

Safe and Caring Schools: Havens for the Mind

A resource guide
for parents and teachers



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Safe and Caring Schools: Havens for the Mind

If you have ever wondered if violence can actually affect the way we think and learn, wonder no more. Cognitive and neuroscientists agree—there is a link between threat and other forms of violence and impaired brain functioning. Strong emotions inspired by violence, such as anxiety or fear, can create what educational researcher Daniel Goleman calls “neural static,” and can sabotage the functioning of the brain’s prefrontal lobes where reasoning and higher-level thinking take place. According to Goleman, “. . . continual emotional distress can create deficits in a child’s intellectual abilities, crippling the capacity to learn.”

What is the bottom line?

For young people to do well in school, to learn to think critically and apply new knowledge and skills, we must remove all sources of threat, fear and anxiety. Students must feel safe and cared for in the entire school, from the classroom to the cafeteria to the washrooms and on the school grounds.

An environment in which intimidation and bullying are allowed to occur impedes the ability to learn and is especially hard on those students who are frequent victims of bullying and taunting. In extreme cases, prolonged exposure to violence and to frightening situations actually impairs students’ brains.

Is there a biological basis to aggression?

Researchers tell us that aggression is programmed into all of us—it is part of our nature and we have inborn mechanisms that tell us when we should attack, fight or flee when faced with extraordinary or threatening situations. Indeed, extreme reactions and aggression are evolutionary adaptations. Is there a person anywhere who wouldn’t flee a burning building, or a father or mother alive who wouldn’t fight to protect his or her child? However, researchers also assert that societal violence—violence for the sake of violence—is not endemic to humans. It is an aberration.

Violence can take many forms. The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities (SACSC) defines violence as *the actual or threatened use of physical, verbal, sexual or emotional power, intimidation or harassment by an individual or group that is harmful to the physical, psychological or social well-being of an individual or group.*

Recent breakthroughs in brain development research help us understand how violence affects how we think. To get a broader and more complete picture, though, let's first consider the development and structure of the brain, the physiological changes that occur when it perceives a threat and the relationship between intellect and the emotions. Then let's consider ways that teachers can help create safe and caring school environments where all students can live up to their full potential.

The human brain: Wonders never cease

The human brain is sophisticated, complicated and fascinating. It controls involuntary movements, like the beating of our hearts and the functioning of our kidneys, and it is also the seat of our language, our loves and hates, our intellect and personality. In short, this "most complex matter in the universe" is what makes us, us.

The brain is clearly an extraordinary organ. Unlike a liver or muscles, though, it requires emotional nourishment in addition to physical nourishment to grow and be healthy.

The anatomy and development of the brain

Each area of the brain (the cerebrum, which constitutes about 85 percent of the weight of the brain, the cerebellum and the brain stem) is composed principally of nerve cells, or neurons. The neurons have spiny branches called dendrites that extend from the body of the cell and that receive input from the organism's environment or from other neurons. Axons, long thin extensions of the neuron, carry messages away. The more positive stimulation and enrichment a brain receives, the more these small, tree-like dendrites branch out. Branching dendrites also thicken the cortex, the part of the brain that analyzes, processes and stores information and enables higher mental abilities, such as remembering, speaking and thinking.

The primary years

In the first 30 months of life, the brain triples in size and grows from 50 to 75 percent of its adult weight. During this time, the brain's "hard wiring" forms, as well as the basic aspects of personality and temperament. In other words, a child's earliest experiences shape everything that follows in life. During the first years of life, babies' brains develop dramatically—within two years, a helpless baby develops motor skills and senses and learns to perceive and engage with the world.

Studies have found that nurturing is especially important during a child's first years; children who are loved and receive attention show growth in their frontal cortex. Studies also show that the more stress and insecurity a child faces in the earlier years, the more neural networks form in the areas of the brain where the fight-or-flight responses reside.

The middle years

By the age of 10, the brain reaches 90 percent of its adult weight. Starting at about the age of 11, the brain grows in spurts till it reaches full adult weight at about the age of 15. During the middle years, children start to learn independence, logic, reasoning and problem-solving skills. They also develop talents—the skills learned during these years when neural circuits are still forming often set the stage for performance in later life. Dendritic branching continues to occur during these years, and the brain begins a selective process of pruning unused neural networks.

The teen years

The teenaged brain completes the pruning process; rarely used neural connections wither away and the brain's use of energy decreases by one-third. However, dendritic trees in the cortex can still grow and cause the cortex to thicken if the brain continues to receive stimulation. So, despite the tailing off of the liveliness of the brain that characterized their childhood years, teenagers continue to develop psychologically and cognitively and to develop what the psychologist Piaget called "formal operational thinking."

