

# How to Create and Use a “Safe Space” in Schools

**Advice from the Primary Behaviour Support Service**

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## Setting Up A Safe Space

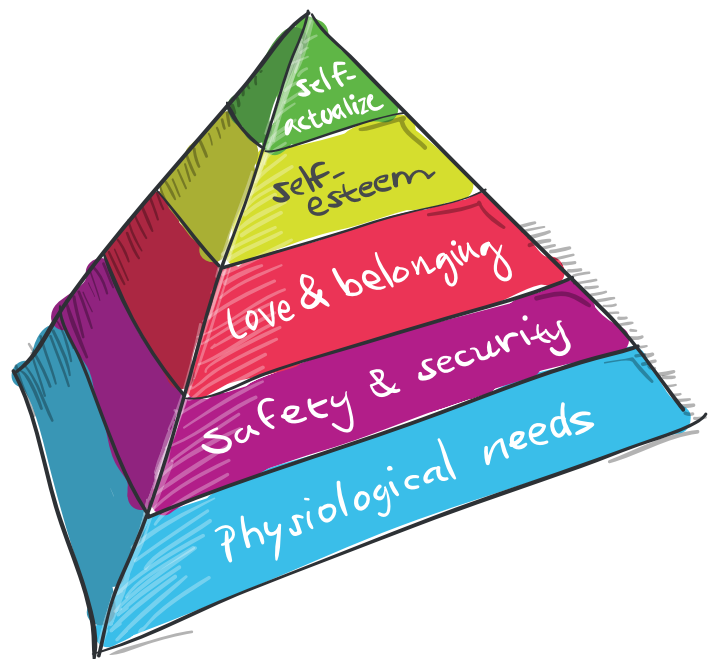
A safe space is a designated area that is used by someone who is feeling overwhelmed by their emotions and needs some time away from intense or difficult situations to calm. Children who are feeling anxious, angry, upset, afraid or even excited may benefit from having a private space that they can go to for some time to regulate their emotions.

It provides a calm, low stimulation environment and is an asset in busy classrooms. Safe spaces can help where there is a wide range of needs amongst students.

They can be used as part of an individual’s crisis management plan. It can help reduce the number of crisis situations as it can offer a less restrictive option than manual “holding” to prevent physical injury to others from an unsettled pupil.

Safe spaces serve every kind of pupil. For some, the space might give them a brief pause from a tough day. For others, it can be so much more. Safe spaces are often cited for helping those suffering from intense levels of stress or trauma. They are essential to every classroom because children cannot learn when they do not feel safe.

A safe space, also known as a calming area, is easy to set up and does not have to be costly. It can be a very effective strategy when used well and is often recommended for children who find it difficult to self-regulate.



## How Do I Set Up A Safe Space?

Where possible, educators should discuss the safe space with their class before setting it up. By involving pupils in the planning and designing of the calming area, we are enabling them to feel a sense of ownership. They will then want to take care of it and respect those who choose to use it. We want to help children to understand that they’re not at fault for having lots of conflicting emotions and that these emotions are common to everyone, regardless of age, ability, or background.



## Locating

Deciding on a location to put the safe space is important. It must be accessible so that it can be used consistently. Children will only rely on using the designated area instead of becoming physically aggressive or attempting to abscond from the perceived threat if it is available at times of crisis. It is important to note that it will take time before children will be able to independently identify that it would be in their best interests to use a safe space. Initially, use of the safe space needs to be guided and encouraged.

The calming area also needs to have the option of privacy. In a heightened state, an audience can escalate the situation, and may cause further disruption to the rest of the class.

Deciding where to place your calming area will depend on the set up of the room. Some educators are fortunate enough to have small rooms that join up to or are next door to their classroom. However, if this is not available, using a corner of your classroom with carefully placed shelving or screens can still be just as effective. Where this is difficult to do, a pop-up tent can also be used as a safe space.



## Décor

The area should have minimal on display and natural or soft pastel colours should be used. Further sensory input will only heighten the situation. Clutter and bright colours may overstimulate and have an adverse effect on a child who is attempting to regulate their emotions.

If the safe space is set up in a room away from the main classroom, adding fairy lights to the ceiling, and softening the light coming into the room by using voile or cellophane will create a relaxing environment.



## Resourcing

The resources in a calming area may change from time to time and identifying what is effective may differ from one pupil to the next.

