

How to Help All Students Feel Safe to Be Themselves

Students suffer when they're bullied or feel like they don't belong—and Social Justice Humanitas Academy is doing something about it.

About the Authors

Each year, roughly 30 percent of California students in middle and high school report being bullied or harassed, many because of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual identity, or some other aspect of their social identity.

This finding comes from California's most recent [Biennial Statewide Healthy Kids Survey](#). The anonymous, confidential survey also found that cyberbullying was a key concern across grade levels, with roughly one-fifth of students experiencing some kind of internet-based harassment.

Why does this matter? Research advances in neuroscience, social science, and education are showing us how these threats affect the health, learning, and educational outcomes of students. When we feel endangered, the body reacts by producing a flood of adrenaline and cortisol, provoking the fight-or-flight reaction. When the feeling of threat is constant, the resulting toxic stress affects physical health, brain development, and learning.

The feeling of threat can result from explicit racism or sexism or

xenophobia coming from other students, teachers, the administration, or the society that surrounds the school. It can also result from smaller “microaggressions”—[subtle insults that manifest as brief, everyday exchanges](#)—that send negative messages to students about their identities. For example, female students may be told that “girls don’t do computer science,” which communicates a lack of aptitude that is tied to their gender; or students of color may be asked, “Where were you born?” indicating their perceived status as outsiders.

Researchers have a name for this experience: “social identity threat.” Social identity threat occurs when children know that others hold negative views about one or more of the groups they are associated with. Social identity threats make students—especially students of color, LGBTQ students, immigrant students, and students from low-income families—feel as if they don’t belong and aren’t seen or valued for who they actually are.

In the short-term, the stress response can take the form of an adaptive reaction to environmental stressors, but when activated over the long-term without adequate social buffering (for example, support from a trusted adult), it can cause lasting damage. After extended periods of activation, the reactive system may have difficulty shutting itself off, leading to an increased risk of chronic health problems and significant changes in the brain that negatively impact learning.

The daily sense of being misperceived, stigmatized, overlooked, or marginalized increases fear of judgment, adding a cognitive load that can reduce focus, diminish engagement, impair performance, and interfere with the ability of students to develop strong, trust-based relationships within their school communities.

So, what can we do about social identity threat? According to [research](#), one key is a positive school climate characterized in part by the presence of strong, trust-based relationships that help facilitate a sense of belonging among students. This improves learning, development, and wellness among students, especially for those who are at higher risk for poorer outcomes. A positive school climate, built upon a foundation that includes identity-safe classrooms that enable every student to belong, is one of [several elements](#) in the [whole child](#) approach to education—a powerful strategy for creating learning environments that work well for students of all backgrounds.

Schools across the country are working to create these types of learning environments. Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA) in Los Angeles is one such school—and its experience can provide lessons for all of us.

Creating positive relationships between teachers and students

Located in California’s San Fernando Valley, Humanitas serves a predominantly Latino community, and many of its students come from low-income backgrounds and have experienced trauma.

The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) is conducting a case study to explore how Humanitas enacts principles consistent with the science of learning and development—research that examines how to support whole child development to advance equity. LPI researchers, including an author of this article (Flook), interviewed staff and students at Humanitas, conducted classroom observations, and reviewed documents for data collection.

Because many teachers at Humanitas grew up in the San Fernando Valley or in similar communities, they know firsthand the trauma that their students can bring to school with them, and the effect of this trauma on students' ability to focus and learn. This understanding allows them to establish trusting relationships with their students, counter negative messages that students may have internalized about themselves, and create positive, accepting learning environments.

The kinds of strong relationships seen at SJHA are foundational to the creation of identity-safe classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers:

- **Create trusting relationships.** Teachers recognize that creating a sense of trust and belonging involves hundreds of affirming interactions. They strive to ensure that each student feels seen and cared about through the use of small gestures, such as asking how things are going, paying attention to their students' comments, and expressing sincere appreciation for their efforts and accomplishments ("You've really been working hard, and it's paying off"). They also regularly reaffirm their faith in their students' ability to learn.
- **Are attuned to students' cultural backgrounds.** By being aware of students' cultures, as well as their learning and developmental needs, the teachers promote a sense of belonging and safety for each student.
- **Model critical social skills.** These include sharing and showing empathy. Teachers also guide norm-setting by defining and modeling concepts like respect and compassion.

Humanitas models these practices by using relationships to meet students' academic, social, and psychological needs, including the

need for belonging, love, and a sense of accomplishment, which are integral to the school's mission and vision. School staff, including administrators, reach out to all students, especially those who are struggling with behavior, home, or academic issues. The principal and assistant principal stand in front of the school each morning to greet students as they arrive. Teachers stand at the door of their classroom at the beginning or end of class to greet students with high fives, a smile, or a question: "How are you?" This simple act serves as one of a multitude of ways to reinforce relationship development and identity validation.

In addition, educators at Humanitas approach students' behaviors from a restorative perspective, recognizing that students bring all of themselves—including trauma and issues experienced outside of school—into the classroom. They ask students to share the reasons behind their behaviors, instead of just applying consequences.

For example, when one teacher asked a student why he was late, she learned that he had been struggling with severe depression that required hospitalization over the summer. Asking this one question shifted the entire narrative. Now, when she sees this student in class, she tells him, "I'm glad you made it to school. I'm glad you're here."