What happens in the brain when it perceives a threat

Recent breakthroughs in brain research have revealed some alarming information. Witnessing or being part of a violent act interferes with the anatomy and chemistry of the brain—the parts of the brain that house our primal instincts are stimulated, while the frontal cortex, which houses our ability to think, is suppressed.

Here's what happens.

When a person perceives a threat—be it emotional, physical or intellectual—an instinctual survival mechanism, known as “fight or flight,” kicks in. Heart rate and blood pressure increase. Reason is suspended as the brain seeks ways for the body to escape the impending threat. When in fight-or-flight mode, the brain

- reverts to repetitive behaviors;
- loses the ability to distinguish patterns, perceive relationships and analyze;
- experiences a diminished capacity for memory; and
- releases a flood of hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, that put the body on alert and suppress memory and reasoning ability.

The signal of a threat bypasses the visual cortex and goes straight to the amygdala (an almond-shaped group of nuclei located in the temporal lobe) which triggers an emotional response before the cortical centres have fully understood what is happening.

In other words, a person exposed to threats or violence literally cannot think straight. Concentration is broken and reason delayed. And it doesn't end there. A traumatized brain stores sensory reminders of the upsetting event in combination with the neurochemical reactions the event triggered. The result is what researchers call post-traumatic stress symptoms. Even innocent reminders of the events—for example, an article dropped with a startling bang—can trigger an unwanted, but unstoppable, reaction before the rational mind can step in to restore calm.

The effect of chronic or repeated stress

The events listed above are normal. We cannot help them. When faced with a threatening situation, our mind searches for ways to preserve life. Reason and rationality are not necessarily part of that process. A real danger arises, though, when the stress or threat is

repeated or chronic. Under these conditions, an excess of cortisol and adrenaline flood the brain, which then “rewires” itself over time to be in a constant state of alarm; attention span is reduced and higher order thinking, memory and complex learning are impaired in the long term. In addition, chronic stress or threat can damage neurons in the cortex, where the capacity for memory is stored, and may weaken the immune system. In extreme cases, a person may even lose the ability to connect and empathize with others, increasing the potential for that person to become violent him- or herself.

How do we reverse the effects? The Four A's of Safe and Caring Schools

Because the brain would appear to organize itself in response to experience, we need to shield our children from the kind of experiences that have the potential to damage them. To counter the effect of violence, schools must strive to create an ethos which encourages a culture of non-violence and which engenders in students a feeling of responsibility and empathy for each other.

The following four A's for creating a safe and caring school are adapted from the work of Brendtro and Long (1995):

- **Attachment:** The creation of positive social bonds helps encourage pro-social behavior.
- **Achievement:** Students should be encouraged to fulfill their academic potential and realize that learning occurs both through success and failure.
- **Autonomy:** Teaching responsibility instead of demanding obedience helps students create and put into action their own ethical code.
- **Altruism:** Young people gain a sense of self-worth from helping others.

The relationship between emotion and reason

Passion and reason have long been held to be diametrically opposed; Goleman calls this a “folk distinction.” In reality, the emotional and rational mind work in close harmony for the most part. Indeed, our emotions tend to direct and guide reason and behavior. We know, for example, that those who have sustained brain damage in the area where emotions are controlled often

have trouble making wise decisions in their lives. We also know that other factors, such as threat, can impede the brain's ability to reason. On the other hand, positive emotions—feelings of achievement, success, self-worth—act as tonics on the brain and increase the brain's own natural production of serotonin.

What is serotonin?

Serotonin is a neural transmitter that helps regulate self-esteem, control impulses, smooth motor co-ordination, enhance relaxation and regulate many bodily functions, from cardiovascular functioning to appetite, mood, sexual activity and behavior.

According to evolutionary psychologists, each personal success one achieves increases the level of serotonin in the brain, leading to an enhanced feeling of self-esteem and calm, which, in turn, enhances the ability to concentrate and learn; conversely, low levels of serotonin are associated with low self-esteem, low social status, irritability and depression which may lead to aggression, violence or suicide.

Prolonged periods of stress or exposure to threatening situations increase the brain's need for serotonin. Although serotonin levels can be artificially enhanced by the use of drugs (such as Prozac), the best way to keep serotonin levels high is through positive social feedback. Educator Robert Sylwester (1997) notes that "positive feedback in the classroom is a powerful social device for helping us to assess and define ourselves (self-concept) and to value ourselves (self-esteem). Serotonin research adds biological support to some educational practices that enhance self-esteem. . . . Cognitive science research is now providing some welcome biological support for practices that many educators have felt were *simply right*."

