

Article

Creating an Emotionally Safe Classroom

By Bruce D. Perry MD, PhD

Why are the first days of the new school year so important? What can teachers do during these first weeks to help their new students come to enjoy school and love learning?

Life is discovery. From the moment of birth we are exposed to a continuous flow of sensory experience — sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Our remarkable brain takes the images and sounds, the feelings, scents and tastes of each moment to create an internal representation of the external world. In the beginning of life, all is new. Each experience is a first. Each image, melody, scent, and caress bathes the newborn's brain as it attempts to organize and make sense of this world. Over time, we create memories, and we learn.

And it is in the learning from first experiences that our future is directed — the first smile, the first words, the first kiss, the first love, the first loss, and the first days of school. These new experiences shape our emotions, beliefs, values, and behaviors. Our first experiences create the platform from which we will view the rest of our life.

Over time, there are fewer firsts — the world becomes more familiar, less novel. For many, active learning slows in age. For those who find pleasure in discovery, however, there will be a lifetime of learning. They will seek novelty and reap the rewards of mastering new experiences — maturity, creativity and wisdom. We wish this gift for our children.

Every September, thousands of young children enter a classroom for the first time and swim in novelty. Indeed, for these children, the first days of school are filled with more new experiences than any other time aside from birth. There will be new sights, sounds, schedules; new children, adults, challenges, and expectations. How can we help our children find pleasure in these first classroom experiences that will lead to a lifelong hunger for knowledge? The key is safety.

Optimal learning is driven by curiosity, which leads to exploration, discovery, practice, and mastery. In turn, mastery leads to pleasure, satisfaction, and confidence to once again explore. The more a child experiences this cycle of wonder, the more she can create a lifelong excitement and love of learning. The cycle of wonder, however, can be stopped by fear.

The fear response is deeply ingrained in the human brain. Under threat of any kind — hunger, thirst, pain, shame, confusion, or too much, too new or too fast — we respond in ways to keep us safe. Our minds will focus only on the information that is, at that moment, important for survival. Fear kills curiosity and inhibits exploration.

This is important for the first days of school because the brain tends to interpret novelty as threatening. In new and strange settings, a young child will be overwhelmed by more novelty and find little pleasure in "learning."

Fortunately, there is another deeply ingrained feature of the human brain — curiosity. We are fascinated by and drawn to the unknown — to new things. Humans are explorers. When we are safe and the world around us is familiar, we crave novelty. When a child feels safe, curiosity lives. Yet when the world around us is strange and new, we crave familiarity. In new situations a child will be more easily overwhelmed, distressed, and frustrated. This child will be less capable of learning. The hungry child, the ill, tired, confused, or fearful child does not care about new things — they want familiar, comforting, and safe things.

In the first weeks of school, very young children are almost drowning in novelty. We can make these new experiences easier. We can do things to make the environment more predictable, structured, familiar, and, thereby, safe. It is the invisible yet powerful web of relationships in the classroom that creates an optimal learning environment. The most important learning "tool" is the teacher. And it is the teacher who creates the safe "home base" from which the child will explore.

A sense of safety comes from consistent, attentive, nurturing, and sensitive attention to each child's needs. Safety is created by predictability, and predictability is created by consistent behaviors. And the consistency that leads to predictability does not come from rigidity in the timing of activities it comes from the consistency of interaction from the teacher. If a schedule is consistent, but the teacher is not, there is no predictability for the child. Predictability in time means less to a young child than predictability in people.

How can a teacher provide this? Use your most powerful teaching tool, your personality. Your smile, your voice, and your touch make a child feel safe. Face-to-face, "on the floor time," and eye contact are essential in this process. Be predictable in your interactions with the child and not in the number of minutes spent in each activity. Be attuned to each child's overload point. Let children find some space and solitude when they seem to be overwhelmed. In these quiet moments the child can find pleasure in reviewing the discoveries of the day.

Teacher Tips

Here's how you can provide the safety and predictability that children need:

- **Keep the first few weeks of school simple.** Repeat the schedule and rules many times. Once a child feels comfortable with the school day, flexibility and change can more easily be introduced.
- **Be predicable in your interactions with children.** This is more important than the number of minutes spent in each activity.
- **Be attuned to each child's overload point.** Let children find some space and solitude when they seem to be overwhelmed.
- **Find time during the day for quiet.** Solitude allows the brain to "catch up" and process the new experiences of the day. This leads to better consolidation of new experience and better learning.
- **Keep the first challenges light and the praise heavy.** Confidence and pleasure come from success. Let everyone succeed at something.
- **Emphasize the importance of good nutrition and proper bed rest.** Children cannot learn when they are hungry or tired. Also, let parents know that their children are likely to be more irritable at home, will need more sleep, and will need some "decompression" time at home after school. Remind them that even pleasant experiences can be stressful.
- **Remember that you make all the difference.** These first experiences with school can help reinforce a child's curiosity and love of learning. You create the emotional and social climate of safety that makes your classroom a place for optimal learning.

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