

Running head: THE SAFE PLACE AND AGGRESSION

Keeping Classrooms Safe:  
The effects of the “Safe Place” Strategy on  
Physical and Verbal Aggression  
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## **Introduction**

The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District covers 25,000 square miles and includes 40 schools. To travel from Hope School to Nanwalek School requires four hours of driving time and a 20-30 minute plane ride across Kachemak Bay.

I am a kindergarten teacher at Sterling Elementary which is located at mile 83.5 on the Sterling Highway. Our school has a population of about 200 students, K-6. My teaching assignment includes two extended day kindergarten classes which overlap for 1 ½ hours midday. Each class averages about 14 students. About 75% of my students are Caucasian, and the remaining 25% are Alaska Native.

### **Problem Statement: There is an increase of unsafe behaviors in our schools.**

The Kenai Peninsula Borough school board held a special meeting to review and update its yearly goals. While reviewing the goal which reads: “Increase collaboration and professional development opportunities for staff,” board members had some specific concerns about current school atmospheres. Two school board members said they believe teachers need more help in learning how to deal with children’s behavioral problems. Consequently, as reported in the *Peninsula Clarion*, the board amended this goal to include that the increased collaboration and professional development should be “to ensure a safe, orderly and productive environment” (Dillon, July 2004).

It is no surprise that our school board feels that our school atmosphere does not appear safe to many adults and students. This is a problem faced by schools all over the country. One only has to watch the news or read a newspaper to know of the increased

acts of violence and other severe behavior problems in the schools. Without a safe environment for our students, orderliness and productivity cannot happen. Jensen (1998) suggests; “Threat and stress in the school environment may be the single greatest contribution to impaired academic learning” (p. 52). If children do not feel safe in schools, they will not learn and if adults do not feel our school is safe, they will not take an active role in our schools and may look elsewhere for an education for their child.

Many children come to school stressed. There are so many things going on in the lives of children these days such as, divorce, blended families, poor nutrition and fast paced lives. Many of these things can cause children to have unbalanced nervous systems, causing them to “strike out, struggling to control stimulation” (Bailey, 2000, p. 42). All of these behaviors certainly contribute to an unsafe environment.

In my own school district, we have experienced an increase in stressed children. These children have become so problematic in the classroom that the district has acquired the help of Central Peninsula Counseling Services to provide counselors and ISP’s (Individual Service Providers or “shadows”) to help our overly-stressed children in our schools. Although this may deter problems in the classroom for a time, it is a huge expenditure on human resources and does not necessarily help the teachers learn how to help children with behavior problems as stated in the school board’s goal.

I have personally experienced an increase of stressed children entering my classroom each day. Some children come in angry and this is evident through their actions such as yelling, hitting, kicking, pushing, name-calling, etc. I agree with the school board that our schools need to be safer places for all children. I believe that we

need to solve this problem one classroom at a time, and so I begin this process with my own classroom.

## **Research Project**

### ***Picking a Strategy: The Safe Place***

My plan for increasing both physical and emotional safety in my classroom is to implement a strategy called, “The Safe Place”. I will set up a safe place as outlined by Becky Bailey (2000) which will “provide the opportunity for children to remove themselves from the group in order to become calm, regain composure and maintain control when upset, angry or frustrated” (p. 51).

The Safe Place is in direct contrast with many current educational practices of removing stressed out children from the class or forcibly isolating them to a time out. After using this type of strategy for many years, I knew I needed a new approach when I began feeling as Vivian Paley (1992) describes; “It made children sad and lonely to be removed from the group which in turn made me feel inadequate and mean and I became convinced....it made everyone feel tentative and unsafe” (p. 95).

I wanted to implement something that would not only help children feel safe but to teach them as well. As teachers, we view our job as teaching reading, writing and math but when it comes to social skills, we expect kids to know how to behave and we punish instead of teaching them exactly what to do. Katz & McClellan (1997) concur with my discovery; “A major disadvantage of using time out as a punishment is that it does not teach a child alternative ways of responding to the situation at hand. It is therefore unlikely to strengthen their social skills” (p. 82). There is no question that our school

board wants teachers to strengthen the social skills of our students. On the search for making my classroom a safer place, I wanted to find something that would teach and not punish. I believe that having a safe place in my classroom will do just that!