Strategies for the whole school

Along with emphasizing personal relationships and interpersonal skills, Humanitas uses a range of strategies that are highlighted in a 2013 book by Dorothy Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas, [*Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn*](#). These include:

The promotion of student understanding, voice, responsibility, and cooperation. Teachers:

- Use supportive instructional strategies, including the use of multiple and varied representations of concepts, and integrate materials that help connect concepts to students' life experiences. At Humanitas, students engage in projects that help them learn concepts through the lens of their personal identities. For example, in a ninth grade ethnic studies course, students spend time analyzing their personal history. One Humanitas teacher described this as a valuable exercise, in part because it allowed students to move into later grades having "already looked at their history and their past, and the way that they see the world, and how can they become better for it."
- Design instructional conversations and collaborative activities that allow students to share ideas, discuss their thinking, and problem-solve together. For example, a teacher might pose a problem to the class, have students discuss and problem-solve in mixed-ability groups, and then reconvene the class to share proposals and identify common themes among the groups' ideas so that all voices are heard and students help each other build academic and social competence. Because marginalized groups have historically and continuously had their perspectives, rights, and overall self-actualization stifled, developing student voice directly aims to overcome that oppression.
- Encourage students to elaborate, question, and self-explain as a means of deepening their understanding (e.g., using journal prompts that tie into the day's concepts).
- Organize instruction and assessments to help students reach

mastery and deeper understanding, rather than focusing on rote memorization of information (e.g., teachers can examine students' mastery of the scientific method by presenting questions about the natural world, and then asking them to propose an experiment that would generate the information needed to address the question).

The cultivation of diversity as a resource for teaching, so that it becomes central to the classroom experience. Teachers:

- Recognize their students' culturally grounded experiences as a foundation on which to build knowledge, and use culturally responsive pedagogy as a means for engaging and deepening student learning.
- Spend time getting to know their students' social identities, as well as their strengths and needs, using a varied toolkit of methods. For example, teachers might use regular check-ins, class meetings, conferencing, close observations of students and their work, and connections to families. They might also use dialogue journals and offer writing prompts that give students a chance to share their unique experiences (e.g., "What did you think about the story we read today? Can you reflect on a time when you...?").
- Offer challenging curricula that provide students with opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives, exercise their higher-level analytical skills, participate in respectful debate and discussion with their peers, grow their emotional intelligence, and reflect upon their own attitudes and identities. For example, one ninth grade English class assignment at Humanitas required students to read the memoir *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez, in

which the author recounts his experience as a young Chicano gang member surviving the dangerous streets of East L.A. Students were asked to reflect on and write an essay about how the author overcame adversity and setbacks and achieved self-actualization (a core value at Humanitas). Across their essays, students identified community cultural wealth—including aspirational, familial, and navigational capital—and grit as important resources for overcoming trauma and achieving self-actualization. Their essays highlight the types of deep engagement that culturally responsive pedagogy can foster.

The creation of a caring environment that is orderly and purposeful. Teachers:

- Ensure that students are active participants in classroom management and conflict resolution, and organize classroom structure around communal responsibility, rather than compliance and punishment. For example, teachers may have students help develop a classroom constitution and take ownership of dozens of activities in the classroom that teachers might otherwise do by themselves.
- Play an active role in co-regulating students' behaviors by providing them with a repertoire of words and strategies to use in different situations, to help students develop their self-regulation skills. For example, teachers might use disagreements as opportunities to help students practice conflict resolution by walking students through a structured, stepwise process that involves calming techniques, turn taking (in which each student acknowledges the other's perspectives and emotions), and collaborative solution development. Humanitas also uses councils

—a component of the school’s advisory class—to build community and create space for “the practice of listening and speaking from the heart,” where students and teachers sit together in a circle and take turns sharing the positive and difficult things happening in their lives.

According to our research to date, these efforts make a difference for students. Humanitas has a high graduation rate and students emerge academically prepared. In 2018, almost all seniors graduated and 80 percent of them are college- and career-ready, surpassing the averages for LAUSD. In the 2017-18 LAUSD School Experience Survey, nearly all students at Humanitas indicated that they “feel safe at school,” compared to just over half of other students in the district; 86 percent of Humanitas students said that they “feel like they are part of their school,” compared to only half of all LAUSD students; nine out of 10 Humanitas students said that “adults at my school treat students with respect,” compared to 66 percent of LAUSD students; and 88 percent of Humanitas students said that they “feel they have a voice in decision making,” compared to only a quarter of LAUSD students.

The bottom line is this: The climate at Humanitas is safe and supportive—and that makes a measurable difference for student outcomes.

Identity safety doesn’t emerge from just one approach. With a multitude of practices in place—such as those at Humanitas—students from diverse backgrounds can come to understand that their social identities are wholly compatible with educational achievement, and that their unique perspectives add value to their communities, both within the classroom and beyond.

In conjunction with other elements of the whole child approach—including the use of student-centered, culturally responsive instruction, and developing strong, trusting relationships—identity-safe classrooms can help create a more positive educational experience and improve outcomes for all students, including many of those who are likely to be our highest-need learners.