

How to be a safe adult

Every child needs a safe adult, especially if they have faced trauma or are vulnerable. Dr Pooky Knightsmith describes the five Cs of being a safe adult.

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A safe adult is one that a child knows they can trust and rely on.

In schools, they enable children to feel physically, emotionally, academically and socially safe and they are especially important for children who are trauma experienced, vulnerable or have additional or special needs.

However, every child (and adult) benefits from having safe adults in their lives. Safe adults are what enable children to do the important work of being children. Without safe adults, children become mini-adults, carrying the weight of adult responsibilities and worries.

Safe adults: 5Cs

I have started teaching about how to be a safe adult using 5Cs which I will explore with you in this article:

- Calm
- Consistent
- Communication
- Connection
- Curiosity.

Consider these a starting point and feel free to adapt them and add more ideas of your own depending on what you think is important to the children in your context.

Calm

Children, especially those who are distressed, need adults who seem calm and in control. Our calm is catching and after

a little while, children will fall in step with our breathing and body language during distress situations. You could try:

Slow-Low-Low speaking

Sound calm by speaking more slowly, with a lower pitch and a lower volume

5,4,3,2,1 grounding

Focus a child on the here and now, distracting them from distressing thoughts or memories by exploring your present situation with your senses. Name with them:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can touch
- 2 things you can smell
- Take 1 deep, cleansing breath.

Box breathing

When we take control of our breathing we tell our brain 'It's okay, I've got this', and our body starts to feel different as the normal balance begins to be restored. There are lots of breathing strategies you can use, one of my favourites is box breathing:

- Breathe in for the count of four
- Hold for the count of four
- Breathe out for the count of four
- Hold for the count of four
- Repeat as needed.

Consistent

Boring is brilliant! Children need to know what to expect of us and what we can expect

of them. Unsafe adults might be loving one minute and abusive the next, but a child knows exactly what to expect from safe adults because they are predictable. You could try:

Review your rules

Fewer, simpler rules are easier for children (and adults) to remember and follow and lead to better outcomes. Paul Dix recommends no more than three.

Routines

Add routines and rituals into your day that can be repeated regularly. These predictable 'set pieces' are comforting for children who know just what to expect (e.g. consider how you greet children on arrival or departure or what you do at the start of a lesson).

Predictable change

If you need to be flexible, develop, share and stick to new rules. It is okay to change the rules for a child with different needs, but do so predictably and consistently

Communication

Safe adults communicate in ways that are heard by their learners. Remember, it's not about what you say, it's about what your students hear. You could try:

Simplifying instructions and allowing pauses for processing.

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Using multiple mediums for communication

For example, written lists and pictures as well as verbal instructions.

Checking for understanding

Develop a culture where it is okay for students to correct you if you have misunderstood them, and ask for clarification if they do not know what you mean.

Connection

Children need to feel like they belong and they matter to someone. Safe adults enable this by connecting with the children in their care. You could try:

Smiling

Something as small as a nod and a smile might be the most meaningful connection a child has had today.

Connect with the quiet children

List the children in your class. Focus on the last one that comes to mind. The quiet children often go unnoticed not just by you but by all the other adults (and children) in their lives. Notice them.

Prompt further talk

Go deeper with conversations by using prompts like:

- Why?
- Tell me more...
- What happened next?
- How did that feel?

- What were you expecting?
- What did you find surprising?
- Would you do it that way again?
- What went well?
- What could have been better?
- Keep going...

Curiosity

Children need adults who are curious, not furious, who explore their world with them at times of calm and who are prepared to try new things. You could try:

Wonder

What need is being met? When challenged by behaviour, get curious, common needs that underlie behaviour that challenges us include:

- Attention
- Basic physiological need (e.g. food/drink/toilet)
- Escape
- Sensory regulation
- Care or connection
- To be heard.

Use Toyota's '5 Whys' to explore tricky situations

In manufacturing, the five whys approach helps factory staff get to the crux of issues and develop ways forwards that solve the right problem rather than trying to fix an incorrect guess. Here's an example from a car production line. I have found it works well to help us explore repeated patterns of behaviour with children too:

- Why did the robot stop? The circuit overloaded causing a fuse to blow.
- Why did the circuit overload? There was insufficient lubrication on the bearings so they locked up.
- Why was there insufficient lubrication? The oil pump on the robot is not circulating sufficient oil.

- Why is the pump not circulating sufficient oil? The pump intake is clogged with metal shavings.
- Why is the intake clogged with metal shavings? Because there is no filter on the pump.

At times of calm, brainstorm ideas and reflect on what is working: Work with the child, be non-judgemental and consider yourselves scientists, hypothesising about what might help and figuring out some experiments to try next time and reflecting on your last experiments. They will not all work, but if you continue to be curious, you will find things that do work and the student will develop a sense of agency as they see some of the things they try impact on how they feel.

Working with colleagues

You could use the ideas in this article to explore team-wide approaches in your next staff meeting. I have put together a PowerPoint with all the salient points to help you or you could simply use the information in this article and open the discussion. You could explore each of the 5Cs and explore with the team questions like:

- What is already working well? This will highlight what you could do more of and islands of great practice within the team that could be shared more widely
- What could we try? This could help you to brainstorm different things that might work well in your setting
- What is our best next step? This will help you drill down to practical actions. Explore exactly what you will do next, and consider the what, when, who and how. In my experience, the best next steps are ones that feel small enough not to be intimidating so they can be tried right away whilst motivation is high.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

PowerPoint: <https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/bitesize-cpd-how-to-be-a-safe-adult/k>