

A short guide to

Safe spaces for learning



Lifeworlds
Learning

What is this?

Some of the issues that are raised by the animation *Learning to Thrive* might provoke strong feelings, emotions and reactions. These may be based on the subject matter of the animation, but could also be due to personal experiences or connections for those watching it. People may also react because they are discomfited by the thinking it creates or frustrated by their own abilities to act or respond.

It is natural when we feel such emotions to sometimes close down and keep them to ourselves, perhaps even removing ourselves from a situation where we might feel exposed. This can lead to feeling even worse however and does not always provide the space and support needed to embrace our feelings and find ways to thrive with them.

Creating safe spaces for dialogue, exchange and learning can be a useful approach to help people become more comfortable with their discomfort; to honour any pain or frustration they may be feeling; and, to relate with others to find solidarity, compassion and inspiration in moving beyond the moment.

The ideas we share here are designed to support adults to engage young people, and perhaps each other also, with the issues raised in the animation and the ways in which it relates to their own lives, experiences, hopes and concerns. You do not need to be a teacher or educationalist to use these ideas, but if you are then you might use them to reflect on your current practice.

Why a safe space?

Dealing with challenging or controversial issues can lead to strong emotional (and sometimes very personal) responses from children and young people. It is important that as adults we are able to support them to engage with these issues in a caring, but still critical manner. Active consideration, and co-creation of a safe space can be an effective way to achieve this.

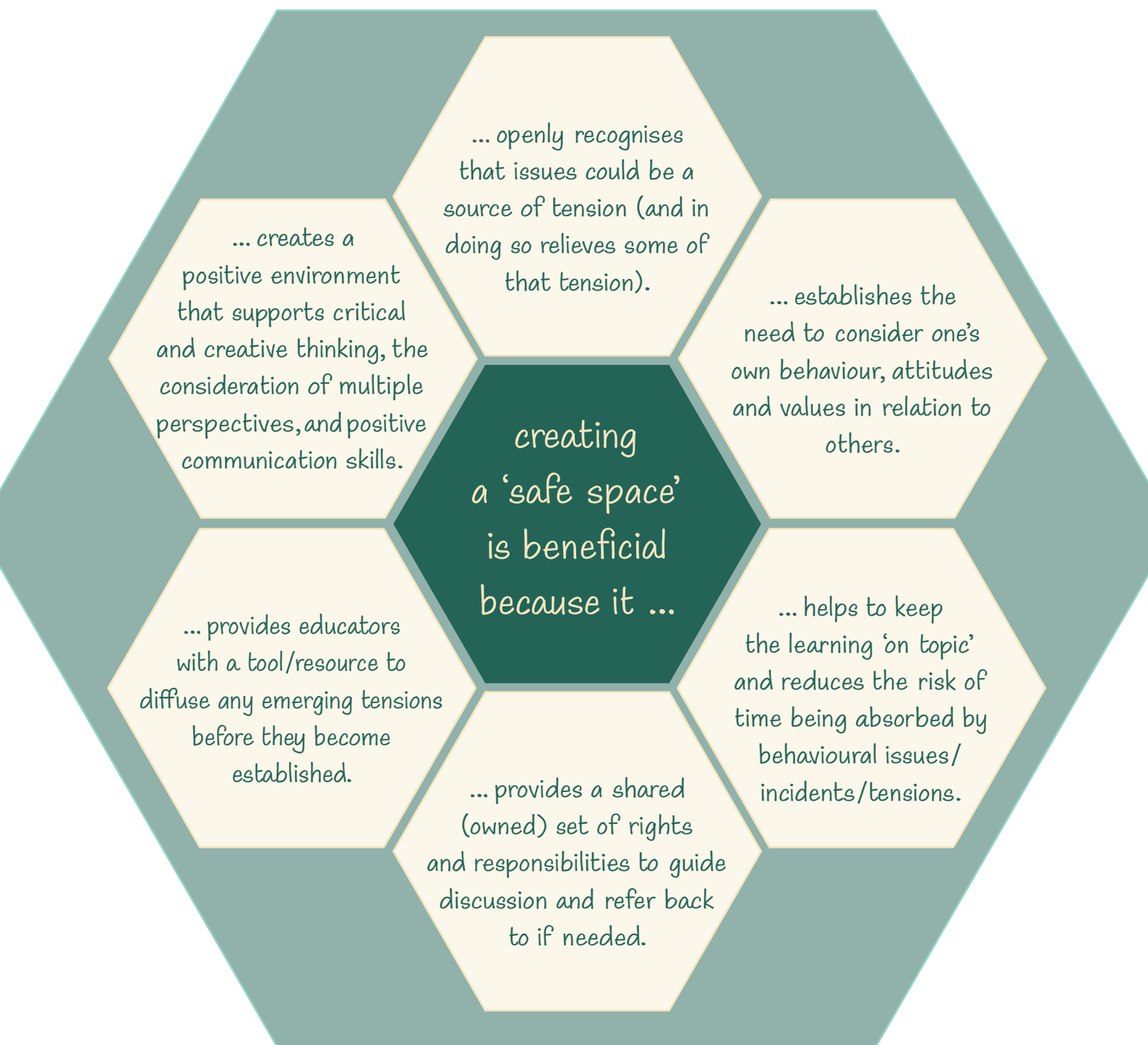
Creating a safe space does not mean protecting or shielding young people from issues, ideas or conversations that may be challenging or create discomfort or sensitivity. Whilst we should always be mindful of not causing harm or creating situations that young people may find purposefully upsetting or offensive, neither should we shy away from enabling them to grapple with the sorts of real-life issues that they are already dealing with:

