Tool 2: Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your school

How to use this tool

This tool has two parts:

1. Creating safe and inclusive spaces across a whole school

2. Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your work as an educator

The work of 'creating safe and inclusive spaces' happens on multiple levels, from site-wide culture and the feeling families get when they enter your school, through to the more specific details. For this reason, we have divided the tool into two parts. Part 1 looks at the big picture, whole of school environment factors; while part 2 addresses how you as an individual educator can create safe spaces on a more micro level, through your interactions with families and how you arrange the space and the furniture in particular rooms.

By ensuring the big picture feeling and atmosphere lines up with the smaller everyday interactions, your school will be able to present a consistent, welcoming feeling to all families, which is a powerful base upon which to build family partnerships.

How to use Part 1: Creating safe and inclusive spaces across a whole school

Part 1 helps you run a staff workshop on creating safe and inclusive spaces.

Leaders can use part 1 of this tool when they are working through the 'preparation' phase of the Family Partnerships Guide with their educators. The staff workshop ideas that are outlined in part 1 offer leaders a range of ways they can approach the third key action in this phase, 'Developing a culture of family partnerships'. Leaders can use this part of the tool to **create and run a workshop** for their staff to consider how the school's spaces feel for families overall.

For more information about the role of leaders in creating safe and inclusive spaces, see page 17 of the Family Partnerships Guide.

How to use Part 2: Creating safe and inclusive spaces in your work as an educator

Part 2 helps you reflect on your role as an individual educator in creating safe and inclusive spaces in your day-to-day interactions with families

Educators can use part 2 of this tool to support your work in step 1 of the Family Partnerships Practice Model, 'Connection'. You can explore the reflective practice ideas to consider how you, as an individual educator, can influence how families experience your spaces.

For more information about how creating safe and inclusive spaces contributes to 'Step 1 – Connection', please see page 21–24 of the Family Partnerships Guide.

Part 1: Staff workshop ideas

Prior learning: This workshop is designed to be run after staff have completed the online learning courses, *An introduction to family partnerships for educators* and *The Family Partnerships Practice Model: A guide for primary school educators*. These courses cover significant content related to creating safe spaces. They will provide staff with a strong understanding of why safe and inclusive spaces matter, and how they are relevant to family partnerships.

We recommend that this staff workshop is held after staff have completed their online learning. By completing the courses first, staff will be ready to put their learning into action by considering how you can create safe and inclusive spaces in your school.

Objectives:

✓ To provide your staff with opportunities to imagine they are 'stepping into the shoes' of families to consider how your school might feel for them.

✓ For staff to reflect on and review their practice in creating safe and inclusive environments for children and for families.

✓ To identify what your school is already doing well to create safe and welcoming environments.

✓ To identify any areas for further improvement or gaps in your awareness, knowledge or practice.

✓ To identify ways you can adapt your spaces or practices to ensure all families feel safe, welcome and valued in your school.

Time required: A 60–120-minute workshop is recommended. The following workshop activities are designed for you to choose from, depending on what will work best for your staff in the time you have available. It is entirely up to you how long this workshop runs for, or whether it's better for your staff to run several short sessions over time.

Materials required: The suggested activities do not require any special equipment or materials. You might make use of a whiteboard or place to write notes to share with the group, and basic workshop supplies to support discussion and the generation of new ideas (e.g. Post-it notes, butcher's paper or online equivalents such as Menti). If you find it useful, you could choose to make a presentation that includes some of the questions and prompts that guide the activities. Just cut and paste from the details in the following sections, based on which activities you have chosen to do.

Suggested space: This workshop can be run in a variety of spaces. You will need somewhere that allows your staff to gather and reflect together, perhaps working in small groups at times. Given the focus, you might consider holding at least parts of this workshop in the spaces of your school that families interact with the most.

Workshop outline:

Topic	Activity outline
Welcome and introduction	– Welcome all staff and thank them for their attendance. – Include any usual Acknowledgement of Country practices. – Introduce the topic, 'Creating safe and inclusive spaces' and reiterate that creating a safe and welcoming environment is important for building positive relationships with families and supporting children's development and wellbeing. – Address that this workshop will involve staff reflecting on and reviewing how safe and inclusive your spaces feel for families, and that this requires your staff to feel safe (including culturally safe) to have this conversation together. – As a facilitator, pay attention to how staff are feeling during this workshop and make sure your staff are aware of any support that will be available to them after this workshop if they feel they need it. Perhaps also identify options for staff who may wish to take time out from certain discussions if they find them difficult.