Although the name of the Safe Place may be fairly new, the concept of creating such a place for children in our classrooms has been around for many years. While I was studying for my masters in early childhood education, I came across many writings of education leaders who have discussed this type of strategy. Kohn (1996) proposes; “. . . there is nothing objectionable about having a safe comfortable place where a child can go to calm down or just be alone for a few minutes. . . . Children should be given the option and when emotions are running high, they can be gently and quietly reminded that it exists” (p 47). Marjorie Fields (1998) wrote about how teachers who understood how children become tired and irritable help teach them what to do. Of one teacher she said; “He helps them learn that time alone can help them get in touch with their feelings and gain control of themselves. He thinks that the most productive time out is the one you give yourself” (p. 190).

Many current educators propose a form of the safe place in their classrooms. Susan Kovalik (2002) in her program, Integrated Thematic Instruction, describes “Australia” as; “A small corner of the room where the students can go to relax, refocus, and reflect. Used to assist students who are highly upset-angry or sad-to reset their emotions, they can return to learning” (p x.2). Knowing that there is much support for this strategy, I was ready to begin the journey to help my classroom become a safer place for all learners.

### *Setting up the Safe Place*

First I had to find a spot in the room that could be designated as a safe place. I chose a corner that was no longer being used to hang coats. I wanted to be sure the child in the safe place had enough privacy while at the same time being able to clearly see who was in the safe place at any given time.. Together, my husband and I created a safe place “wall” with a window.



Next I found a soft vinyl chair for the safe place. Dr. Bailey recommends beanbag chairs for young children but since none was available, I felt this vinyl lounge-type chair would work well. I hung up a section of shoe organizer pockets and began placing different things in them such as a squishy ball, a ball of play dough in a baggy, a few stuffed animals, star sunglasses and a couple of other things that I thought might help the children calm themselves. I then taped a construction paper stop sign on the safe place and a ribbon across the opening so that the children would visibly know that it wasn't yet open.

I have been teaching for 16 years and nothing could have prepared me for the 1<sup>st</sup> 10 days of school. Many of my 28 children (divided into 2 classes) were very stressed. I am sure that I witnessed more types of aggressive behavior (physical & verbal) in those 10 days than I had ever seen in my own class (see graphs). I had several children in each class that were frequently kicking or hitting, a few others would yell and call others derogatory names (what our class calls “trash can” words), and still others were fleeing the classroom without warning. I had to call the principal down to my room for help at least once and sometimes three times a day. It was very stressful for me and for the

children and I was counting the hours until I could open that safe place hoping that it would make a difference.

### ***Implementing the Safe Place***

Finally on day 11, I introduced the concept of the safe place by reading to the children, “Schubert is a STAR” by Becky Bailey (2003). We practiced being a “STAR” (Stop, Take a deep breath And Relax) and then each student had the opportunity to spend 2 minutes during choice time in the safe place. Some children chose not to practice going to the safe place and that was okay.

During the first day of implementation we discussed the rules for using the safe place:

1. You can go to the safe place when you are angry, sad or want to be alone.
2. Only one person at a time may be in the safe place
3. If you need the safe place when someone is in it, you could:
  - a. Wait until they are out
  - b. Ask them if you could have a turn
  - c. Sit at a table near the safe place quietly & alone until it is available
  - d. Use another strategy (such as STAR breathing) to help yourself.

(adapted from Bailey, 2003)

### ***Observations of Change***

After introducing the safe place, it was very clear to me that my students had a great need for it. During the first few days after introducing it, the safe place was almost

always occupied. In the afternoon class, several students wanted to go to the safe place at the same time and so there were a few children sitting at the table near the safe place, particularly during circle time. This was something unexpected and I became frustrated at times and gently encouraged kids to come back or to sit at a table alone as a “temporary” safe place.

As the graphs show, there was a significant decrease in physical aggression and a bit of a decrease of verbal aggression over the 10 day period. It was especially relieving and comforting to me to see a student choose the safe place as opposed to fleeing the classroom. Although the introduction of the safe place did not “cure” the problem entirely, it certainly was making a difference.

