

Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home



How You Can Create an Emotionally Safe Space

Safety exists in many forms, from physical safety to emotional and psychological safety. Your child’s sense of safety, or lack thereof, can have a powerful effect on how and what your child learns. In this section, we will focus on:

- **Understanding physical and emotional safety:** what is it, why does it matter, and how can you make sure your home is safe for your child?
- **Using this information:** what strategies can help you create a safe space at home?
- **Things to look for:** what is normal and what may be a potential warning sign that something needs more attention?
- **Resources:** what materials should you consult to explore this topic in greater detail?

As you read through [these resources](#), remember: Every family is different. Everyone’s individual circumstances are different. Everyone brings their unique set of strengths to address life’s challenges. The information we are sharing here is designed to be flexible and adapted in the ways that work best for you.

Understanding Physical and Emotional Safety

Physical safety—which includes preventing injury, protecting against violence from others or self-harm, and safeguarding against weapons and threats—is one of the most basic human needs. When someone does not feel safe, they will seek out ways to feel safe in their environment before they can attempt to meet any higher level of survival, like connecting with others or learning new skills.

Emotions trigger responses in our brain that affect how we feel and behave, and these emotions have a powerful effect on learning. For example, it is harder for us to learn when we are worried, angry, anxious, grieving, or humiliated because these emotions limit attention and concentration. When we feel emotionally safe—that is, when we feel calm, happy, and supported—our brains are better at taking in information, learning new things, and being productive.

It is also important to remember that children's needs will be different based on their developmental age, race/ethnicity, gender, their strengths and needs, family expectations, and previous experiences with school. Your family's culture and community norms will also influence your child's needs.

These differences will affect how children express themselves and how you respond to them. For example, younger children and children who have experienced trauma (for example abuse, divorce, or the loss of a loved one) may express anxiety by physically acting out or becoming more "clingy." Adolescents, on the other hand, have great needs for respect, autonomy, and how they maintain their newly developing senses of their identity. As a result, they may react by working harder to protect their freedoms during this time of limitations, or by acting out with belligerence or withdrawal.

Using This Information

Children need a physically and emotionally safe place to learn. There are three main ways families and caregivers can support emotional safety at home:

1. Proactively create the social and emotional conditions for learning—that is, take the steps to create a space that is physically and emotionally safe from the start
2. Respond to emotions, behaviors, or challenges in an emotionally safe way
3. Make sure your child is experiencing safety in other settings (for example, if your child is learning online)

To proactively create the social and emotional conditions for learning:

- **Make sure that YOU are ready** to provide the physical and emotional safety your child needs. [Review the first section on readiness to learn more.](#)
- **Seek help to prevent conflict or violence** in your home (which could be caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 situation). Make sure that conflict or violence does not involve or impact your child.
- **Make sure your child has their own physical space to learn where they are safe from fear, humiliation, or high levels of stress.** Too many distractions can add to our stress, especially when we are trying to learn something new. Try to set aside a specific space—either a separate room or in a shared room—for your child's learning time and work. If you have multiple children in the home, this may mean alternating space and resources like computers or other devices, so having a plan can help to minimize conflict.
- **Accept your child for who they are and build on their strengths.** Although all children will vary in their academic strengths and sense of who they are, it is essential that they develop a positive self-image. You play a critical role in helping them to develop that.

- **Establish predictable routines at home.** Doing so can prevent emotions like stress and can help your child’s brain to work better because they’ll know what to expect. Involving your child in creating the routine or schedule can not only teach them about time management, but also will help them to feel a sense of control.

When responding to emotions, behaviors, or challenges:

- **Make sure your child knows that they can express their feelings and share emotions with you.** This may include, for example, worries about COVID-19, financial situations, the health of family members – for instance, if you or another family member work in the health sector, or have been designated as “essential workers” that are required to work outside of the home – or academic frustrations. If it is hard for you to share your thoughts and feelings in a healthy way when your child is expressing what they are thinking or feeling, ask for help. Reach out to your child’s school social worker or counselor, or ask your child’s pediatrician for a referral.
- **Let your child know that it is OK to make mistakes,** especially right now when they are trying to learn new things in new ways. (This applies to you, too!) It’s important to remember that mistakes are how we learn. If your child makes a mistake, it can be helpful to talk through what might have gone wrong and what they could do differently next time. **Encourage and reward persistence over perfection.** Avoid punishing failure
- **Listen, acknowledge, and affirm your child’s feelings.** Give them the space to feel however they may feel and let them know that it is OK to feel that way. Then, help them identify what they or you can do to help them feel better.
- **Discuss what is outside of your control and identify ways to deal with frustration.** Many families are experiencing slow internet or other challenges with technology (or lack thereof), for example. You can help your child to understand what they can and cannot control while acknowledging how they feel.
- **Soothe children in ways that work for them.** If you don’t know what works for them, have a conversation to learn more about what would work for both of you. Ask them about what helps them to calm down. If they don’t know, try different strategies together (like hugs, taking deep breaths, coloring a picture, or taking a walk) and talk about what was helpful.
- **Prepare in advance for how you will respond to your child’s anxiety about COVID-19 and its aftermath.** Be honest but calming. Use science and facts to share information, highlighting what we know about the virus and the ways in which we can stay safe. For example, tell them that you are practicing regular handwashing to prevent the spread of germs.

To make sure that your child is safe in other settings:

- **Share information with your child about how to protect against COVID-19.** Make sure that they wash their hands regularly, wear appropriate personal protective equipment if they go out in public, and always cover coughs and sneezes.

- **Monitor your child's time online**, in developmentally appropriate ways. Whereas younger children may need more support from an adult – thus making it easier to check on them – older youth and teenagers may want more privacy. Ensure that your child doesn't experience bullying in their new learning setting.

Things to Look For

While children may *tell* you how they feel in words, they may also *show signs* in other ways. Please note that these signs won't necessarily mean there is a problem. Knowing what to look for can help you to decide if you need to explore this more deeply or seek additional support. These signs will be different based on age, culture, and your individual experience. Here are a few examples:

Preschoolers may show you they are anxious through new or more thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, acting as if they were younger, and withdrawal.

Elementary school children may show new or more irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.

Adolescents may reveal they are having problems by new or increased sleeping and eating disturbances, becoming more irritable and getting into more conflicts, physical complaints (for example, having a stomachache or headaches), delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

If you notice any of these signs or other new behaviors, it will be important to respond in a supportive way. Make sure your child knows that you are there to help them and that you will help them in a way that works for them.

Resources

These resources will help you to create emotionally safe spaces for learning at home:

- [Webinar](#) from Turnaround for Children about supporting children during COVID-19
- [Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Emotional Distress](#) from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- [Coronavirus Adds to Many Other Stressors for Latino Students. Here are Some Past Mental Health Blogs and Resources to Help](#), from UnidosUS
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a Crisis Counselor 24/7.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255: The Lifeline provides 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Advocates are available 24/7 and speak more than 200 languages. All calls are free and confidential.