Following is a list of possible activities you might like to run with your staff to explore the topic of safe and welcoming environments. Choose a selection of the activities and questions from the following ideas to make up your workshop plan.

1. Optional icebreaker (approx. 10–15 minutes)	This activity gets staff thinking and talking about how much education settings have changed in how they treat families over time, and to wonder how adults feel generally in education spaces. Before you decide to add this activity to your workshop plan, think about whether you think your staff will feel comfortable to do this activity and make sure you are working within a safe space for staff to share with each other. – Ask your staff if they are willing to remember back to their own education (or perhaps the stories they have heard from older family members) and whether they have any memories of how it felt to enter the space of their child care, kinder or schools? – If staff feel comfortable, you might ask them to share some of their memories within small groups of two or three and then feed back to the whole group afterwards about the themes that were shared. – This activity can be kept light or may also address more serious reflections. Leaders will need to facilitate accordingly. – Complete this activity by asking staff to then reflect on your own school environment and how much they think things have changed? How do they think the parents who come into your space would answer that question? Would all your parents have the same answer? Are there some who might feel differently?
2. Reflection activities (approx. 10–15 minutes)	This activity provides an opportunity for staff to reflect on your current practice in a few key areas that contribute towards creating safe and inclusive spaces. – Use the reflective question bank (page 59) at the end of part 1. These questions can be used to lead a discussion with your staff about how well you are creating safe spaces in your school. – Depending on how many staff you have participating in the workshop, you could divide the group into three smaller groups and give each group a set of questions to discuss. – Ask the group to discuss their responses to the set of questions in their small group and then report back to the whole staff with the key themes of their discussion, as well as some early ideas for what they see as the possible strengths and areas of improvement.

Topic	Activity outline
	– If staff are identifying areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, you might like to start noting these somewhere visible in your workshop space, such as on a whiteboard or a Post-it note wall. This is something you will come back to later in the session.
3. Experiential activities (approx. 15–20 minutes, possibly longer if you have a large site)	The purpose of reflecting and reviewing in this workshop is to try to put yourselves in the shoes of families and try to imagine how they feel in your spaces. This next activity asks staff to imagine they are literally walking in the shoes of families through your site. – Explain to staff that to help them get into the shoes of families, you are all going to get out into the spaces and take an 'inquiring walk'. This isn't about conducting an 'audit', but instead takes a more inquiring and curious approach. It asks staff to see the space anew from a different vantage point and think about how different families would feel. – Ask staff to work in pairs or small groups to go for a walk through your school as though they were a parent or carer, and think about how the space feels for them. – Make sure all spaces are included in the walk – you might like to ask staff to head in different directions to cover a specific area or have all the groups cover the whole site (this may depend on your staff size and the time you have). – As part of this walk, encourage staff to try out your own spaces. Do you have a family room or space for private conversations? Try out the space as though you were a family member and consider how they feel. How are they set up (e.g. the furniture placement, whether you can close the door, if other people can see in)? Are they welcoming and conducive to private or sensitive conversations? – Ask staff to make notes as they go, discuss what they notice with their colleagues and remember to think from a few different families' perspectives as they walk through. – Bring the whole group back together after they have had time out in the spaces and ask each team to share their key findings. Remember to keep looking for strengths, as well as opportunities for improvements or gaps you might not have noticed before. – Add any new ideas to your growing list of strengths and opportunities for improvement.
Identify strengths and opportunities for improvement (approx. 10 minutes)	By reflecting on and reviewing your spaces (and possibly also planning to consult families directly) your staff will now be in a position to develop some ideas about your school's strengths in terms of safe and inclusive spaces, and also to suggest some opportunities for improvement or gaps you would like to address. – Ask staff to use Post-it notes or butcher's paper to contribute their ideas under the headings of 'Strengths' and 'Opportunities for improvement'. – You can add to the lists you have already started earlier in the workshop or start new lists if you haven't already set them up. – You might think of other useful categories such as 'Gaps' or 'Areas we need to understand more about'; you can add as many headings as you like.

