



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Protective Factors in Psychologically Unsafe Environments

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DEFINING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Researchers define psychological safety as a shared understanding in an environment about the expectations to take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, and voice opinions. Psychological safety is defined by Dr. Amy Edmondson in simple terms as “felt permission for candor.” A psychologically safe environment is characterized by conditions that foster belonging and well-being. Whether it is in the classroom or the workplace, the science of learning and development shows us that psychological safety is the precursor for all learning and a necessary condition for optimal performance (Bogan, 2024).

While the importance of psychological safety for students’ academic success, job performance, and wellbeing cannot be refuted, the reality is that we navigate spaces that are psychologically unsafe every day.

Students, particularly students of color and those from underserved communities, sit in classrooms where they feel unheard or unseen; we attend jobs where we feel overlooked or undervalued. Nevertheless, many of us find ways to learn, perform, excel, and even thrive.

HOW DOES ONE THRIVE IN A PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE ENVIRONMENT?

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

For decades, researchers have tried to understand how individuals thrive in adverse contexts. Researchers define “protective factors” as characteristics that reduce the negative impact of a risk factor or negative condition, on one’s outcomes. In other words, protective factors are simply conditions or characteristics that make positive outcomes more likely. In the context of psychological safety, for example, protective factors are those elements that buffer against the negative effects of stress in that environment.

Because psychological safety is a subjective phenomenon, there are many mechanisms by which someone can come to feel unsafe in an environment. One common thread in psychologically unsafe environments, however, is that these environments foster belonging uncertainty and often leave individuals feeling alone, misunderstood, unseen, and disconnected. For this reason, positive relationships are a particularly important protective factor, especially for students navigating unsafe learning environments.

WHY POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT TO DEVELOPMENT

Positive relationships are those characterized by warmth, consistency, attunement, and reciprocity. Positive relationships also involve shared power and provide opportunities for scaffolding of learning (Center on the Developing Child, 2016; Li & Julian, 2012). Positive relationships are key to our development and growth. Starting in infancy, our first relationships with caregivers set the stage for our developmental trajectory. Social synchrony, or the coordination of social behavior between caregiver and infant (e.g., touch and eye gaze) triggers a chemical process and release of oxytocin that establishes a bond between the infant and caregiver. In early childhood, the relationships between children and their caregivers help children establish “templates” for understanding and navigating interpersonal interactions and relationships with others— settings and managing expectations, boundaries, and behaviors and attitudes. Early relationships also support the development of the neurobiological systems that undergird the management of stress, cognition, and emotions regulation (Knafo & Jaffee, 2013). In this regard, relationships are key to shaping us and how we see and connect to the world around us.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AS PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Given the critical role that positive relationships play in our lives, it is not surprising that research shows that positive relationships not only support students' academic and social experience in schools, but serve as a protective factor in learning environments that are psychologically unsafe.

There are three core ways that positive relationships, particularly among students and mentors or trusted adults, serve as a protective factor in psychologically unsafe environments.



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

Psychologically unsafe environments place the body and mind under stress that suppresses the learning centers in the brain. When we experience repeated fight or flight, the natural response is to disengage or avoid the threatening situation or environment. Psychologically unsafe environments, in this regard, are associated with increases in academic disengagement and absenteeism. In contrast, psychological safety provided by positive social relationships is associated with positive school adjustment, learning, and academic performance.

Specifically, studies show a strong relationship between the quality of early adult-student relationship and the impact on students' academic experience and trajectory. For example, research shows that contentious student- adult relationships result in students exhibiting more dependency, lower levels of achievement, increased behavior problems, and poorer study habits among (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Further, students who have these poor relationships with adults early in the academic journey are found to struggle with social skills as they move into middle school (Berry & O'Connor, 2009). Such poor relationships between students and adults are not just salient in psychologically unsafe environments, but often fuel the negative impact of psychologically unsafe environments on students' outcomes.



Other studies have shown that students who had positive relationships with adults were less likely to avoid school, and more likely to exhibit positive learning behaviors in school, including self-directed learning, collaborative and cooperative learning behaviors, and higher levels of engagement (Hammond, 2016; Klem & Connell, 2004). These students were also more likely to take academic risks, which is otherwise unlikely to happen in psychologically unsafe environments.

When trusted adults and mentors show more sensitivity to a students' individual strengths and learning preferences and styles, students experience increased motivation in and outside of the classroom (Daniels & Perry, 2003).

Students who have emotional support from an adult report increases in classroom engagement, are more likely to exert more effort, and even report more enjoyment when problem solving. Research shows that simply having emotional support increases students' engagement and willingness to engage with new material or subjects they are less confident in.

Further, having a personal connection to a trusted adult or mentor is found to not only raise a students' intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and interest in class material, but even make students more likely to extend support to their peers, particularly when peers are exploring novel concepts in a learning environment (Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Larsen, Curby, & Abry, 2014).