Surprisingly, I discovered that one of the biggest changes of all that could not be merely placed on the graph was my own attitude. As the students used the safe place and then chose to come back to join the group, I found myself to be more relaxed and calm with them. I didn’t “get after” them and try to correct their behavior nearly as much not only just because behavior was beginning to improve but because I was allowing children (with guidance of course) to take charge of their own behavior and begin to understand their own feelings. It is truly empowering and freeing to a teacher to go through this process. Each time a child chose to come back, I was truly happy to see them and expressed my optimism by saying, “(name), welcome back. You came back to (activity) with us. We’re so glad you are here!”

I have many hurting kids this year and I still have moments where unsafe behaviors occur but there is a difference in my classroom. The atmosphere is calmer and the children are more willing, than in previous years, to help and comfort each other.

Although there are moments that I still get very frustrated and need to consciously breathe and calm down, I know that our class is becoming a safer classroom on a daily basis.

## **Conclusion**

As I look back on the first four weeks of school, my thoughts go back 16 years to some of the first classes I taught. I really never thought much about ways to keep my classroom safe. I shake my head in amazement and wonder like so many of my colleagues, “Have children really changed or are we imagining it?” This inquiry has been confirmed for me. Jensen (1998) states; “Interestingly there is some evidence that children today are less prepared for school than they were one or two generations ago...The evidence can be seen in many critical areas including emotional development...” (p. 19). The data that I have collected, confirms Jensen’s evidence that some children do have difficulty functioning emotionally in a classroom setting. . The graphs show a significant number of verbal and physical aggressive acts occurring at the very beginning of school. Clearly, my classroom began as an unsafe classroom.

Physical aggression, by far, accounted for the majority of unsafe behaviors. There were 88 incidences over the course of the first 10 days! This is the most aggression I have ever witnessed in a classroom in such a short period of time. However, after the safe place was introduced, the physical aggression in my classroom was reduced by a total of 55%! When I introduced the safe place, we practiced what to do when someone got angry enough to hurt someone. It was clear that the children were choosing to go to the safe place rather than to hurt someone. One little boy had a very difficult time playing with

the other children during choice time and would continually hit and kick, especially when at the block area. After introducing the safe place, I watched him closely during play for signs of impending aggression. When I saw that he was getting angry or frustrated, I would say, “Your body is telling me that you are feeling angry. I will take you to the safe place now to calm down”. He reluctantly went the first few times but we celebrated the day together when he went on his own! Like many of the children, when he realized that the safe place was not a punishment and he could come out when he wanted, he felt more in control and used it more freely.

Verbal aggression seemed to be unaffected by the presence of the safe place. There was only a total of one less incident (61) in day 11-20 than there was in the first 10 pre-safe place days (62 incidences). However, a somewhat positive result to point out is that there were many more physical (88) incidences of aggression at the beginning of the study than verbal (62) incidents. After the introduction of the safe place this dramatically reversed; 61 verbal and 40 aggressive. It seemed that during days 11-20, children were trying to not only use the safe place to avoid physical aggression but to also use their words in place of hitting others. As the children learn more strategies in the kinds of words to use, perhaps this number will be lessened.

It was a real relief to me to see children use the safe place instead of leaving the classroom without permission. There was a huge 70 % decrease in this behavior which is reason enough for me to have a safe place! There were only about 5 children who engaged in this behavior but it was very stressful when it happened. There is no doubt, that our classroom is much safer now that this behavior has all but disappeared.

Examining the frequency of safe place use shows that there was a definite need for it in the classroom. On some days, nearly half of the students used the safe place at one point in the day. Sometimes a student chose to use it more than once which is not made clear on the graph. However, one thing was very apparent; when a child came out of the safe place he immediately joined the class in whatever activity we were doing and appeared happy and relaxed.

Many parents have already expressed concerns about next year. They are asking, “What if there isn’t a safe place in my child’s classroom next year?” I tell them that as the year unfolds, I will encourage the use of other strategies that may help the child to cope. In the meantime, the safe place will continue to be an excellent strategy for children to use when they feel the need.