Topic	Activity outline
Next steps (approx. 10 minutes)	The final step in this workshop is to take your reflections and develop a plan for how your school will continue to review and adapt your spaces to encourage safety and family engagement. – Consider the ideas for further learning in the 'After your workshop' follow-up ideas section. – Identify any areas that staff would like to learn more about. – Consider the ideas for further review of practices and policies in the 'After your workshop' follow-up ideas section. – Identify whether any further review is required and who will undertake this work. – Add any other action items identified by staff and leaders. – Agree on how and when this work will be discussed in ongoing staff meetings to track you progress with agreed actions.
Meeting close	– Thank staff for their engagement in the workshop. – Ensure that staff are aware of the supports that are available if this workshop has raised any concerns for them. – After the meeting, follow up with an email with any agreed actions or further inquiry activities that were identified. – Be open to receiving ongoing feedback from staff and families to help you understand how you're progressing in this area. Make adjustments based on future learning. – As a facilitator and a school leader, if you have noticed that any parts of this workshop felt difficult or that staff were uncomfortable talking openly about creating safe and inclusive spaces or cultural safety, you might like to consider some follow-up work as a leadership team. Consider whether your workplace culture is supporting the creation of safe and inclusive spaces for families by ensuring a safe space for staff. Seeking anonymous staff feedback might assist you to understand if this is also an area you might need to focus on to support safe and inclusive spaces across your school.

After your workshop: Follow-up ideas to keep reflecting, reviewing and learning

1. Ideas for further reflection with families

Ask families' opinions

Develop a plan to consult with families. Discuss and decide, as a leadership team or with staff, how you will approach families and what you would like to understand more about.

You might like to inquire about:

– How families attending your service feel about your spaces?

– What do they like and what do they think could be improved?

You can do this through conversations with families or more formal communication channels, such as a survey in your newsletter or email to all families.

Observe and remain curious

In addition to, or instead of asking families, you might like to observe families using your spaces. Make a plan to spend the coming weeks considering your spaces and noticing:

- How do families engage with the physical environment?

- How do they engage with staff?

- Are you noticing any trends?

Plan to discuss your observations at a future staff meeting.

2. Ideas to engage in further learning and training

It is possible that this workshop and the family partnerships online learning courses have helped staff identify areas they would like to know more about.

Engaging in further training involves seeking out professional development opportunities focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. This targeted training will enhance your knowledge and skills in creating environments that are welcoming and supportive for all families. Seek out training opportunities that are available for your staff either online or face-to-face in your local community.

Ideas for further Emerging Minds learning

Learn more about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the following courses:

- [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children: A framework for understanding](#)

- [Using Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems to strengthen families' resilience](#)

- [Improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#)

Learn more about working with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the following courses:

- [Understanding children's mental health in culturally diverse communities](#)

- [Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health](#)

3. Ideas for further review of current practices

Reviewing current practices involves critically assessing existing policies, protocols and practices within your learning environment. This helps in understanding how these practices align with and support the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) families, LGBTQIA+ families, children and parents with disability, and families experiencing social disadvantage.

Some actions you might like to take in your setting include:

- Schedule a designated time to review current policies, protocols and practices within your learning environment.

- Create a checklist or assessment tool to systematically evaluate how these practices align with the diverse needs of families.

- Engage with leadership, colleagues or mentors for feedback and insights on areas that may need improvement.

Reflective questions bank (for Workshop activity 2)

The following list of questions can be used to lead a discussion with your staff about how well you are creating safe spaces in your school.

Communication

– What sort of communication channels do you have with families? Have you asked families what the most convenient way and times are for educators to communicate with them?

– How do your staff welcome families when they enter your setting?

– Do educators have access to a room or quiet space for conversations? How is that space set up in terms of temperature, furniture, sound levels, and atmosphere?

– Are there a variety of ways to access a child's educator(s) that meet the needs of all families?

– Do you think your school provides a range of opportunities for genuine two-way communication between educators and families?

– What are your current strengths and opportunities for improvement in this area?

Diversity and inclusivity

– Does your school consider how it can be a culturally safe place for Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander families?

– Does your school have families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds? If so, what do you know about these cultures? Do you need further support to be able to effectively communicate with and support these families?

– Are your signs in any other languages spoken by families in your school?

– How do you demonstrate cultural inclusivity in your physical space? For example, do you have flags representing different cultures on display?

– Does your school consider how it provides a safe space for LGBTQIA+ families?