***Knowing that an adult cares
helps students to feel more
invested in their own success.***



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS COMBAT NEGATIVE MESSAGING.

Environments send messages. The rituals, routines and practices that characterize an environment signal what is important and who is important in that space. The shared understanding of these practices becomes a culture and the climate in that space. In psychologically unsafe environments, students often feel unclear of the expectations and are afraid to make mistakes, ask questions or speak up because of the lingering threat of being devalued, stereotyped, or simply embarrassed. Often, it is the implicit behaviors of teachers that send the strongest messages. For example, when teachers do not provide thorough feedback, it sends the message that they do not care or find it worth their time to invest in that student's understanding or development. Similarly, when teachers call on certain students to share their thoughts, it sends the message that some voices are more valued than others in that space. Because such negative messaging is often communicated through the practices that happen in that learning environment, it is difficult to fully address in that space. That's when the role of a mentor or trusted adult outside of the classroom, becomes critical.



Mentors and trusted adults can take many forms—they may be a member of the school staff, a school counselor, coach, a family member or even an older sibling. These adults play an important role in students' lives, especially those navigating psychologically unsafe learning environments.

These adults can directly provide students with counter-messaging to buffer against the negative implicit and explicit messages that the student received in the classroom context. Mentors and trusted adults may do this directly by encouraging the student and building self-esteem with affirming messaging.

Being in a psychologically unsafe environment can be stressful and detrimental to students' self-esteem when they are continually confronted with messages that signal the teacher does not see their potential or recognize their strengths and genius. Research shows that simply having a mentor or trusted adult is associated with lowered stress among students navigating such challenging, psychologically unsafe learning environments (Rhodes et al., 2007). Having a mentor gives students a safe space to process their feelings, gain support and communicate their concerns. In addition, mentors and trusted adults' support and direct encouragement of a student's ability can not only boost their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, but empower students to be agentic and advocate for themselves in spaces where they are being overlooked (Herrera et al., 2007). Such counter-messaging combats negative misconceptions the students may have adopted that threaten their self-concept and self-worth and identities, all while supporting students to think positively about their future self.



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS FOSTER A SENSE OF BELONGING, COMMUNITY AND CONNECTEDNESS.

One of the greatest harms of psychologically unsafe environments is that they put us in a “survival mode” and rob us of the opportunity for deeper connection and belonging. Mentors and trusted adults in a students’ life, however, can provide students with a sense of safety by fostering the conditions for belonging outside of the classroom.

Research shows that responsive, positive student-adult relationships have multifaceted and cumulative benefits for students. One way that adult-student relationships foster belonging is through positive communication. Respectful communication helps support students’ ability to express their emotions and verbalize what they are feeling. In doing so, adults help scaffold students not only to effectively address and talk through their emotions, but support their ability to also be empathetic when connecting with others (Hughes et al., 2001; Zins, Elias, Greenberg, & Weissberg, 2000). When adults are welcoming, engaging, and empathetic, it fosters feelings of connectedness and belonging, strengthens neural pathways and activates motivational systems in the brain (Lerner, 2006; Overton, 2010). Neuroscience research shows that when students communicate empathetically with others, it reinforces neural connections among regions of the brain that support higher level cognitive functions, therefore building a student’s capacity for empathy and intrapersonal skills, which undergird positive relationships.



Studies find that when students have a supportive relationship with an adult they trust or mentor, the caring that adult demonstrates helps that students to build the social skills to demonstrate caring toward other students and make that student more able to provide the conditions for belonging among their peers. Not only are these students less likely to reject their peers and engage in bullying, but they have enhanced interpersonal skills necessary to foster connectedness and build community. (Donahue et al, 2003; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2006).

Overall, even when navigating challenging contexts in learning environments, students with adult support report feeling less lonely at school and enjoying school more, especially when that adult support is a teacher. Trusted adults and mentors, even those that exist outside of the classroom, can provide students with support that translates into a psychological safety that they can carry with them across contexts. The support not only shields students from the stress of toxic environments, but also protects against the negative effects of stress on students’ academic engagement and learning, self-concept, and sense of belonging.

3 WAYS TO EMPOWER STUDENTS THROUGH POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The research clearly demonstrates the importance of positive relationships on students' development and positive outcomes. Positive relationships are particularly important for students who have experienced trauma or chronic stress.

Positive relationships not only buffer against negative effects of stress in psychologically unsafe environments, but can empower students to engage the skills necessary to create safe spaces among their peers in their sphere of influence.



Below are three recommendations for empowering students through positive relationships.