“Children’s experience is replete with ethical concerns and issues, though they may be only dimly aware of this. And through television, the Internet and other media, children today are exposed to ideas and images which not so long ago would have been reserved for adults. Like adults, children often perceive the world as a jumble of alternative possibilities.”

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The complexity of many real-life issues requires viewpoint diversity which will not come from spaces that are defined as safe by closing down dialogue and perspectives. Quite the opposite. We need safe spaces to be understood as opening up to create learning opportunities and environments that are caring, critical, creative and collaborative. Such spaces can help young people to make sense of their own ideas, through considering those of others and being exposed to new insights and perspectives from beyond their current sphere of influence.

Understood in this way the process of creating a safe space can bring multiple benefits:



Reflection point: finding myself

The uncertain nature of the issues that safe spaces might be used for can unseat the educator as the expert and position them more as a facilitator and participant than a teacher. The space needs to be safe for the educator too! For example, to enable them to be honest when they do not have an answer to an issue that is raised.

Before using a safe space it is a good idea to reflect on how you will approach the use of safe spaces as an educator and how the relationship you have with young people might shift as a result.

Creating a 'safe space'

There are no fixed rules about what makes up a safe space and the boundaries agreed by one community might be slightly different to those of another. That said, the following prompts might prove useful in helping you move through the process of creating a safe space.

Embrace uncertainty and complexity

It can help to share with children and young people that an issue or topic is complex and that there may not always be answers to their questions or ideas. This can help to introduce how a safe space is a different sort of learning environment to those that they may be used to.

Connect with experience

Ask children or young people with whom they feel comfortable and safe to share their deepest thoughts or emotions with.* Without asking about any particular thing or person, ask them to think about what it is about that relationship that makes them feel safe. You can use these ideas to collectively shape the safe space.

Explore provocations

It can be useful to use provocations to stimulate thinking about the safe space you want to create. Examples might include:

- what will we do if someone is obviously upset about something?
- what if I completely disagree with a particular perspective?

Language and sentence starters

It can be useful to think about the sorts of language that might help to make it a safe space. Ideas of 'right' or 'wrong' for example are unusual in such settings and so language such as 'agree' or 'disagree' are more appropriate to model and use. This can develop into sentence starters to further model with examples such as:

- I'd like to challenge the idea that shared because
- In my experience

Physical space and organisation

Relaxing normal expectations around the use of physical space can help in the creation of safe spaces. You might like to use a circle of chairs or sit on the ground/cushions for example. If possible, you could choose to use outside spaces. You might also like to think about how you organise participation in the space, perhaps providing opportunities for paired, small group exchanges and sharing, to reduce or vary whole-group exposure. This can allow different voices to come to the fore within the space.

Opening and closing the space

As a 'safe space' may be used to engage with children and young people in ways that are different to normal lessons, it can be beneficial to have a clear opening and closing of the space. This can be done through checking-in and checking-out of the space with a shared feeling or thought.

Thinking (checking) through opposition

If you find it hard to think about what should make up a safe space then it can sometimes be useful to 'think in opposition' and consider what makes a space feel 'unsafe' and then build a safe space using the counter conditions to these. This can also be a useful check for when you think you have covered everything.

* This may raise sensitive issues so you may need to rephrase accordingly. It may also bring things to the fore that you were not aware of. These may require appropriate follow-up and in some circumstances may necessitate referral to relevant safeguarding procedures.

A Safe Space Agreement

The ideas shared on the previous page can end with the creation of a Safe Space Agreement. This can be written up on a whiteboard, flipchart or just a sheet of paper and should remain visible throughout the safe space session for all of those present.

Here is an example of what a typical Safe Space Agreement might look like, but it is essential to remember that the act of co-creating it with children and young people is the most important part of the process and goes a significant way in establishing the space. The example below is illustrative only and not a set of predetermined rules.



NOTE: Once a Safe Space Agreement is in place it should not be treated as static or fixed. Anyone in the space should feel able to add to, or amend the agreement to suit the direction of the dialogue and emerging issues. The same principle should apply if you choose to use the agreement over several sessions, with the opportunity to review and refine any agreement forming part of opening up the safe space.