

Creating a Sense of Safety

(Not Only) in the Classroom



„From our first breath to our last, we have an enduring need to be safely connected with others.“

— Deb Dana

Introduction

Extensive research in neuroscience shows that safety is crucial for human development – physically, psychologically, socially, and even spiritually. Studies also suggest that over a third of adults faced difficult situations in childhood that might have robbed them of a sense of safety. How do we deal with what we consider threatening and what can give us a sense of safety?

Shootings and other life-threatening situations in schools highlight the question of when a school is truly safe. Bars on the windows, cameras, and increased surveillance – these are the first ideas that come up when everyone’s frightened and experiencing a loss of safety. But what exactly does it mean to feel safe? And how can we create that sense of safety?

We can learn from the most vulnerable – those who lost their sense of safety but managed to find it again. These people are all around us – adults and children alike – and it’s quite possible that just by being present and showing interest, we may have played a part in their healing.

This bulletin is about safety, so it concerns every one of us. But it’s especially dedicated to all the children and adults in schools who are constantly searching for safety – perhaps not realising it might be right beside them, in me, in you, in all of us.

Zuzana Krnáčová, Maja Jaššová
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Schools, much like families, can be places where children feel calm and safe. For children who face hardship or neglect at home or grow up in chronic stress, teachers can be essential figures, guiding them through tough times. School staff are therefore important in supporting children’s healthy development. When teachers understand themselves, their motivations, and their feelings, and are able to manage their emotions, they can be wonderful role models, just like parents, and create a healthy, supportive environment for children.

MUDr. Natália Kaščáková
Psychiatrist, psychotherapist

What is safety and why can't we always have it?

Safety is a state of mind and body where all our automatic processes in the body are working properly, allowing us to feel our emotions and engage our rational brain when needed. It sounds straightforward, but there are a huge number of physical, biological, and chemical processes happening in the background, all influenced by our past experiences and memories.

Safety isn't just about the absence of danger – it's much more than that. When we truly feel good, we're able to learn, focus, connect with others and ourselves, and tap into our qualities, strengths, creativity, and curiosity. We might feel like playing or even just enjoying a moment of doing nothing. Safety is a subjective quality and can take different forms for different people. Our experience of safety is a dynamic process, and the level of safety can rise and fall.

Sometimes, we feel completely at ease, like just before we fall asleep. These moments allow us to recharge, offering a much-needed boost. They are important islands of respite in the sea of our daily lives, which are fraught with all sorts of challenges.

We can feel active and full of energy, jump in passionate discussions or physical adventures – and still feel that we have one foot on solid ground, so to speak.

Life naturally brings situations that shake our sense of safety – perhaps a physical threat, a relationship issue, a big change, or some other trigger.

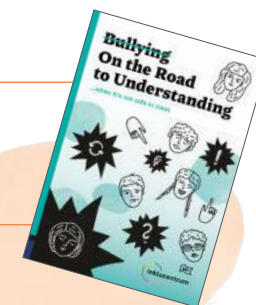
A dog barks – if you jump, your heart races, and it takes a while before your breathing slows down and you can collect our thoughts.

You stumble – you quickly regain your balance, the blood pumps through your arms and legs, and you steady your falling body with your mind, and even with help from your tongue and eyes. You wouldn't be able to make these quick movements if you were in a state of calm.

You have to speak in front of people – blood rushes to your head, your face flushes, and your mouth is dry. You want to say something, but the faces in front of you blur, and all you see are vague shapes. You freeze, and it's hard to breathe.

If these reactions sound familiar, it's because they're common responses to stress. They're nothing dramatic or life-threatening, just part of everyday life. In such moments, we temporarily lose our sense of safety. And let's not forget other common situations – sadness, uncertainty, falling in love, fears – or natural developmental changes like puberty. We can't feel safe all the time, but we should know how to build safety and find our way back to it when we need to.

You can learn more about stress responses in our bulletin [Bullying – On the Road to Understanding](#)




Where safety is formed

At birth, a newborn already has 86 billion neurons, which continue to grow and connect through experiences with the world and with others. These form complex networks that help the newborn to start understanding the world, building relationships, and through them, developing a sense of self.

The nervous system processes all incoming stimuli and is the first to evaluate whether they're safe for us. In other words, every impulse must first go through a "safety check" in our brain:

1. If the stimulus seems dangerous or threatening, we react quickly and reflexively, without much thought.
2. If the stimulus is judged to be safe, only then do we get the chance to think about it.



„Bottom line: Our brain is organised to act and feel before we think.“
— Perry, Winfrey.
What Happened To You?

Our external senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – monitor what's happening outside our body. Things like air, smells, colours, sounds, and light provide stimuli that we react to. When these senses are triggered, they send signals to the brain.

Our internal sensory systems monitor everything happening inside our body (like hunger, body position, heartbeat).

Besides these internal and external signals, we can also pick up on and assess cues from our interactions with others.

All this information – whether it's from the outside world, our inner world, or our interactions – provides constant feedback to the brain, helping it to activate the right systems to keep us healthy and safe.

