



## **Creating a Safe Classroom**

Imagine your classroom as a container for learning - a structure within which feelings and behavior are experienced and expressed. In order for true expression to emerge, very clear boundaries must be in place. Sometimes boundaries can be structured physically (such as by the arrangement of the chairs). Other times, boundaries can be communicated through agreements and rules.

### **Physical Space**

The physical setting in your classroom sends a strong message to students regarding group culture. When arranging your classroom try to keep it inviting and comfortable. Arranging the desks in a circle or several small grouping as opposed to in rows encourages a feeling of equality and teamwork.

### **Create a Contract**

We have found that it is helpful, especially when dealing with difficult behavior, to create a written contract. We suggest that within this contract, which students and teachers create together, consequences be established. In alignment with the "restorative approach" philosophy being implemented in classrooms, this contract is designed for the purpose of creating an optimal learning environment which allows for personal and group responsibility. It aligns with our core values of taking ownership for personal behavior and choices.

You can introduce the notion of consequences democratically by saying something such as, "We all slip up once in a while, so what should we do if this happens?" We have found setting specific guidelines such as a "three-strikes-and-you're-out" policy, allows students the opportunity to recognize and self-correct their behavior. Perhaps while developing the contract suggest, "Instead of just getting kicked out right away, what if we get three chances and then we are asked to leave the activity until the next one begins. Does that sound fair?". It is always good to discuss "worst case scenario" i.e. a student who continuously undermines the group and let the students suggest how this situation should be handled.

Once the contract is designed with the class, have all students sign it, and displayed it in view of all. Make sure you are consistent with consequences. Tell the students that there will be two verbal warnings when the contract is violated. On the third

warning, they will be asked to leave the working area, although they are invited back to try again after an appropriate period of time. This way it becomes a challenge - not a punishment - for students to work on their behavior and to become conscious and responsible for it.

When negotiating a contract, work democratically so students feel they are a part of the process and not coerced into it. Solicit suggestions from students when setting up the contract. Contracts may vary from group to group depending on the class dynamic and lesson goals. Teachers should also be held accountable for following the contract.

### Sample Contract

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In this classroom, we agree to:  
Be respectful.  
Be supportive.  
Have no invasive physical contact (pushing, hitting).  
Use appropriate language.  
Take Turns Talking.  
Be on time.  
Be at every session.  
Try our best.  
Have fun!

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### Creative Controls

These are basic "creative controls" that can be very helpful to re-focus the group.

- ❖ **Freeze** - For use when you want immediate control and attention. Students should stop what they are doing and freeze in place.
- ❖ **Focus** - For use when you want students to focus on a particular individual or activity. Students should immediately turn towards the object of attention and quietly focus.

Example: when the group is chaotic and all over the place, the leader calls out, "Freeze! Focus on the ceiling, focus on the door, focus on the window, focus on the floor, and then focus on me!" Once the group is focused, you can begin the next activity.



## Trauma in Our Schools

### School Violence

- I. The U.S. Department of Justice has reported that 1 percent of students ranging in age from 12 to 18 years, or 225,000 children, have been victims of serious violent crimes either at school or as they traveled to and from it.
- II. The National School Safety Center (NSSC) has reported that about 75% of school-associated deaths over the past decade involved the use of firearms, and that there were as many as 12 bully-related and 16 hate-crime deaths.

### Traumatic Experiences

- I. Traumatic experiences are those that are overwhelming, invoke intense negative affect, and involve some degree of loss of control and/or vulnerability.
- II. The experience of trauma is subjective.
- III. Variations among students
  - In spite of our ability to predict general responses to trauma depending on age and developmental level, there is still tremendous variability among students regarding post-traumatic stress symptoms and the extent to which learning and school behavior may be disrupted.
  - The variety of individual responses to trauma is related to many factors, including: a student's prior history of trauma or loss, prior or current mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or behavior problems, and individual differences in temperament. (Korn, 2012)
- IV. Universal Precautions
  - Medical: Treat all human blood and certain human body fluids as if they were known to be infectious (OSHA, 2012)
  - Trauma: Approach all students as if they were known to have trauma histories
  - One out of every four children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior (recognizetrauma.org)

## Effects on Middle/High Schoolers

- I. Feeling self-conscious about their emotional responses to the event, shame and guilt about the traumatic event
- II. Fantasies about revenge and retribution
- III. Radical shifts in the ways students think about the world
- IV. Self destructive and/or reckless behavior
- V. Shifts in interpersonal relationships with family members, teachers, classmates
- VI. Change in school attendance, performance and/or behavior

## Responses to Trauma

<b>Flight</b>	<b>Fight</b>	<b>Freeze</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Withdrawing</li><li>• Fleeing the classroom</li><li>• Skipping class</li><li>• Daydreaming</li><li>• Seeming to sleep</li><li>• Avoiding others</li><li>• Hiding or wandering</li><li>• Becoming disengaged</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acting out</li><li>• Behaving aggressively</li><li>• Acting silly</li><li>• Exhibiting defiance</li><li>• Being hyperactive</li><li>• Arguing</li><li>• Screaming/Yelling</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exhibiting Numbness</li><li>• Refusing to answer</li><li>• Refusing to get needs met</li><li>• Giving a blank look</li><li>• Feeling unable to move or act</li></ul>

- From *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* by Kristin Souers and Peter A. Hall



## SEVEN ELEMENTS OF A WINNING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

1. **ENGAGEMENT**- Motivation and active learning. Enact uses actors to address real life issues that are pertinent to student's current life situations.
2. **RESPECT**- Enact teaching artists come into every classroom with a philosophy of respect for human dignity. It is demonstrated through a nonjudgmental attitude and letting students know we "see them", their essence: which goes deeper than behavior and expect their best
3. **CONNECTION**- What it is and why it matters. Enact is sincerely interested in getting kids interested in our social- emotional curriculum by getting buy in through inquiry on the topic. Non judgmental questioning allows them to decide if and why it matters to them.
4. **TRUST** – Reliability is a demonstration of trust. By staying true to our values, agreements and standards, we demonstrate a form of trust.
5. **LIMITED CHOICE**- As a leader showing respect to the group and individuals can be demonstrated by offering them limited choices demonstrating that you feel they important enough to make the decision for themselves. For example, when a student acts up we may say to him or her, " you have your choice, you can improve your behavior or you can sit out."
6. **FUN– yes, fun....** Fun is simply enjoyment and learning to take things lightly. ENACT does crazy fun games or humorous scenes to lighten the atmosphere. This also creates a non judgmental atmosphere.
7. **CONSEQUENCE**- The result of an action or condition. At ENACT, students are asked to take accountability of their actions by previously agreed upon results such as stepping out of a game, or apologizing for an action.



# **Creative Contract**

**What group rules are most important to ME?**

- ◆
- ◆
- ◆
- ◆

**If someone can't follow these rules I think...**

**I think students should be welcomed back to the group if they...**