The space is there to provide comfort. Both positive and negative feelings can be overwhelming. Adding cushions, a blanket or a teddy can provide comfort for those children who seek it.

Some children need a way to channel their pent-up anger so providing resources that they can push, pull or squeeze will allow them to relieve some of the tension they are feeling.





There are also children who find deep pressure calming. Having weighted resources such as blankets, neck wraps, lap pads, cushions, body wraps or teddies can be an extremely effective tool to support de-escalation. It is important to note that weighted resources need to be appropriate for the child's height and weight.

Calming sensory stimulus may also help reduce stress levels. Using sand or liquid timers or having sensory lights such as fibre optic lamps can provide children with something to focus on rather than fixating on the trigger.

Resources should be kept in a calming/sensory basket unless they are being used. In the peak of a crisis, these resources are unlikely to be effective and may be thrown. Timing is important. If they are stored away when a child enters the safe space, they can quickly be moved if it is felt they will not be used appropriately at that time.

## How Do I Use A Safe Space?

There are several factors to consider when using a safe space. There is no clear way of using a calming area and the approach to using this space will differ from child to child. It may also differ from one incident to the next. For some children, it will be used as a preventative measure and for others, it will be an end point.

The key is to educate the class on the benefits of the safe space. Let them know when to use it and the cues that might indicate they to take need a break. Encourage them to choose the designated area to regulate and then return to the classroom activity when they feel ready.

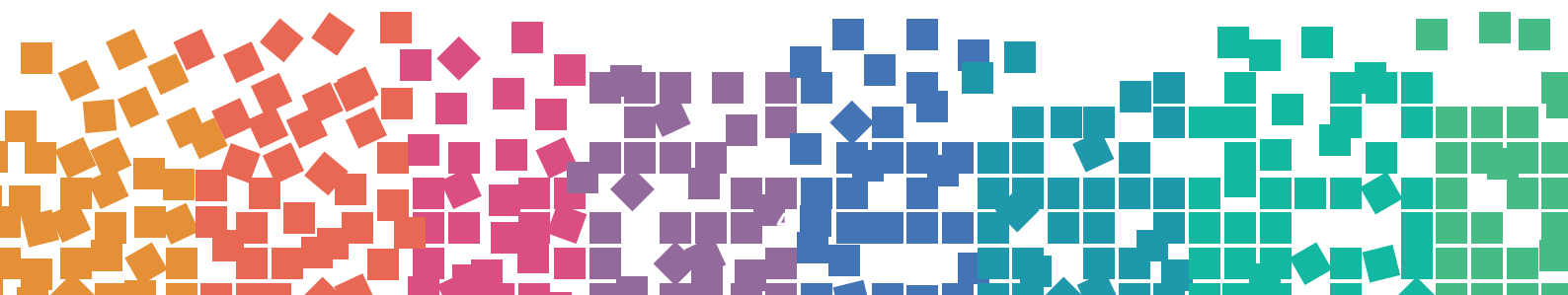


Once kids see that it is okay and “normal” to get upset or need a break, they begin using safe spaces voluntarily for their own unique needs. This is social-emotional learning in action.

We must also emphasise that it is not a punishment, rather a choice.

## The Safe Space To Preventing A Crisis

With some pupils, it can be easy to identify when they are feeling unsettled. They may start to fidget, they may become non-verbal, they may start to line up stationary, or they may hide. At this point, a trusted member of staff would step alongside the pupil and try and identify the trigger and address it. If the pupil will not engage, offer them a way out of the situation by asking if they'd like to stay where they are or to use the safe space. By providing a closed choice, children will feel as though they have a sense of control. In the majority of cases, the child will choose to go into the calming area.



Once in the calming area, staff should provide the pupil with the option of having an adult nearby or whether they would prefer some time alone. For some pupils, particularly those who do not trust, it may be intimidating having someone close by when they are feeling unsettled. Providing them with space can help them to relax. If this is the case, a timer should be set when the adult will return to support the transition back into the group. On the other hand, many pupils like to have close contact and prefer to have the adult on standby for reassurance. Again, a timer should be used to indicate how long they will have to calm.

During time out, children may choose to use something from the sensory basket, they may choose to hide under the blanket, or they may choose to talk. This is very much dependent on the child.

The time it takes for the child to feel calm enough to return to the class can sometimes depend on the adult who is supporting them. If you have a particularly challenging pupil, ensure they have a key adult and a trusting relationship is actively worked on.