We can create a sense of safety by actively seeking and adding positive stimuli from our surroundings, our bodies, and our relationships. For example, by drawing on:

Smell – from flowers, the street after rain, or preparing a meal with loved ones.

Touch – hugs, caresses, massages, or even a firm grip. Leaning against a wall or sitting down when our legs give way.

Breathing – slow, steady inhaling and longer exhaling.

Looking into the face – with a soft smile, a relaxed and friendly expression, tuning into bodily signals – noticing tension in different parts of the body and being able to release that tension. When the body is in sync with emotions – it relaxes when we feel good and tenses up in challenging situations.

Connection with others – tuning into yourself and the other person, sharing moments of play, laughter, or rest.

We can also create a sense of safety through thoughts and cognitive processing – by taking time to reflect on events, consciously assigning meaning or significance to what is happening, understanding ourselves and others, exploring the reasons, remembering.

Whether stimuli feel pleasant and safe depends largely on our individual experiences and preferences. For some, a tidy desk is essential to feeling comfortable in a room. Others might feel uneasy in such order and immediately scatter at least a few cushions around. *How about you? Do you have a favourite smell or colour that makes you feel good?* We also know that some stimuli are perceived by most people as pleasant and safe. These include scenes of peaceful nature, birdsong, or a gentle touch. Did you know that certain pieces by Mozart and Bach activate parts of the brain's emotional centres boosting imagination, which is closely linked to a sense of safety?

Three steps to safety

We create psychological safety for others by taking **active steps in our relationships**: with ourselves, with others, and with our surroundings.

To foster safety for others, we first need to understand what makes us feel safe so we can provide that for others. Developing our ability to self-regulate (manage our emotions and behaviour) and co-regulate (for an explanation of regulation, co-regulation, and dysregulation, see the *Bullying* bulletin). We also need to understand the conditions and structures that help us to create shared experiences of safety.

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BULLYING BULLETIN

In relation to ourselves

To create environments and relationships that feel safe, the first crucial step is to start with yourself. Adults responsible for ensuring the safety of others (e.g. their children, clients, or students) must first feel safe themselves, or, at the very least, must consciously work with strategies that foster safety.

„In that situation, I was experiencing mixed emotions. I felt obligated to help him, but I wasn't sure if I'd be able to figure out how to help, which made me feel uneasy. Through deep breaths, I slowly brought myself to a state of alertness and calm.“
— lower primary school teacher

Active steps towards building your own sense of safety start with recognising your current feelings and signals from your body. You sense and understand that you have pain or discomfort somewhere, or you feel thirsty, hungry, or tense:

- *You can mentally scan your body, starting with your feet and moving gradually to your head, noticing the position of the different parts, their pressure and relaxation.*
- *You take note of your emotions. How are you feeling right now? Can you name it, or is it a tangled mess of emotions?*
- *You visualise a pleasant place or memory.*

If you feel like you need to improve your well-being, you can reach for your trusted strategies – pleasant sensory experiences (smells, favourite music, rocking or other movement), connecting with someone close, or using a motivating inner monologue.

Knowing our strengths and using the qualities, skills, and abilities we can rely on also helps us to stay calm and at ease. This will help us to lean on them when we feel unsteady or lose our footing. In these moments, we can remind ourselves:

- *I handled it last time.*
- *I'll figure something out. I always come up with a solution, even at the last minute.*
- *I'll double-check this in a foreign source; my excellent English will help.*
- *I've had good experiences talking things through and consulting with someone in the past.*

These ways of supporting our own well-being can also be shared with those around us – students in a classroom, colleagues, or our own children and family. We can offer activities involving movement, pleasant interaction, or small sensory prompts, and give verbal encouragement. It's important, however, to be mindful of individual differences in what each person experiences as safe.

Our strengths and tried-and-true strategies might not work for everyone, so let's each find our own ways and encourage others to discover theirs. When sharing our suggestions, we should check in with others about how they perceive them and whether they find them helpful – because nothing is universally beneficial!



„I feel like I'm just getting started on my journey and there's still a lot for me to learn about connecting with myself and my feelings. This skill is really important, especially in tricky situations, like in a busy classroom.“
— lower primary school teacher

In relation to others

While working on our own sense of safety is important, we mustn't forget about relationships and contact with others. These are just as vital for our psychological well-being. We humans are social beings, dependent on each other for survival. Children are born relying on co-regulation with others. Meeting their needs, including physical and psychological safety, is solely in the hands of adults. It is through caring interactions with adults that children gradually learn to calm themselves. Even so, our need to bond with others, to lean on them in difficult moments and to share joyful occasions with them remains natural and lifelong.

Our goal, whether for children or adults, isn't to achieve complete independence from others, nor to eliminate the need for co-regulation.

Self-regulation and self-soothing are not innate to a child. Children can overwhelm their nervous system, which, under great stress, automatically shuts down their awareness of distress. At that point, the crying may subside, but the nervous system actually experiences stress even more intensely. Neglect is most devastating during early childhood, when the brain is developing quickly, and can prevent a child from receiving the stimulation they need for normal growth.