In other words, young people who feel good about themselves have a physical advantage—their serotonin level remains constant. A child with a positive self-image has a better built-in defence mechanism against violent and upsetting acts.

Nipping violence in the bud—What teachers can do to ensure a safe and caring school

Teachers cannot be all places at all times. They often don't know if intimidation or harassment is occurring. Furthermore, victims of violence are often afraid to come forward, either for fear of reprisal

or out of embarrassment. Still there are some telltale signs that a student is being victimized. These include

- frequent absenteeism, class skipping;
- frequently missing belongings or money which the student claims are lost;
- uncharacteristic difficulty finishing assignments;
- a change in demeanor—a usually happy student becomes uncommunicative;
- unexplained bruising, disheveled clothing;
- physical complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches;
- reluctance to leave the classroom or go out with peers during breaks;
- adoption of nervous mannerisms, withdrawal;
- crying; and/or
- apathy, depression.

If any of these signs are observed, the teacher should talk to the student privately to ascertain if the student is being victimized. The teacher should also consult the school's guidance counsellor and the student's parents.

What can a teacher do to prevent violence?

Teachers have a critical role to play in adopting and promoting effective anti-harassment and anti-violence policies and programs. Teachers must

- show that they care;
- recognize the impact of violence, threat and harassment on learning, health and students' future prospects;
- recognize the positive influence of personal success on students' ability to learn;
- take all incidents involving any form of violence seriously;
- get to know students as well as the behaviors associated with harassers and victims;
- be visible in and around the school;
- challenge disrespectful behavior and attitudes that encourage silence or dismiss the seriousness of violent incidents;
- encourage students to report bullying and harassment;

- ensure that students know that you will respond to inappropriate behaviours and that they can turn to you for help;
- support and encourage a safe and caring atmosphere in the classroom and throughout the school;
- integrate safe and caring concepts and instructional methods in their teaching practice; and
- use a problem-solving approach to deal with inappropriate behaviour.

Punishment versus problem solving

One of the major objectives of the Society for SACSC is to get adults to respond to students' inappropriate behaviour with a problem-solving mind-set. Vicki Mather, executive director of the Society for SACSC, reviewed research from social development and behaviour-related disciplines as well as the work of prominent educational psychologists. The punishment and problem-solving paradigms were constructed by Mather to summarize the findings.

In the problem-solving approach, the young person becomes part of the solution; instead of punishing bad behaviour, the goal is for the young person to learn a better way to behave. To help achieve this goal, teachers and parents can consider the contrast between a punishment approach, which allows students to abdicate responsibility for anti-social behaviour and imposes an external set of rules on them, and the problem-solving approach, which, while treating misbehaving students with dignity, nevertheless seeks to instill a sense of personal responsibility and a desire to behave better. In the problem-solving paradigm students are expected to *fix* the wrongs they commit.

Punishment paradigm versus the problem-solving paradigm

<i>Punishment</i>		<i>Problem Solving</i>
focused on mistakes	vs	focused on making things right
external control	vs	intrinsic motivation (values and character)
rewards and punishment	vs	recognition, restitution and logical consequences
abdication of responsibility	vs	assumption of responsibility
exclusion/expulsion	vs	belonging/resocialization
one consequence fits all	vs	being treated with respect and dignity
moral condemnation (a fight against delinquents)	vs	preventive education and interagency approach (a fight against delinquency)
intimidation	vs	respect
retaliation	vs	forgiveness and reconciliation
discipline imposed	vs	discipline as a way to learn to behave better
7 × spending on the justice and penal systems	vs	1 × spending on prevention and early intervention

A problem-solving approach to dealing with violent students and bullies is aimed at preventing a recurrence of the violent or harassing behavior. However, modeling and teaching pro-social skills are also vital to reducing violence in our schools and communities.

The personal touch: Handling aggressors, victims and witnesses

Part of a teacher's strategy for creating a safe and caring environment in schools is to understand how to handle all involved parties. Teachers should intervene in all incidents of violence, reported or not.

Dealing with aggressors

- Stay calm and talk to the student alone.
- Get the facts—the names of the people involved, the sequence of events, etc.
- Find out why the harassment occurred.
- Be firm—set limits, assign consequences that offer help and alternative behaviors.
- Talk to the student's parents.
- Build skills—the aggressive student must learn to recognize and correct negative behaviors.
- Aid reconciliation—discuss how the offender can make amends.
- Monitor behavior and follow up with both the student and the parents.

