

Safe and Welcoming Environment

School is one of the safest environments in which children engage in physical activity. As professional educators working directly with students, educators have a legal and ethical duty to keep students safe, and this is reflected in their professional training and in-school policies. The focus then becomes whether physical activity in schools is welcoming to all.

If a Student Does Not Feel Safe, They Won't Feel Welcome

There are different types of safety that educators need to consider.

Physical safety: In most physical activities there are inherent risks of physical injury, from falls, or from collisions with other participants.

These risks can be minimized, but not avoided, by ensuring:

- well-fitting footwear with properly tied laces;
- equipment is in good working order, properly used, and developmentally appropriate;
- consistent application of physical activity rules with students trained to respond to an emergency “stop everything” signal;
- students are warmed up before vigorous activity; and
- when students work together they are grouped with peers of similar size and weight.

Other physical risks can be avoided through:

- playing surfaces with sufficient space around them to avoid students colliding with walls, furniture or other obstacles;
- modifying outdoor activities for excessive heat, humidity, or cold; and
- careful inspection of outdoor playing surfaces to ensure there are no dangerous objects (broken glass, garbage) or surface irregularities that might cause injuries.

Psychological safety: Is about building up students' confidence, and removing their anxiety about trying new activities and their fear of failing in front of their friends.



Confidence and enjoyment can be increased if educators set physical tasks that can be accomplished in different ways by different students, and if the educators themselves try – and sometimes fail – in performing skills. This demonstrates that failing at a new skill is normal, to be expected, and part of learning.

Emotional safety: Teasing and bullying can really hurt. Some students are modest about aspects of their physical appearance especially during times of development. By being flexible with student dress codes, and by setting up and enforcing anti-bullying rules, educators can help create a safe environment for activity.

Cultural safety: Ensure the environment is accepting of students from different backgrounds. Some students may have a different style of attire for exercising in. Creating an inclusive atmosphere can provide comfort and confidence for students.

Make Physical Activity Welcoming

Create a culture where failure is learning, diversity is embraced, activity is for everyone, and respect is the norm. Above all else keep physical activity fun.

Ideas to Make Activity Fun:

1. Use music:

- Have upbeat music playing in the physical activity space when students arrive, or turn on music to signal the start of physical activity if you are staying in the same place.
- Have music playing in the background when students are practicing a skill.
- Use music to signal a change in tempo of the class, with upbeat music during vigorous activity, and slower, calming music during cool-down and preparation to return to the classroom.

2. Variety is important: Repeating the same activity over and over is boring, and as soon as a student is bored, their effort and focus is seriously reduced.

- Alternate static activities with moving activities.
- Perform activities at different speeds – as fast as possible, as slow as possible.
- Keep the activity but change the objective. In throwing, for example, throw for distance, throw for accuracy, throw under an object, throw over an object.
- Provide students the opportunity to experiment and explore newly learned skills (e.g., ask students to create their own sequence of movements and teach it to a partner).

3. Early success is critical: Set initial tasks so that everyone can do it. If a student is having difficulty, make the task easier; if they can do it with ease, make it harder.

- Doing an activity slower, over a shorter distance, or with a bigger target makes tasks easier.
- Doing an activity faster, over a longer distance, or with a smaller target makes tasks harder.
- To make tasks much harder for skilled students, have them perform the task with their non-dominant hand or foot.

4. Provide positive feedback: Students rarely need to know what they are doing wrong, so when you provide feedback, keep it constructive.

- Acknowledge effort: “Good try”, “Like the effort you put into that”, or similar.
- Tell the student specifically what to do to have success: “Keep your feet apart for better balance”, “Throw it higher so the ball goes farther.”
- Encourage them to try again.