Naturally, not every interaction with others brings a sense of safety. Think about what signs and signals you look for in others to feel comfortable around them:

- *Is it a certain facial expression?*
- *Is it the way they talk, or perhaps their attitude?*
- *We may also notice their tone of voice, the way they express themselves, or their choice of words.*

Each of us experiences interactions differently, shaped by our temperament, our early experiences, and other interactions with people. For example, maintaining eye contact is usually seen as a sign of a good connection, but for some it can feel too intense or off-putting. Similarly, a fleeting touch on the arm might show trust and care, but some people find touch threatening and avoid it even in this subtle form.

It's useful to notice who we feel comfortable with and which interactions feel safe and pleasant to us. Equally, we should consider how others feel in their contact with us. To build supportive relationships, we need to respect both our own and others' boundaries.

Typically, safe relationships benefit from:

- *accepting, non-judgemental communication;*
- *a calm tone of voice;*
- *emotional attunement;*
- *active listening;*
- *predictable and consistent responses;*
- *giving everyone space;*
- *awareness of our own emotions and needs.*

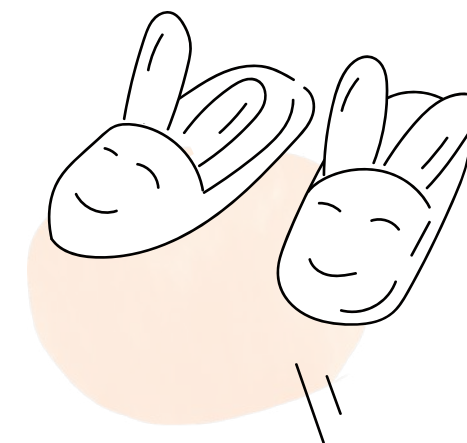
Losing a loved one, especially a parent, or prolonged separation can significantly disrupt a child's inner sense of safety. In these situations, it is vital to nurture close relationships in order to restore that inner safety.

In relation to our surroundings

We also pick up vital signals about our safety from our surroundings and how our interactions with others are structured. Again, we can ask ourselves what kind of environment makes us feel at ease:

- *What colours and shapes around you make you feel good?*
- *What physical conditions should your surroundings have – temperature, lighting, amount of space...*
- *What options are there for sitting, moving around in, or leaving a space?*

Of course, the answers will vary from person to person, and we ourselves may prefer different settings in different situations. It is helpful to consciously question and observe how we ourselves, and others, react to our surroundings.



When creating a safe environment – both physical and social – we can benefit by focusing on:

● **Transparency and predictability**

Surprises can often add fun to our days, and make a lot of people happy. However, feeling safe mainly depends on having a sense of orientation, knowing what to expect, and being aware of what's going on around you. For example, when entering a new setting, you should be able to familiarise yourself with the space by identifying where everything is (e.g. a source of water, the toilets, the exits), choosing where to sit, and taking a good look around.

Imagine walking into a restaurant for the first time – how do you choose where to sit? Do you like to keep an eye on the door or the bar? Do you prefer to sit by a window, or does that make you feel like you're on display? Do you notice what music is playing and how loud it is? Would you rather sit near the wall or have open space around you?

But it's not just the physical space – our interactions here also need to be transparent and predictable. We feel safer when we know what the gathering is about, how long it will last, what's expected of us, what the outcome should be, and perhaps other information. At regular meetings and in everyday social situations, agreed-upon rules and recurring rituals help us to navigate.

Obviously, changes are inevitable, but even then it's helpful to prepare for them or at least communicate them after the fact. Children need fresh experiences and changes to be integrated, and talking about them often helps significantly. We can discuss what changes bring, as well as the stress they cause – even if it's something as small as a teacher suddenly substituting a lesson. Most children can cope with changes, but it's still a challenge for everyone.

● **Choice and a sense of control**

What sensory inputs are pleasurable to you, what sort of interactions with people you look for, what qualities and abilities you have that make you feel personally confident, and so on – these are questions you can ask yourself. **Even just being able to recognise and identify what specifically makes us feel safe and what, on the other hand, threatens us is an important step towards greater well-being.** To deepen that sense of well-being even more, it's crucial to take it a step further – by being able to change and influence what's going on around us and what's in our immediate vicinity. Simply making sure we are comfortable and creating space for small changes can significantly boost our sense of well-being:

Is it okay with you if we leave the window open? Should I leave the light on? Choose a spot where you'll feel comfortable sitting. Should we take shorter, more frequent breaks, or would you prefer one longer break? If this activity becomes uncomfortable for you, feel free to stop at any time.

When we create and give people the chance to shape their environment, circumstances, and situations, we reinforce the sense that we're not just victims, but active agents.

Even though we're mostly unaware of it, our nervous system is constantly scanning for signals of safety and threat. Our own mindfulness makes us capable of influencing our sense of safety.

It is not in our power to ensure that everyone around us feels safe. Each person experiences safety at their own pace and in their own way. But we can take it one step at a time, relying on principles that allow us to move closer to safety.