– Does your school consider how it provides a safe space for families from all backgrounds and situations?

– Is your current communication approach working for some families better than others? Are you unintentionally leaving some families out?

– What are your current strengths and opportunities for improvement in this area?

Physical spaces, safety and access

– How do you balance security and safety obligations with family access and ease of entry?

– Is the entry accessible for those with additional needs? For example, is there ramp access for prams and wheelchairs?

– How many of your spaces are accessible to those with additional needs?

– Is the physical space welcoming to all families?

– What are your current strengths and opportunities for improvement in this area?

Part 2: Reflective practice ideas for individual educators

By utilising these reflective practice approaches and advocating for targeted training, educators can contribute to an authentic and inclusive learning environment that meets diverse family needs.

The following reflective and inclusive practice suggestions focus on a theme of listening to families to understand their experiences in your spaces. We've included the voices of families with lived experience of family partnerships throughout the following prompts, to help you consider how families are feeling when engaging with schools.

1. Reflect on your own practice and the environment you are working in

As an educator working with your specific class of children and families, consider the following reflective questions. They can help you reflect on any areas of unconscious bias that your workplace might hold, or even feelings that your families might bring with them based on previous negative experiences in other education settings.

Unpacking and understanding how schools can feel for families and being proactive about letting go of any historic biases or unhelpful attitudes can support you as an educator to engage families. This reflective practice is not intended to suggest that you haven't already been working hard to engage families. But in some ways the system wasn't set up to make this easy for educators or families, and not all families find it equally easy to connect with their educators.

Relationships and connections with families

– How well do you know the families of the children in your school?

» Who are the families in your school? What sort of engagement or interactions have you had with them?

» Are there some families you know better than others? Why is this?

» Is there anything you can take from your interactions with those families you know well and apply to those families who you have spent less time with?

» Are there other strategies you can try with those harder-to-reach families?

– How do you think families feel about the relationships they have with you? Would they reflect on it positively?

Examining whether our approach works for all families

– Is our current approach working better for some families than others?

– Are we unconsciously missing the needs of some families? For example: does the system we work in privilege parents who have time during the day to engage with educators or take part in activities onsite?

– Have you asked the families how and when they would like to communicate with you?

» If not, how could you undertake some consultation to learn more about what your parents want to communicate?

» How could you balance offering families flexibility in communication and still maintain a healthy and sustainable workload yourself? Do you need to seek the support of your leaders to discuss this?

– Do you have specific cultural groups represented among your families, and do you feel you have the knowledge, skills and confidence to work effectively with all members of the community?

» If you feel that you require support in this area, who might be available to support your learning?

– Have you considered the diversity of your families and whether they all feel welcomed and safe to discuss their circumstances with you? Do you work with families who:

» identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

» identify as LGBTQIA+

» are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD)

» practise a religion

» have lived experience of mental illness

» have lived experience of disability

» have lived experience of the criminal justice system

» have lived experience of financial or job insecurity

» have lived experience of poverty

» are experiencing homelessness

» have had negative experiences with the education system.

» Are you confident all families would feel welcome in your school?

– If you feel like you require support in this area, who might be available to support your learning?

Offering opportunities for two-way communication with families

In the online learning courses, you saw that effective partnerships feature two-way communication between educators and families. This can be tricky sometimes when our education system was historically known for a more one-way flow of information from education institutions out to families.

As an educator, you likely have a good understanding that parents and educators working together, respecting the knowledge that each brings to the care of the child, leads to positive outcomes. However, you may find that the system wasn't always designed to make this easy, and perhaps there are more opportunities for parents to **receive information** from your school than to **contribute knowledge** about their own child.

Reflection questions

– If you think about the range of ways families engage with your school, do you think there are enough opportunities for two-way communication and collaboration?

– As an educator, how could you help parents to feel confident that you welcome two-way communication?

Here, a parent with lived experience of family partnerships reflects on their perception of a power imbalance between parents and educators:

'…you have this automatic power imbalance between the educator and the family. The parent feels like you have all of the knowledge and you have all of the power, so you need to bring that back and allow the parents to have that voice to be able to express what they know works for their child, because they are with them all the rest of the hours that you are not with them. So you need to trust that we know our kids best and if something isn't working and we are getting an explosive child at home, then something's got to change … You need to have a level of vulnerability as educators because that allows us as parents to come in with our vulnerabilities and to try and even up that power imbalance just that little bit, so that I know that you actually care about me and my child as much as you care about your own children or the rest of the children in the learning environment.'