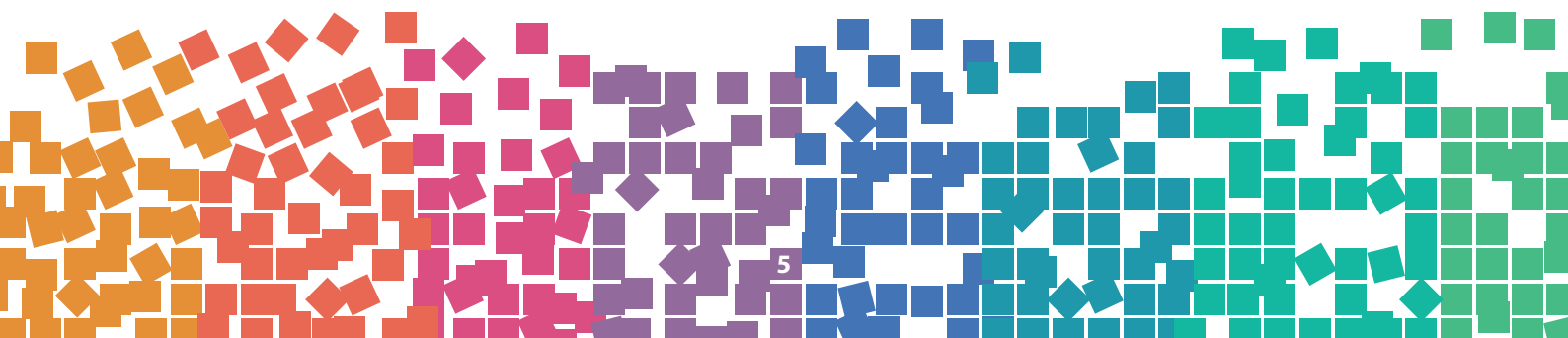
## The Safe Space As A Crisis Strategy

When a child is in crisis, it is difficult for them to communicate. They may be verbally abusive or physically aggressive which may give the impression that they do not want support, but this is when they need it most. During a crisis, the parts of the brain concerned with speech production and speech comprehension are inhibited so it is not advisable to attempt to engage in conversation with a child. Adults supporting a child in crisis should use short, explicit statements with no room for misinterpretation.



If your school uses positive handling techniques such as Team Teach, and de-escalation attempts have failed, the pupil should be guided or escorted to the safe space. Follow these steps to support them to understand their feelings, and to develop strategies to help them calm.

- Firstly, ensure you acknowledge his/her feelings. If the child reacts aggressively when you try to talk to them, he/she is not ready to listen and needs more time. This may be in a designated space using calming toys. Use calm talk and reassure the child that the feeling he/she is experiencing is normal. Label the feeling when they are ready to hear it.
- Once the child has started to calm, provide him/her with two clear options: "Are you ready to talk about this now?" or "Do you need 5 more minutes in your safe place to calm?"
- Listen if they are ready to share, do not interrupt or judge. Telling a child where they have made an error will only fuel his/her upset. Allow them to express themselves. Empathise with the child no matter how small the trigger may appear to be. Reassure, helping them feel understood.
- After the emotional intensity has passed and the child is visibly calm, talk to them about the incident calmly. Some children will benefit from a comic strip approach so that they can see what has happened from another's perspective.
- Reflect with the child, reassuring them that it is okay to feel frustrated/angry/upset. Identify a strategy to use the next time that they are feeling this way. It is important to note, that it is unlikely the child will use the identified strategy straight away and will need support to do so.



## Setting Up A Plan

We need to support all children to recognise their emotions and to handle them safely, but some need more time and attention than others. Consistent approaches embed new patterns of behaviours.

Children who continuously find it difficult to regulate their emotions need have an action plan put into place for when they are feeling overwhelmed. The plan should be decided, written and agreed by the pupil, their class teacher and their key adult. The plan will state where the child will go (safe space), who they will be with (supported or unsupported), how long the child will go there for (usually five - ten minutes) and what they will do whilst they are in there (calming activity). The plan should also detail who will approach the child once the time is up. Following the steps above will support with the transition back into the class.

Once the plan has been decided, it must be followed consistently for it to be effective. Consistency builds trust, and when pupils trust, they are more accepting of support. As a result, there should be a reduction in incidents. The incidents may decrease in duration and/or frequency.



*A SAFE SPACE  
for small children with  
BIG feelings*