Safety, resilience, and stress tolerance

Resilience has been shown to be one of the most important factors for success in adulthood. The ability to “bounce back”, control emotions, and cope with stress are key characteristics of a healthy, functioning adult.

To build resilience, we need to be exposed to stress. Only by facing challenging situations can our nervous system develop strategies to overcome them. Hunger, thirst, cold, exercise, job promotions: these are all stress factors, and stress is a necessary and positive part of normal development. Stress is a crucial element in learning, acquiring new skills, and building resilience.

But not all stress is suited to this. The key factor in determining whether stress is positive or destructive is how it affects us. When stress is unpredictable, extreme, or prolonged, our stress response systems become hypersensitive and overreactive, as they must constantly be on high alert. This kind of stress creates vulnerability.

What do these situations look like in real life?

- Constant classroom cover, with no relationship being formed between teachers and students.
- Inconsistent grading – every teacher has their own rules.
- Pressure to perform – without consideration for a child’s or adult’s needs, limits, or potential.
- Belittling or mocking others.

On the other hand, stress that affects us in a predictable, mild, and manageable way helps us to practise handling tough situations, especially since we know when it’ll end, giving our nervous system time to relax.

What do these situations look like in real life?

- A test that’s announced to pupils in advance – challenging though it may be, children have the chance not only to revise, but also to mentally work through any worries they may have.
- By talking through and thinking about what they’ve done when they’ve behaved inappropriately, they can take control of their actions and make sure they don’t do it again.
- Predictable adults – children know what reactions to expect, whether positive or negative. They understand that adults’ responses are appropriate to the situation.

Patterns of stress activation

unpredictabl +
extreme +
prolonged

SENSITISATION
vulnerability

predictable +
moderate-
controllable

TOLERANCE
resilience

Perry, D. B., Winfrey, O. *What Happened To You?*, p. 39

Picking up on signals of safety and discomfort

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether we're still in a zone of resilience or if what we're experiencing is starting to chip away at our ability to recover and grow stronger.

During one of my first public speeches, when I was defending my thesis, I nearly collapsed. My vision blacked out, I stopped hearing, and I couldn't speak. I couldn't remember anything. My system reacted very severely to the stress and I carried this negative memory with me for a long time. But then my job presented me with challenges, and I had to keep putting myself in front of people over and over again. I was an adult by then, so I could prepare, I knew what kind of presentation it would be, and even though these presentations were frequent, they didn't last long and I had time to recover in between. In the end, these experiences made me stronger and gave me new skills and experience that I'm grateful for.

But this story could have gone another way. Imagine a child who is often, and unexpectedly, called to the front of the classroom to be tested on their knowledge in front of others. Because they've been mocked before for giving a wrong answer, they're finding it increasingly difficult. Even when they're familiar with the material, they often struggle to recall the right answer. They're afraid of making a mistake, saying something wrong, and being laughed at. Because they never know when the teacher will call them to the front, they start avoiding school. On top of that, recently they've also felt the compulsion to repeatedly touch things over and over as a way to feel in control of the unpredictability around them. This makes their mum angry, and she yells at them.

Two similar stories. The first ends well, the other keeps getting worse. Once you know the story, it's not hard to understand why they turn out so differently.

That's why it's important to ask questions, to be curious about what happened before. But we can't always find out the story; not everyone knows it or is willing to share.

Even if we don't know a child's story, we can still pay attention to their outward behaviour, which tells us when they're stepping out of their comfort zone. If these signs persist for a long time, if they intensify, or if they appear after stimuli that are safe for most children, we need to start asking whether the child is experiencing harmful stress – stress that leads to vulnerability. That's when it's time to pause, support their recovery, allow them to rest or take a break from challenging situations, and introduce activities that help to regulate them.

The signs we should look out for are reflected in their behaviour and various physical reactions.

„He often had outbursts of anger and frustration during lessons, especially when he came into contact with stricter teachers. One day his behaviour escalated to self-harm; he started banging his head on the desk, pounding the desk with his fists, and tearing his hair out during a maths lesson. The issue arose when he felt wronged by the marking of his written exam and couldn't accept the teacher's grade.“
— specialist staff member, primary school

● Behaviour

Loud, quiet, avoidant, aggressive, cheerful – all behaviour tells us how someone is feeling and whether they're feeling safe or uneasy. When we feel safe, we've no reason to act unpleasantly towards ourselves, others, or our surroundings – we become more patient, calmer, and more amenable. On the other hand, if we're feeling uneasy, we tend to react more aggressively even to minor triggers, or we withdraw. If we can let go of the ingrained belief that someone's inappropriate behaviour is a deliberate attempt to harm us, we can adopt a completely new perspective on the situation. Once we accept that behaviour is a coded form of communication, we gain vital insights into both ourselves and others.