Reflection questions

– Does this reflection surprise you as an educator?

– How can you make sure children, parents and educators all feel empowered within a partnership?

2. Keep developing your inclusive practice

By reflecting, remaining curious, engaging in ongoing learning, and focusing on your practices with families in the classroom, you can create safe spaces for all children and their families. The following are some ideas you can use to keep developing your inclusive practice:

Take a curious and reflective stance

Remaining curious entails cultivating an open, authentic and non-judgemental approach when working with families. This involves learning about a family's culture, routines and rituals, and other aspects of their lives. These understandings will help you tailor the environment to ensure it remains safe and inclusive.

How can I apply this in my work?

Some actions you might like to take in your setting include:

– Initiate conversations with families to learn about their cultural backgrounds, traditions and experiences.

– Implement regular reflective practices to assess your own biases and assumptions and how they may impact your interactions with families.

– Take a position of trust and mutual respect with families, where you value them as experts in their own lives.

> A parent with lived experience of family partnerships suggested the following mindset when engaging with families:
>
> 'Be inquisitive, be curious. "What's that about? What is that teaching me? What's that telling me?" Or, "What don't I know?"

Engage in further learning and training

Engaging in further training involves seeking out professional development opportunities focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. This targeted training will enhance your knowledge and skills in creating environments that are welcoming and supportive for all families.

> A parent with lived experience in family partnerships highlights the need to keep working to connect with families:
>
> ' These people may be experiencing many, many external pressures and stresses. So, find a way to connect, whether that be inviting them into the classroom space to see what's going on, inviting them to just come and have a sit and have a cup of tea with you and actually connect and realise that you're a person. You may find that there's some people who have language as their barrier and that's why they don't feel comfortable engaging with you. There may be cultural reasons as to why they're not engaging with you. Dig deeper, search as to where that disconnect is and find a way to really bridge that gap and make them feel like you will have time for them and that you do have time for them, or you'll make that time.'

How can I apply this in my work?

Some actions you might like to take in your setting include:

– Research and identify relevant professional development opportunities focused on diversity, equity and inclusion.

– Discuss with your leadership team any funding or support that may be available for attending training sessions.

– Create a personal development plan with specific goals and timelines for acquiring new knowledge and skills.

Ideas for further Emerging Minds learning:

– [Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children: A framework for understanding](#)

– [Using Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems to strengthen families' resilience](#)

– [Improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#)

– [Understanding children's mental health in culturally diverse communities](#)

– [Culturally responsive practice strategies for children's mental health](#)

3. Adapt your classroom environment

A safe and welcoming environment in the classroom and school generally is a significant start towards creating safe spaces for families. As an educator, you can ensure that parents feel welcome and valued in your spaces.

> A parent with lived experience of family partnerships reflects on the importance of feeling like you belong:
>
> 'I think one of the things that's really made a difference in being able to connect with the educators is feeling like I have a space within my children's education environment where I belong. My particular children's school has a parent's lounge where I can come and I can hang out and see what's going on. I know how to find the educators if I have a worry, I can find out when they have some time where I can give them a call and say, "Hey, this has really been bugging me." But I think one of the wider things is that our kids' wellbeing is everybody's business…'

How can I apply this in my work?

– The look and feel of your space sends a strong message to families. As an educator, you're likely working hard to ensure each child feels valued and respected in the space, and it can help to extend this to thinking about the child's family too. Consider whether all families would feel their language, culture, experiences and identity are acknowledged visually in your space.

– Make sure you have access to physical and virtual spaces that provide safe spaces for partnership conversations.

– If these conversations happen onsite in a room in your school, consider:

  » the level of privacy in the space so that sensitive conversations are not overheard by or visible to others

  » the comfort of the space in terms of temperature, furniture, sound levels, atmosphere, etc.

  » the layout of the space and furniture to encourage a sense of equality between educators and parents

  » your approach as an educator and whether it's welcoming, calm, unhurried, empathetic, respectful and non-discriminatory

  » the time and scheduling so as not to be rushing the conversation

  » the availability of support for families and educators if required

  » whether you're maintaining a culturally safe space in language and behaviour.