1 *Demonstrate Respect and Build Trust*

Trust is at the crux of all positive relationships. Respect is one of the key mechanisms by which we develop trusting bonds. There are simple ways to demonstrate respect. Simply getting to know a student beyond the classroom or school environments is one way you demonstrate an interest in them as a person. Learning about their families and community, their hobbies, interests, and simply the correct pronunciation of their name demonstrates a level of respect for them as a human being. This is particularly important given that psychologically unsafe environments are fundamentally dehumanizing. Holding students to a high standard and expressing high expectations is also a form of respect that communicates to students that you see and recognize their ability to succeed. This is particularly important for students of color as racial stereotypes are often salient and activated in learning environments in which students of color are a statistical minority. Holding all students to clear and high expectations helps dispel the negative messaging that racialized environments can send about one's ability to do well in that learning environment. Similarly, explaining to students why you do something also communicates respect and builds trust. Often, psychologically unsafe environments reinforce a power dynamic in which communication is predominately unidirectional from adult to student. Explaining your thinking and reasoning for doing something communicates to students that you respect them and want them to feel empowered to ask questions and take an active part in their learning experience. And while these behaviors are key to showing respect and building trust, it is equally important to be consistent and show a pattern of support over time. This kind of consistent behavior is key to creating emotional safety as it reflects mindful consideration of the students' feelings and a reliability that ensures students you are someone they can turn to for support.

2

Model Positive Strategies for Dealing with Challenge

Strong, positive relationships with students often involve deliberate modeling of strategies to manage difficult emotions and persevere through challenges— even momentary challenges. Through your relationship with students, you have the opportunity to help build and exercise strong self-regulation skills through modeling. Students notice your behavior and the way you interact with them and others. Students are aware of the ways in which you speak to others, show respect, handle frustration, manage your temper, express your feelings, and show warmth. You are always modeling behavior, whether it is intentional or unintentional. Students will often mirror and adopt the behavior that you model as their own template for dealing with difficulty and challenge.

Through these positive relationships with students, mentors and trusted adults combat negative messaging by modeling skills to manage stress, focus, reframe problems, and engage in positive self-talk, empowering students with tools to tune out negative messaging that may be relevant in the psychologically unsafe environments.

In the process of model self-regulation, mentors and trusted adults provide students with a framework for dealing with stressors and challenges that comes from the learning environment or other areas of their lives (Rhodes et al., 2006). For this reason, it is not only important that adults are mindful to set an example students will follow, but that they also take opportunities to explicitly communicate what is being modeled and why. This positions students to more easily incorporate the behaviors modeled to them into their own repertoire of skills for managing the challenges that may surface in psychologically unsafe environments and beyond.

3 Listen

As a mentor or trusted adult in a student’s life, you will have opportunities to send positive messaging, encourage the student, and have discussions with them about their lives in and out of school. One of the most powerful supports you can offer, however, may simply be a listening ear. Psychologically unsafe environments leave students feeling unseen and unheard—these environments often strip students of their voice as psychologically unsafe conditions prevent those in the environment from feeling as though they can make contributions and speak up, ask questions, or be heard. Simply listening shows students that their voice matters and what they have to say is important. Listening signals to students that their time matters and that they are worth your time.

Listening not only provides students a safe place to vent or to express things that may be difficult for them or causing them pain, but a place to share their victories and dreams. It is important for students to hear themselves vocalize the positive as it reinforces to them a sense of hope.



Students, even into college, have often not yet mastered self-talk and encouraging themselves when facing challenges. Having a place to talk aloud helps them develop the skills needed to build their positive self-talk. Being a listener is the easiest way you can help students tap into their strengths, assets and resilience—without saying a word.

While we may sometimes navigate environments that are psychologically unsafe, our positive relationships can shield us from the deleterious effects of the stress associated with those toxic settings. Just as environments can shape how we think, learn, work, and even see ourselves, relationships have a strong influence on our behavior, thinking, and perspectives. Positive relationships have benefits that extend beyond the academic domain— they help us to live longer, healthier, fuller lives. When those positive relationships are activated in a midst of a challenge, they become a powerful facilitator of strength and transferable resilience to face not only the current challenge, but any challenge that we may face.

About the Author

Dr. Erin D. Bogan is a developmental psychologist and education consultant. As part of the Equal Opportunity Schools Senior Leadership, Dr. Bogan serves as the Senior Director of Impact and Research. In this role, Dr. Bogan oversees EOS's Impact and Research Team, where she leads the organization's research, evaluation, impact measurement, and assessment strategy in service of the EOS mission to support equitable learning environments.



Dr. Bogan is passionate about using data for good and leads internal and external projects to support equity-centered, data-informed decision making and continuous improvement. A developmental psychologist by training, Dr. Bogan brings over 10 years of deep content expertise and experience working at the nexus of research, practice, and policy.

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Dr. Bogan also continues to contribute to the field through research and has received grants and recognition from the American Education Research Association and the Society for Research on Child Development for independent research projects exploring parenting, social emotional learning competencies, and school readiness among Black children and families. Dr. Bogan has earned PhDs in Education and Psychology from the University of Michigan, a Master's in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, a Master's in Psychology from the University Michigan, and a Bachelor's in Education and in Social Welfare from UC Berkeley.

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