„Maťo lay slumped on his desk, his head facing down and buried in his arms, unresponsive to instructions, even, at first, when addressed from a distance. After being addressed multiple times, he just shook his head, indicating he wasn't going to do any work. He was overwhelmed with emotions, couldn't process them, and felt a deep sense of injustice, which first manifested itself as apathy and then as resistance – 'I won't work, I'm not doing it, I don't want to...“

— lower primary school teacher

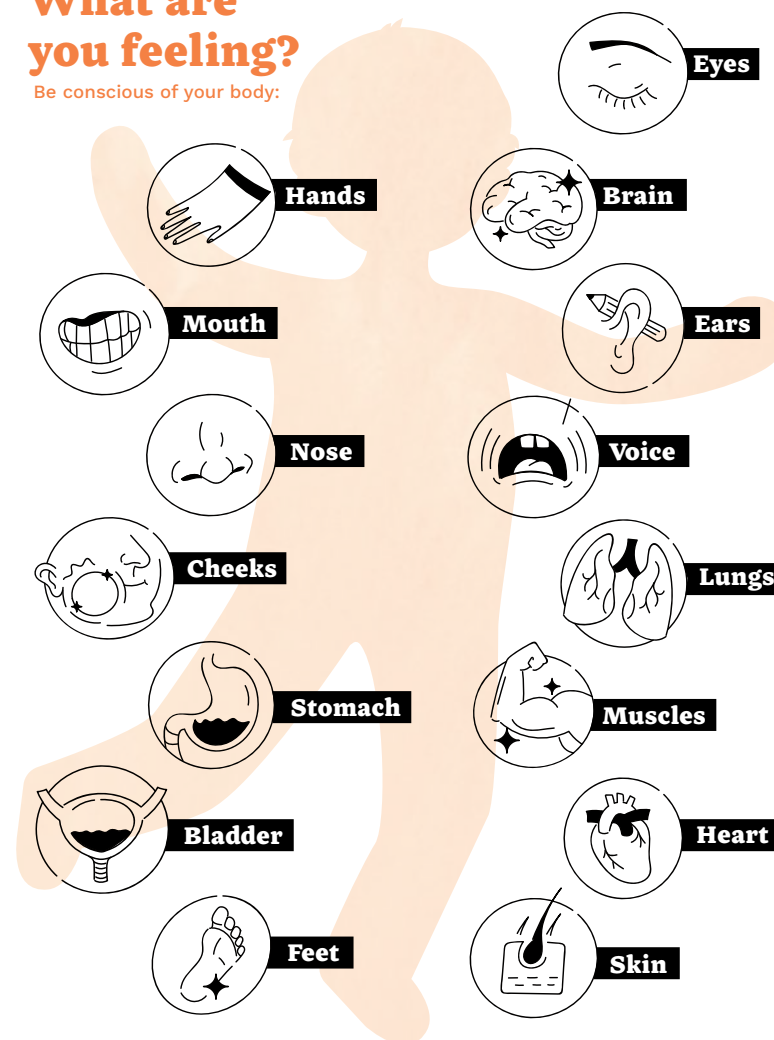
● The body

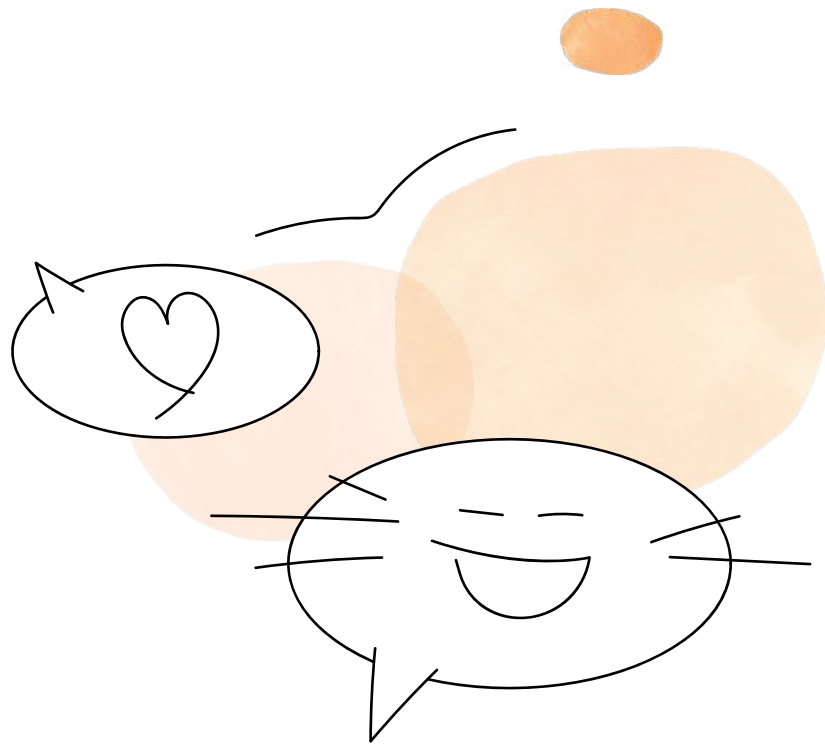
All bodily functions are closely linked to the human psyche, as they're connected to the emotional centre of our brain. So, it's understandable that when we start to feel discomfort, we can observe subtle signals in our body – like fidgeting, flushed cheeks, or clenched muscles. These immediate bodily reactions give us insight into a child's acute stress, enabling us to plan activities or stimuli that we can then use to help regulate their emotions. The relationship between the body and mind isn't just a short-term affair. A global study on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) shows that prolonged toxic stress in childhood increases health risks in adulthood.