Dealing with victims

- Stay calm and talk to the victim alone.
- Get the facts—the names of the people involved, the sequence of events, etc.
- Offer support—assure the student that reporting was the best thing and ask the person what it will take to feel safe again. Be sure the student's parents are contacted.
- Make arrangements for the student to go to a safe place.
- Practise effective responses—involve the students in groups or situations where they can make friends.

- Affirm their courage in reporting the incident.
- Monitor the situation and follow up with the student and parents.

Dealing with witnesses

- Stay calm and talk to those involved separately.
- Get the facts, including the names, what was observed, circumstances and location.
- Emphasize that it takes courage to report harassment.
- Reaffirm that everyone has a responsibility to make schools safe and caring.

Creating a safe and caring school

Everyone in society has a responsibility to help inoculate young people against violence by providing and promoting a safe and caring environment, not just in school.

As we all know, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

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The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities (SACSC) Resources



The Society for SACSC, formerly the ATA's Safe and Caring Schools Project, resources and materials are available through Alberta Learning's Resources Centre (LRC), 12360 142 St. NW, Edmonton, Alberta, T5L 4X9. Tel: 427-5775 in Edmonton. Elsewhere in Alberta call 310-0000 and ask for the LRC or fax (780) 422-9750. To place Internet orders, visit www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca *These materials are eligible for the Learning Resources Credit Allocation (25% discount). Contact the LRC for details.

The SACSC has four program areas and an inventory of promotional items:

I. SUPPORTING A SAFE AND CARING SCHOOL

This program area helps build a SACS culture. It includes information about SACS, an assessment tool to aid in planning and quick, easy-to-read booklets that review current research on SACS topics and successful programs.

- Safe and Caring Schools in Alberta Presentation: video, overheads and 30 brochures
 # 445297 \$15.00
- The ATA's Safe and Caring Schools Project: An Overview (K-12) (Pkg of 30) Describes the origin and objectives of the project (2001, 4 pp.)
 # 445298 \$ 6.80
- Attributes of a Safe and Caring School (K-12) (Pkg of 30) A brochure for elementary, junior and senior high schools, describing the characteristics of a safe and caring school (1999)
 # 445313 \$ 6.80
- The ATA's Safe and Caring Schools Project: Elementary Booklet Series (16 booklets) (K-6) (see LRC website)
 # 445610 \$11.50
- The ATA's Safe and Caring Schools Project: Secondary Booklet Series (15 booklets) (7-12) (see LRC website)
 # 445628 \$10.80
- Preschool Bullying: What You Can Do About It—A Guide for Parents and Caregivers (1-6) Provides advice on what parents can do if their child is being bullied or is bullying others (2000, 24 pp.)
 # 445347 \$1.43 ea for 10 or more \$2.85 ea
- Bullying: What You Can Do About It—A Guide for Primary Level Students (K-3) Contains stories and exercises to help children deal with bullies and to stop bullying others (1999, 28 pp.)
 # 445397 \$1.48 ea for 10 or more \$2.95 ea
- Bullying: What You Can Do About It—A Guide for Parents and Teachers of Primary Level Students Contains tips to help teachers and parents identify and respond to children who are involved in bullying (2000, 12 pp.)
 # 445454 \$1.33 ea for 10 or more \$2.65 ea

Bullying: What You Can Do About It—A Guide for Upper-Elementary Students and Their Parents Directed at students who are the victims, witnesses or perpetrators of bullying, and their parents (2000, 16 pp.)
 # 445321 \$1.50 ea for 10 or more \$3.00 ea

Bullying in Schools: What You Can Do About It—A Teacher's Guide (1–6) Describes strategies that teachers can follow to stop bullying in schools (1997, 10 pp.)
 # 445339 \$1.33 ea for 10 or more \$2.65 ea

Beyond Bullying: A Booklet for Junior High Students (7–9) Explains what students should do if they are being bullied or if they see someone else being bullied (2000, 12 pp.)
 #445470 \$1.48 ea for 10 or more \$2.95 ea

Beyond Bullying: What You Can Do To Help—A Handbook for Parents and Teachers of Junior High Students (7–9) Defines bullying behaviors and suggests strategies that parents and teachers can follow to deal with it (1999, 16 pp.)
 # 445488 \$1.33 ea for 10 or more \$2.65 ea

Bullying is Everybody's Problem: Do You Have the Courage to Stop It? (Pkg of 30) (7–12) A guide for senior high students, defines bullying and provides advice on how to respond to it (1999)
 # 445305 \$4.76 for 10 or more pkgs \$6.80/pkg