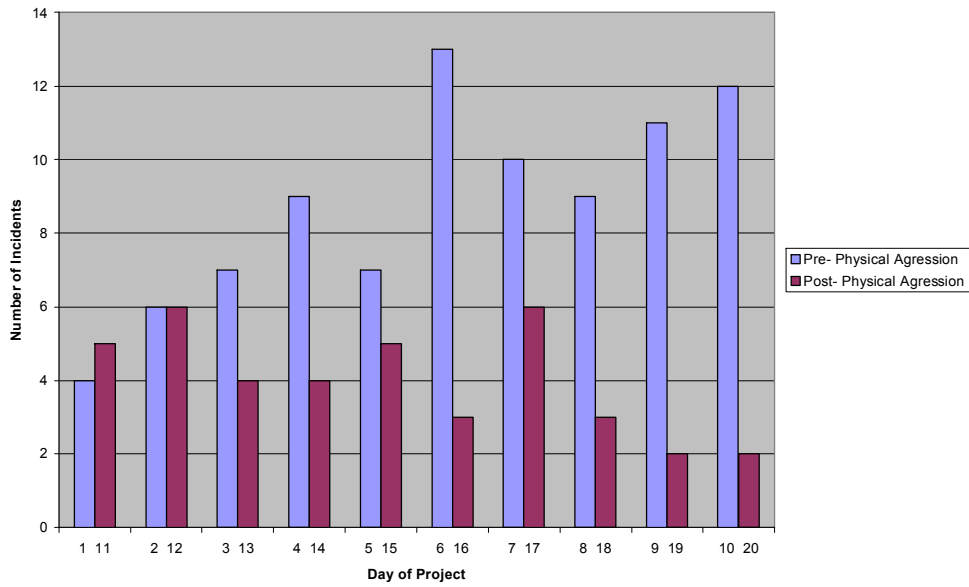
Now, I have come to a new appreciation of the school board’s goal for safe classrooms. It is not merely something that would be nice to do but rather; it is something we must do! It is by no means an easy challenge and I have experienced this first hand over the past month. The problem is a huge one and one that I know I can not solve overnight. There is still some aggression going on in my classroom and we may still need a “shadow” for one very stressed little girl. However, the data is dramatic. I can only conclude that implementing a safe place, is a positive step in helping our classrooms become safer from physical aggression as well as keeping the group together. I firmly believe that verbal aggression will be reduced in time with the continuation of this strategy. Of course there are many other things that I can and will do to help my classroom become an even safer classroom.

As a result of this project, I can confidently say that my main priority (although still very important) is not to teach academics but to actively teach the students under my care how to be both physically and emotionally safe. The research is clear and the verdict is in; “The classroom that dedicates itself to safety will help reduce the triggering of the brain’s alarm system in all children” (Bailey, 2000, p.45). As our school board, administrators and teachers in our district work to turn down those alarm systems with the implementation of a safe place along with other teaching strategies, our schools will become safer and happier places to learn and teach. As Eric Jensen (1998) has proposed, “...emotional intelligence develops early and the school years may be a time of last resort for nurturing emotional literacy” (p. 19).

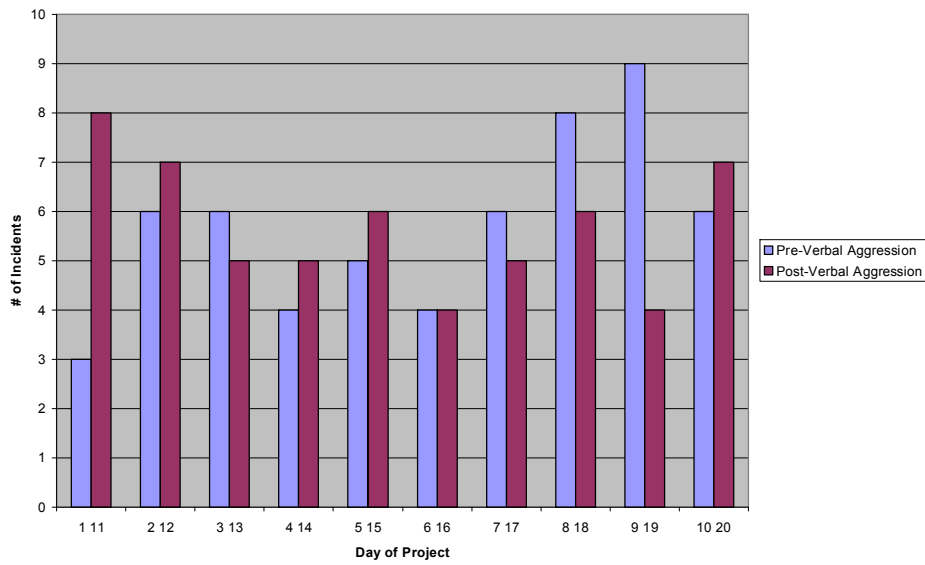
We have no time to waste. The time is now to make safety a priority in every school and in every classroom!