The body and mind influence each other. If you've got an upset stomach because you ate something bad, your mood is also likely to worsen. Conversely, if you're anxious or in a bad mood for a prolonged period, you might start experiencing physical symptoms, such as stomach aches, headaches, or trouble sleeping. Understanding your body's signals is essential to maintaining a sense of safety.

What are you feeling?

Be conscious of your body:





„The opportunity to stand at the board and assist me helped the student to calm down, making him more able to engage with what was happening in the classroom, observe his classmates working, listen to my instructions, and then be more willing to participate in quieter activities at his desk, such as writing exercises. He was happy to put down his bottle, take out his workbook, and begin working. While writing, he rolled a sensory motor aid on his desk with his other hand. Although he subsequently stood up while writing and completed the writing task standing up, he was no longer a distraction in the teaching process.“

— lower primary school teacher

Actively creating safety in the school environment

Safety needs to be actively cultivated – it doesn't happen by itself. As life presents many challenges, we need to practise our ability to maintain and establish a sense of safety. If we've been fortunate enough to have had positive adult role models and life experiences in the past, this skill is easier for us to develop. However, if our lives have been marked by hardships, especially in childhood – illness, trauma, the loss and unavailability of loved ones, or social deprivation – it's possible that a sense of safety might feel unfamiliar to us, and our own efforts won't be enough; we'll also need the help and support of others to achieve it.

● The role of the adult

It's like building a house – if the foundations are strong and made from quality materials, the house will be able to withstand shocks in the future. The solid, quality material for building a child's brain is a relationship with one or more safe adults. This applies to all important adults in a child's life, including teachers, support staff, and coaches.

School-age children still haven't fully developed coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and discomfort. They still need to be regulated by an adult, and this happens on a sensory, emotional, and cognitive level.

„Afterwards, we discussed together why he might feel isolated from the other kids. We talked through ways to improve his social skills and build better relationships with his classmates. Together, we came up with a plan to take steps that could improve his situation, so he'd feel more included and accepted within the class.“

— upper primary school teacher

How adults can contribute to a sense of safety among children at school:

- They're self-regulating and aware of how they feel in different situations.
- If they're uncomfortable, they can communicate this to the children without anger or tension. They are able to explain why they're not feeling great and what they need at that moment.

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NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION

- They're attuned to the children's needs and able to regulate them on various levels.
- They're accessible – they're present both physically and mentally. They can handle children's feelings, accepting even the toughest of emotions, without punishing the child.
- They see the potential in children and set individual challenges that the kids can manage first with help and then on their own.
- They clearly express their expectations of the children's performance and behaviour.
- They actively shape the physical environment and consider the children's physiological needs.

There are many other qualities that it's great for an adult to have. However, the key lies in fostering a supportive relationship and understanding healthy stress as a cornerstone on which resilience can be built.

Wherever you are on this journey, predictability and a sense of control can help to nurture a sense of safety. That works for all of us. Ask students for their opinions and respect them – this gives them a sense of control and makes you a predictable adult for them.

„My immediate compulsion was to explain to him that he couldn't just lie on his desk for the whole lesson and not do any work because, at the end of tech class, he needed to hand in something so that he could be graded. But I managed to stop myself and realise that this wasn't his normal response or state, and that something more serious had likely happened. This awareness helped me to shift from anger to understanding. I walked up to him, crouched down, and asked him to step out into the hallway with me. At first, he resisted, but when I got up and walked towards the door, he followed me.”

“Initially, he was reluctant to talk, but eventually, he opened up and said that his mum had been angry with him and cried that morning. He felt hard done by because, in his eyes, it was his younger siblings' fault, but his mum had directed most of her anger at him.“
— upper primary school teacher

● Movement and relaxation

With younger kids, we instinctively understand the importance of movement and physical well-being in their lives. However, as they grow older, we start focusing more on intellectual development, pushing physical movement aside. Yet physical well-being and mental health are interconnected, and neglecting one negatively impacts the other.

We need to look after our physical well-being, too. Introduce physical activities and relaxation into your own life and into the lives of your students. Include exercises that can energise, but also calm things down when needed. Pay attention to your body's signals and respond with care and interest. Incorporate brief, pleasant physical exercise into lessons – it only takes a few minutes but can effectively regulate a child's condition.

„I've started using 'pauses' in my lessons. When I see the kids are losing focus and chatting, I get them to stand up and let them walk around the classroom. We quickly play a game of 'head, shoulders, knees, and toes.“
— lower primary school teacher

Activity designed to calm the class down

Mirroring: pair up the students. One is free to move around as they wish, and the other mirrors their movements like a reflection. The rhythm and speed of movement vary. It's best to include music and let students move according to what they hear. After about two minutes, they switch roles.