Bullying and Harassment: Everybody's Problem—A Senior High Staff and Parent Resource (10–12) Provides advice for parents and teachers of high school students on how to deal with bullying (2000, 12 pp.)
 # 445496 \$1.30 ea for 10 or more \$2.60 ea

Class Meetings for Safe and Caring Schools (K–12) Explains how regular class meetings can help teachers and students work out conflicts before they become major problems (1998, 20 pp)
 # 445587 \$1.33 ea for 10 or more \$2.65 ea

Expecting Respect: The Peer Education Project—A School-Based Learning Model (K–12) Provides an overview of Expecting Respect, a project that trains junior and senior high students to make classroom presentations on establishing healthy social relationships (1999, 16 pp.)
 # 445462 \$1.33 ea for 10 or more \$2.65 ea

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Classroom Management: A Thinking and Caring Approach Written by Barrie Bennett and Peter Smilanich, this manual outlines numerous strategies that teachers can use to cope with misbehavior in the classroom and create a learning environment that encourages student learning (1994, 342 pp.)

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SACS series of six full-color posters A series of six full-color posters highlighting the Project's key concepts.

☐ # 444836 \$ 9.00

III. TOWARD A SAFE AND CARING PROFESSION

The Society's SACSC Project trains inservice leaders and workshop facilitators.

The following workshops are designed to help teachers implement the curriculum resources.

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IV. TOWARD A SAFE AND CARING COMMUNITY

This program area is designed to help all adults who work with children—parents, teachers, coaches, youth group leaders, music instructors—model and reinforce positive social behavior, whether at school, at home or in the community. The community program includes a series of

2-2½ hour workshops for adults and older teens.

Living Respectfully*

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Who Cares? brochures (Pkg of 30) Provides background on the Safe and Caring Communities Project, a collaborative effort between the ATA and Lions Clubs of Alberta (1998)

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Who Cares? CD-ROM and brochure Describes the Safe and Caring Communities Project, a collaborative effort between the ATA and the Lions Clubs of Alberta (1998)

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Who Cares? video and brochure Describes the Safe and Caring Communities Project, a collaborative effort between the ATA and the Lions Clubs of Alberta (1997, 11 minutes)

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Toward a Safe and Caring Community Workshops Action Handbook: A Guide to Implementation Provides specific information about how to implement the ATA's Safe and Caring Schools Project—Toward a Safe and Caring Community Program.

In addition, the handbook provides suggested activities and strategies to help communities continue to work on issues related to enhancing respect and responsibility among children and teens.

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☐ # 455312 \$ 7.00

SACS PROMOTIONAL ITEMS

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Niska hand puppet Featuring the Niska mascot.

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444571 \$ 4.00

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444604 \$ 5.45

Safe and Caring Schools pencils (Pkg of 30) Inscribed with "Toward a Safe & Caring Community."

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Niska T-Shirt (white, featuring the Niska mascot front and back)

444745 adult X-large; # 444737 adult large; # 444729 adult medium;

444711 adult small; # 444703 youth X-large; # 444696 youth large;

444688 youth medium; # 444670 youth small \$10.50

SACS men's golf shirt (white, featuring the Niska mascot) # 444787 X-large;

444779 large; # 444761 medium; # 444753 small \$24.95

SACS women's golf shirt (white, sleeveless, featuring the Niska mascot)

444828 X-large; # 444810 large; # 444802 medium;

444795 small \$24.45

*All workshop materials can be ordered from the SACS office by inservice leaders and workshop facilitators who have successfully completed the training: e-mail <office@sacsc.ca> fax (780) 455-6481 or phone (780) 447-9487.

PRICES SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE

SACSC Booklets on Bullying

Preschool bullying: What you can do about it (A guide for parents and caregivers)

Bullying: What you can do about it (A guide for primary level students)

Bullying: What you can do about it (a guide for parents and teachers of primary level students)

Bullying: What you can do about it (a guide for upper elementary students and their parents)

Bullying in Schools: What you can do about it (a teacher's guide)

Beyond Bullying (a booklet for junior high students)

Beyond Bullying—What you can do to help (a handbook for junior high school students)

Bullying is everybody's problem—Do you have the courage to stop it? (a brochure for senior high students)

Bullying is Everybody's Problem (a senior high staff and parent resource)

SACSC Respecting Diversity Series

Visit www.sacsc.ca to download booklets from the diversity series and explore a variety of resources for teachers, parents and other members of our communities.

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Safe and Caring Schools for Students of All Races: A Guide for Teachers

Safe and Caring Schools for Newcomer Students: A Guide for Teachers

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