

# Establishing a safe learning environment and responding to disclosures

When delivering any activity that addresses potentially sensitive subjects, it is essential to begin by creating a safe, supportive environment. By helping learners to feel confident and secure, they are more likely to share their ideas and opinions, ask questions, and contribute to discussions without fear of judgment or negative feedback.

## Before running an activity



### Think about your space

Decide beforehand if you would like to change the seating arrangement of your space. Learners may feel more comfortable seated in a circle or in smaller groups.

If running any sessions remotely via online platforms, give learners clear expectations or boundaries, such as reminding them to find a quiet, private space with an appropriate background from which to join any video calls.



### Expect inclusivity

Remind learners of your school/organisation policy around treating others with respect. Make it clear that learners are expected to be mindful of the ways other people work and communicate to them that everyone's opinions are valid.



### Take a non-judgemental approach

Although some views or opinions can and should be challenged, it is important for both the educator and other learners not to shame or judge a learner who shares something sensitive.



### 'No real names' policy

Ask learners to talk in the third person and speak about 'a friend' or 'someone they know' instead of using people's real names if they are recounting a story or an example. If learners do feel they need to share a personal story, signpost them to a time and place where they can do so privately with an appropriate member of staff.



## Create a set of ground rules

Agree on a set of ground rules with your learners that clearly state the expectations for behaviour and communication from both learners and the educator. It is important these are generated by the learners themselves so that they feel responsible for them. Use language that is age appropriate and as much as possible, framed as positive behaviours, e.g. 'We will support one another.'

Examples could include:

We will listen to others and allow each other time to speak

We will respond to others without judgement.

We will ask questions if we are unsure about anything.

## Handling sensitive topics

Some discussions or questions which young people raise may need more consideration before answering. Here are some suggested ways of pausing the discussion:

### 'Save it for later'

Display a question wall or box in which questions, themes, or topics which may not be appropriate at that moment can be saved for future discussions. These could be submitted anonymously, or with a name if learners would like an individual response.

### 'Oops and ouch'

Anyone who finds a comment offensive or worrying can respond with 'ouch.' The speaker replies with 'oops' and is given an opportunity to explain. This method helps to avoid misunderstandings or resentment.

### 'Time out'

Call a 'time out' when learners are showing signs of fatigue and/or stress. This will provide them with a brief break and can give you an opportunity to assess the situation and decide how to proceed.

### 'Pause and park'

'Pause' a discussion and 'park' until a later date. Try to give the learners an idea of when this discussion will be 'un-paused.' This might be after the lesson, during a break or after discussion with another member of staff.

## Responding to a disclosure



While discussing their online lives and the issues that might be affecting themselves or others, it is possible that children and young people may make disclosures about things they have seen or experienced online.

- If you are worried about a child for any reason, tell your school's/organisation's Designated Safeguarding Lead/Person or a senior colleague as soon as possible.
- Ensure that you are familiar with reporting procedures in your school/organisation and that you do not promise confidentiality to the child.
- Ensure that the child's own words are used and are not changed in any way; avoid asking leading questions.
- Take a calm and non-judgemental approach, particularly if it is about a sensitive issue.
- Give the child the opportunity to be included in making the report to your DSL or senior colleague, where appropriate.

## Further advice



The UK Safer Internet Centre's 'Need Help?' page contains further information on reporting specific concerns to organisations outside of your school/organisation. [saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/need-help](https://saferinternet.org.uk/advice-centre/need-help)

The Professionals Online Safety Helpline is a free helpline offering advice and support to all members of the children's workforce on any online safety issues, including gaming, grooming, cyberbullying, sexting, inappropriate behaviour on social media and more. The helpline is available Monday to Friday 10am – 4pm.

0344 381 4772

[helpline@saferinternet.org.uk](mailto:helpline@saferinternet.org.uk)

[saferinternet.org.uk/professionals-online-safety-helpline](https://saferinternet.org.uk/professionals-online-safety-helpline)