Activity designed to stimulate the class

Markers among us: pair up the students. Each pair will need one marker (or a pen/pencil). Each of the pair curls their index finger around a marker, and in that way they grasp it between the two of them. Then, they work together to draw a square, circle, or any other shape or picture with the marker.

Don't not forget about the *setting* – cosy spaces, a place free from the threat of violence, space for pleasant interaction – these are the working conditions that promote a sense of safety. Students also need a space where they can escape noise and external stimuli. Think with them about what you can do together to improve their surroundings. Having visual displays of rules, values, and how to get around the school helps to create a sense of predictability in this space.

„When this student becomes a significant distraction, I feel like he's not just disrupting the other students, but also me in my work. It's harder for me to concentrate, I feel like I'm losing control of the situation in the classroom, and I get irritable, focusing on the disruptive behaviour. After completing the training, I was able to recognise and control my feelings. I saw for myself how incredibly effective this was. By being able to calm myself down, I was able to adjust the activities so that this student could participate in the lesson.“

— lower primary school teacher

● The joy of play

It's a shame we pay so little attention to play. We often think of it as just an outlet for children, something to fill up their free time, but not as crucial as learning or sports.

Yet play has huge potential when it comes to building resilience. Many scientific studies trying to understand the evolutionary importance of play have found that young animals who didn't have playmates were more stressed as adults. Playing is essential because it is how young ones learn to cope with stress. During play, the same stress responses get activated as during real stressful events. So the more kids play, the better their brains get at regulating stress over time. Their ability to handle stress improves through play, helping them to deal with increasingly complex situations.

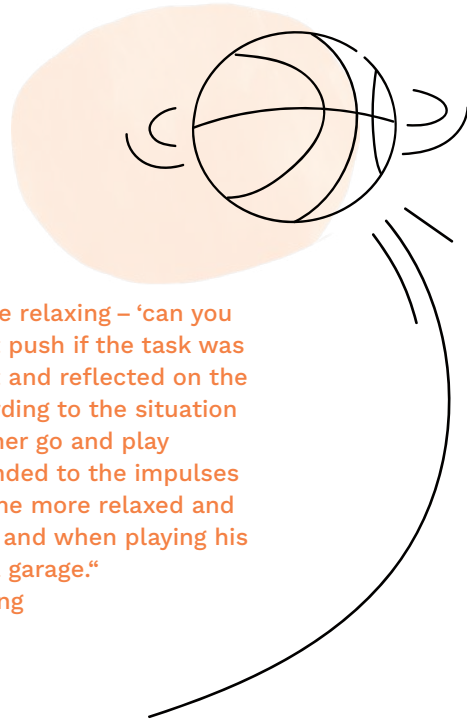
Social play can lead to both conflict and cooperation. If children want to play, they have to learn to cope with factors such as fear and anger. Play is a safe space for resilience training:

- Let kids have unstructured play. That means play without external rules, competition, or adult supervision.
- Don't interfere in their play if someone is unhappy. These moments, when kids try to sort things out themselves, foster their ability to socialise, control events, negotiate, and adapt.
- Make sure that children don't hurt themselves during play, and if they do, talk to them about it. Anger management also requires practice.
- We can support play at school in several ways:
- Every school should have access to a playground where kids can play freely.
- Provide stimulating materials that engage all the senses.
- Use outdoor spaces for learning and play, where kids can engage their imagination.

- Encourage art activities where kids can create spontaneously.
- Integrate elements of play into teaching.
- Mix children of different ages. This encourages them to support each other's learning (see the Mixed-grade classrooms bulletin for more).

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- Create options for play and downtime – some kids go outside for break, while others stay inside, because each child regulates differently.



„The child found the physical exercise relaxing – ‘can you show me how a frog jumps?’ I didn’t push if the task was rejected emphatically; I respected it and reflected on the behaviour by asking questions according to the situation (do you need help, or would you rather go and play now?). I let the play flow and responded to the impulses showing in his behaviour... He became more relaxed and calmer after some physical exercise and when playing his favourite game – with toy cars and a garage.“
— specialist staff member, counselling and prevention centre

● Creativity

Creativity is directly linked to play. It’s a specific way of expressing imagination, creativity, and spontaneity. Creativity can be encouraged in school through art activities (see the Artephiletics bulletin for more information). It can also be developed in subjects like maths, science, and languages, during conflict resolution, or when finding answers to various questions.

→ inklucentrum.sk/publikacie **ARTEPHILETICS**

For a person to make use of their creativity, they need to feel safe. Creativity resides in the higher parts of the brain and is only accessible when we feel at ease and our nervous system doesn’t need to respond to threat signals.

Play, creativity, and learning all stimulate mild stress responses, which build resilience. They also serve as resources when we need to create a sense of well-being and safety.

● Humour and sharing positive experiences

Our own experiences and research show that supporting others during stressful and challenging times is crucial in enhancing and supporting well-being. It has also been found that sharing positive experiences and moments with a supportive and constructive listener contributes equally, if not more, to increased well-being and positive experiences. Adding laughter and humour to these shared moments creates a literally healing social cocktail.

