part time to the K-



12 classrooms along with my university teaching, one thought stayed with me while I tried to establish a safe, strength-based climate each year. That thought is "change." Children and adolescents arrive at school each day with a variety of social, emotional, and cognitive needs, but those needs are changing by the week or day. Children's ongoing brain development intimately affects their abilities to feel positive, negative, motivated, frustrated, protective, vulnerable, and clear thinking, among a myriad of other brain states. 

Feeling safe is connected to trusting others, as trust is the foundation of how we relate to people in this world. Trust begins with a child or adolescent knowing that a teacher is present and not going away. Most of our struggling youth have a developmental history filled with negative experiences. Their school history alone is filled with discipline referrals, unsuccessful punitive interventions, and sustained failure. Their life experiences outside of school may show patterns of prolonged adult rejection and neglect. It is critical for educators to recognize that such a history has conditioned these students to see any new staff relationship as toxic and potentially hostile. Creating safe, strength-based environments begins by creating positive connections with students swimming in pain -- and this can be an endurance event!

Below are research-based strategies that we are implementing in our classrooms and schools to promote an ecology that draws daily on a student's strengths while building safety and trust.

## 1. Change It Up

At the beginning of every school year, we establish classroom rules, procedures, and transitions. Yet I am learning that these guidelines should change more frequently based on students' development. When we invite our students to help us develop these rules, procedures, and transitions (especially when they feel broken or stagnant), everyone is invested.

## 2. Create Rituals

Implementing a ritual each morning is a great way to start the day with curiosity, prediction, and positive emotion. This is more than sharing in a circle. It might be writing out as many "gratitudes" as we can think of in one minute. By adding a time limit and a bit of competition, we invite participation. Teachers should begin by modeling this while the students time them, and then sharing their list to model trust and engagement.

Another ritual might be watching three minutes of an inspirational documentary and creating a class service project to enhance and further the documentary's content. [Soul Pancake's videos](#) are a great resource for inviting us to relax, serve, and feel positive emotions.

We also can start the day with a few minutes for fun facts and brain games. [Failed science experiments are often the greatest successes](#), and sharing examples of mistakes, errors, and failure encourage a growth mindset that says, "Mistakes are welcomed and expected in this classroom!"

### 3. Invite Imagination

Using props and imagination can tap into everyone's strengths and creative thought at the beginning of the day. Instead of traditional "Do Now" exercises, place an empty chair, rug, vase of flowers, and end table in front of the class with music playing. Invite students to write about a favorite or beloved individual sitting in that chair. What would you share? What advice would they give you? The props for this "Do Now" activity could be anything to create a feeling of trust, safety and community.

### 4. Study Your Students

I study the ecology of my students' lives as much as I study the standards that I teach. This includes the toys, video games, music, and free-time activities of the age group in the classroom. For those students with basic trust issues, I make a point of knowing their lives, inner logic, and private stories. I notice everything about these students as I constantly look for what is going well and right. I also pay attention to my own emotional triggers and recognize that a safe classroom may invite unwanted behaviors because this space feels comfortable and familiar, and acceptance can sometimes breed negative behaviors.

### 5. Understand and Discuss Conflict

**Dual thought sheets** are important when there is conflict in the classroom. These questionnaires model and share with students that everyone (even teachers) can improve and work harder when trouble is brewing. We are all responsible for how we choose to handle a growing battle. Following are examples of brief questions for both teacher and students to fill out and discuss, written and considered at a time when all parties feel calm and responsive. When I feel hurt, confronted, or disrespected by my students, I know that I could have done a bit better in communicating or handling my own emotions and triggers. Here is a sample dual thought questionnaires:

1. What is the problem or challenge?
2. What did I do that didn't work so well?
3. What are some possible things we could do to solve these challenges?
4. What will we try first?
5. How will we know when we're in a better place?

Dr. Bruce Perry says, "The carrier of all development is attachment and safety." How do you make sure that your students feel safe and felt? Please share in the comments section below.

### Welcoming Diverse Learners

This series offers strategies to meet students where they are, and respond to their changing needs.