## Project Data Analysis

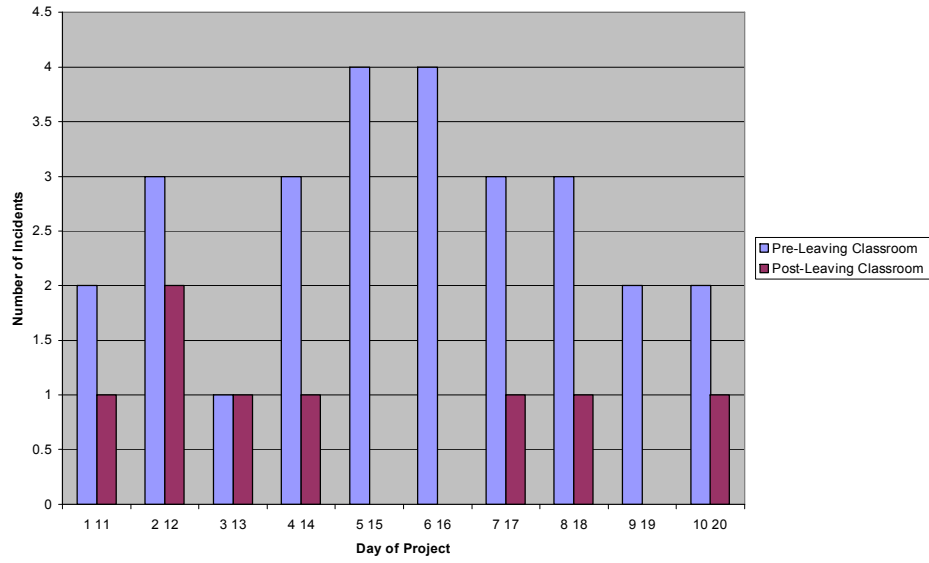
Pre & Post Safe Place Physical Aggression



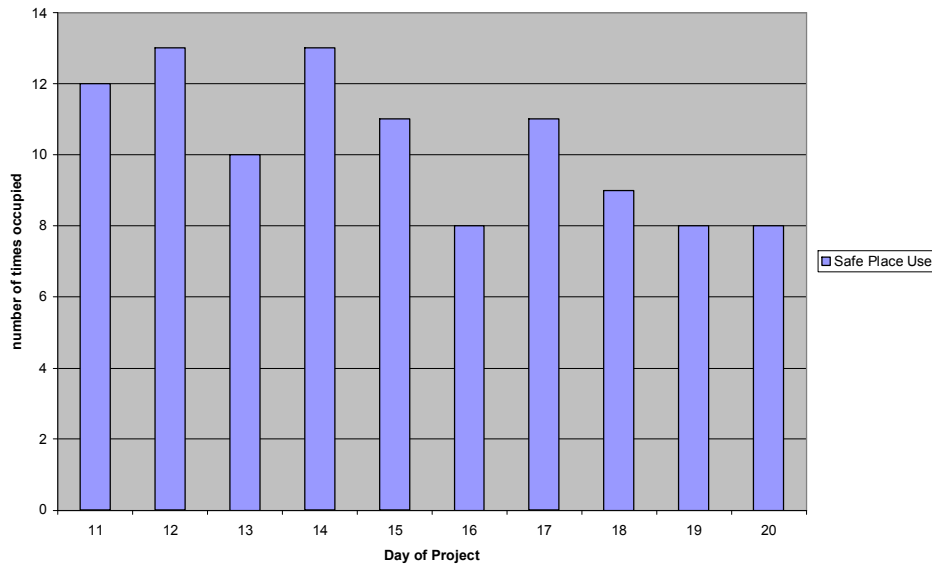
Pre & Post Safe Place Verbal Aggression



Pre & Post Safe Place: Leaving Classroom



Frequency of Safe Place Use



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