Positive humour (careful – not sarcasm or critical and demeaning jokes) helps to relieve tension and enables us to connect. It activates areas of the brain responsible for complex and abstract thinking, and also fosters creativity. It supports self-regulation and our sense of perspective and control, making it an ideal addition to teaching and classroom activities – it's even been shown to improve information retention!



A student complains to their parents:

„How can I trust my teacher when they claim that an hour has 45 minutes!“

„Maths is the only subject where buying 60 melons is perfectly normal.“

„The best way to learn is from my mistakes. The problem is, teachers don't give good grades for mistakes.“

● A sense of comfort and cosiness

For healthy relationships in any group – whether it's within the family, at work, or at school – it's important to have shared moments of togetherness, to make time for each other, and to enjoy each other's company. This shared time involves the art of setting worries aside for a while, and sacrificing individual needs and desires to make these gatherings as pleasant as possible. It's about consciously creating a comfortable space of well-being and cosiness.

In school, we can set aside specific times for these moments – for example, creating a pleasant atmosphere together one morning a week, spending time playing games, having breakfast together, and showing mutual appreciation (see the Morning Circles bulletin for more information).

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MORNING CIRCLES

We should nurture both personal and work relationships. A short morning session sitting with students can mean a lot for their sense of safety. This can be a brief ritual that reinforces trust and relationships. Similar gatherings with colleagues at work can be equally empowering.

We're all just kids in grown-up bodies, still nursing old wounds.

We're all as fragile as porcelain, and can be just as shattered and broken.

“Do I still have worth?”
I doubt it when I fall apart into pieces.

Shrouded in a haze of aching sadness, I take stock of my every mistake.

You see me here; you don't look away, even if you feel scared.

Quietly, you sit down; I feel that you see me, you read my story in my eyes.

Your gaze changes the colours of my world to a shade of safety and peace.

With your trust, you soothe my wild heart and wounds – suddenly, they don't hurt.

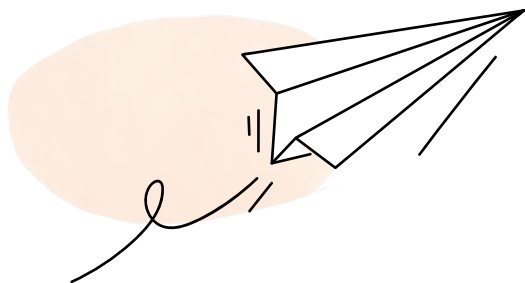
That's the magic, a small, big miracle of mindfulness – it can do this.

It reconnects the broken pieces and creates stained glass from the shards.

Lucia Kubíny

„I think this is exactly the type of training I needed, and certainly not just me, but many teachers need training that focuses not only on forms and methods in teaching, but on understanding our own experiences. I would love it if all my colleagues could take this training, and I believe it has the potential to change the overall atmosphere and climate of the school.“

— lower primary school teacher



„I'd already been applying many of the ideas, though I didn't know how to consciously describe or label them. Many of the ideas in the training were new to me, and I'm currently preparing a short presentation for my colleagues. We're gradually introducing sensory motor aids in classes at the first level of primary school for those teachers who are interested.“

— specialist staff member, primary school



Safety isn't created through grand gestures and bold moves. It's the day-to-day situations and micro-moments that gradually build and reinforce a sense of safety in our nervous system. This is an ongoing process of mutual humanity, sensitivity, and development.

When we feel safe, we can be curious and creative. We're able to form and develop relationships. We can show empathy and feel a sense of belonging. We can plan, weigh up our options, make decisions, and think critically. We learn.

Since 2023, Inkluscentrum has been offering “Trauma-Informed Approach in Schools”, training created in international collaboration with the Czech Republic, Norway, and the US. The positive feedback from educators and specialists has encouraged us to further develop training focused on a whole-school approach.

It is an honour and commitment for us to support many experts at schools in their professional and specialist development. Just as they bring their true selves into classrooms and among colleagues and students, we aim to be authentic and supportive during our training and consultations.

This bulletin was created in collaboration with the Czech organisation Society for All. We thank Kristýna Šeniglová for her expert feedback.

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SOFA, *Brain break: stimulujúce aktivity*

SOFA, *Brain Break: upokojujúce aktivity*

Our publications

Our bulletins are prepared in collaboration with a team of inclusive education experts. Use them as a helpful guide in your work or when explaining the principles of inclusive education to the general public. On the Inklucentrum YouTube channel, we have produced some useful videos for you, some of which are also available in other languages. For a deeper understanding of the topics covered, we recommend signing up for our training sessions.



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We oversee inclusive education

Inklucentrum – The Centre for Inclusive Education is an advocacy, educational, consulting expert organization on a national level, working in the field of support to inclusive education. It is dedicated to supporting quality and humanistic education in the school environment for the benefit of development of potential for all children, families and the school staff. It provides support, consulting and education in accredited programs and workshops, especially for pedagogical and professional employees.

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