

Creating a Safe Learning Environment for Children

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True education is wholistic—it develops head, heart and hand—academically, spiritually, socially and physically. It is with the purpose to educate wholistically that the point cannot be over-emphasized: if real learning is to occur, the learning environment should be safe—environmentally, psychologically, sociologically and emotionally. Children, as well as their teachers and support staff deserve to be in a safe learning environment. They must be safe from accident and potential dangers. In this postmodern era with the many challenges that face educators, creating and maintaining a safe learning environment should be a priority. It is of the utmost importance that all stakeholders in the Education System work together to create a non-threatening, protected environment for children and young people of all ages. The term “Stakeholders” refers to all those who have a vested interest in the education of children: Conference Education Departments, School Personnel, Parents and the Community.



What, therefore, can each group of stakeholders do to create the safe learning environment that is necessary if children’s ultimate learning experiences must be maximized?

First, the Conference Education Departments should realize that the onus is upon them to ensure that school buildings are environmentally safe. Schools should be located in areas that are free from chemical contaminants, pesticides, poisonous gases etc.; they should not be constructed near areas that are designated for the dumping of refuse/garbage; building materials should be properly tested and pass safety standards e.g., avoid using materials that are allergens; cleaning solutions used in the schools should be carefully selected so avoid causing allergic reactions.

Second, the principal should build a good rapport with the community; solicit their help in keeping the school environment safe by setting up a “neighborhood watch” program; schedule meetings where community members (other than parents) can give suggestions, provide funding etc. towards a safe environment; keep the community informed about the school’s programs.

Third, the teacher should ensure a classroom environment that is comfortable and welcoming--it should be best suited to the needs of the children; be sensitive to the personal, developmental, academic, social and emotional needs of the children. The expectation that the teacher be nurturing and encouraging, providing positive reinforcement rather than negative reinforcement, is a key ingredient in creating a safe environment. (Dr. William Perkey, psychologist, suggests that teachers provide at least 10 positive reinforcements to every one negative reinforcement statement—notice the ratio of positive to negative). The statement: “People do not care how much you know but they want to know how much you care” is a powerful one with serious implications, especially for the Christian teacher or education administrator.

In my own experience and from my research, I have discovered that many students prefer to attend a school where there is nurture and in which they feel a sense of connectedness, rather than a school which contains more resources, “bells and whistles,” but is significantly deficient in nurture. Repeatedly, I have seen parents make that choice because they believe that if they perceive their children to be in a safe learning environment, their children will eventually acquire the necessary academic skills which they so much need to survive in this sometimes hostile world environment.

The teacher should also help children to feel accepted—feel free to be themselves and to express themselves without the fear or threat of rejection, ridicule or ostracism; also be understanding of their learning styles, abilities and skills—some students perform better when they work individually, others need group support. Some are auditory, others are visual, kinesthetic, or tactile learners. (It could be a tall order to meet the diverse learning needs of the students in the class). A cooperative rather than a competitive classroom (although some healthy competition is good) contributes towards a safe learning environment.

*A note about young children and their readiness for school: Young children who are sent to school before they are ready can feel unsafe in their new environment. Readiness is determined by three important factors: chronological age, mental age and experience.

Fourth, it is necessary to include in the school personnel: the non-teaching /support staff as well as the sanitary engineers (the cleaners), guards etc. These persons who are not actively involved in formal teaching in the classroom often exert their influence on the children as they move around and interact with them. Very often, cleaners who seem to be uninvolved, unconnected or unconcerned about what happens at the school know a whole lot about what is taking place in the school than the administrators and teachers. Often the children will share information with them because they perceive them as a non-threatening group and not part of the administrative network, so there is nothing to lose by sharing with them. These persons can be, in a sense, watchdogs for safety in the schools. It is important therefore, that we treat them with respect and let them know how they can assist in creating a safe learning environment at the school.

Fifth, the School Board should develop policies for the construction and maintaining of safe and secure schools so that students as well as administrators, teachers and non-teaching staff feel safe. They should also be supportive of the school administration in its bid to create a safe learning environment for all.

The guiding policy as stated in the SDACC Education Code over the years has been the following: “Each school should establish a Health and Safety Committee. The committee should meet regularly to review and implement school safety procedures” (3024:01-2).

Sixth, parents should build a good rapport with the school (assist whenever possible with field trips, activities, supervision etc.) where there is a large number of children in the classroom; be supportive of the school’s policies; give creative and helpful suggestions

for keeping the school safe through the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA); teach their children to be respectful of their teachers and to express themselves appropriately.

Seventh, the Community which includes church organizations should share concerns about the safety of the environment; make helpful suggestions for improvement of safety measures; assist in “watchdogging” the school’s neighborhood; support the school’s efforts at creating a safe learning environment; encourage members of the community through town meetings to be positive role models for children; offer seminars and workshops in family life topics for parents and school personnel e.g., parenting, discipline, literacy and other topics; pray for the safety of the school.

When everyone in the school feels safe, then perhaps effective teaching and learning can take place without fear; there will be less discipline problems, and educators can be engaged in the business of creating better quality schools in this country, preparing products that are second to none.

Resources:

- SDA Church in Canada Office of Education. (2001). *Education Code*.
- Dr. William Perkey – Ontario Counselor’s Association Presentation