

Fostering Psychological Safety on Child Welfare Teams



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

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This is what psychological safety is all about. When team members feel safe with one another, the whole team functions more effectively.

Read this to:

- ▶ Learn more about concepts related to psychological safety on child welfare teams
- ▶ Build understanding of conditions necessary to foster psychological safety on teams
- ▶ Reflect on your individual and team approaches
- ▶ Explore questions for consideration and team activities

For example, psychological safety has been linked to:

- A culture of learning and increased effectiveness on teams (Kim et al., 2020)
- Increased worker well-being and retention in child welfare (He et al., 2021; Kruzich et al., 2014)

This resource is designed to be used by individuals and teams to explore concepts related to psychological safety and potential strengths, areas for growth, and actions that can enhance the psychological safety of their team. Working together to define shared results and commitments can, in and of itself, help to support psychological safety.

Psychological Safety in a Child Welfare Context

Developing an internal culture of psychological safety offers an environment to explore what meaningful actions we can all take to move us toward improved child welfare system outcomes and builds a foundation for transformational practice with children, young people, and families.

Fostering psychological safety on teams includes creating the environment to support vulnerable, authentic, and brave contributions from members of the team. It is important to consider that even when the conditions are present, individual factors may also contribute to individual feelings of safety. While facilitators and team leaders are critical drivers of psychological safety, each team member has a role to play in fostering psychological safety.

Psychological Safety Is Safety Science

When working to establish psychological safety on child welfare teams, it is important to consider the unique nature of child welfare work and how everyone comes to the table with different experiences. Fostering psychological safety on child welfare teams requires trust, vulnerability, and accountability—qualities that might sometimes feel out of place in a risk-sensitive or reactive culture. Consider how psychological safety is aligned with safety science, which many agencies are turning to as they strive for children’s safety, permanency, and well-being.

A culture of blame will not lead to improvements in child welfare outcomes. Safety culture, however, applies insights from safety science to create a supportive and proactive environment. Key aspects of this approach include the following:

- ▶ A strong commitment to safety, where leaders actively support staff and address systemic risks
- ▶ Collaborative teamwork and open, trust-based communication, rather than blame and rigid compliance
- ▶ Confidential and nonpunitive methods for reporting mistakes and concerns
- ▶ A dedication to continuous learning and organizational growth

Visit the [National Partnership for Child Safety](#) to learn more about safety science and the link between psychological safety and improved child welfare outcomes.



What Psychological Safety Is (and Is Not!)

Before taking active steps to foster psychological safety on a team, it is important to understand what psychological safety is—as well as what it is not.

Psychologically safe team environments are those that:

- ▶ Seek input from all members
- ▶ Promote a growth mindset in which learning (and making mistakes) is normalized and supported
- ▶ Foster vulnerability, trust, and accountability

Psychological safety is not a shield from discomfort and should not be used as an excuse to avoid difficult conversations, including those that address practices that marginalize and harm people. Some team members may feel uncomfortable discussing issues related to certain topics. It will be important for those team members to sit with their discomfort, explore it individually and with their supervisor, and listen and learn from others on the team, as opposed to shutting down the team discussion. **When in doubt, teams can ask themselves whose safety (or comfort) they are prioritizing.**

Psychologically Safe Teams Do:	Psychologically Safe Teams Do Not:
Foster accountability	Shield members from accountability
Encourage healthy dissent	Create false harmony
Empower members to learn and make mistakes	Overprotect from anxiety, fear, and discomfort
Neutralize the power differential	Necessarily make decisions through consensus
Minimize the likelihood of traumatic experiences	Eliminate the possibility of traumatic experiences
Promote opportunities to earn autonomy	Eliminate existing supervision structures
Foster an atmosphere of respect	Advance a particular political agenda
Rely on a culture modeled by leaders	Happen through decree

Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces, and Accountable Spaces

As teams work to build psychological safety, they may want to consider the concepts of safe spaces, brave spaces, and accountable spaces.

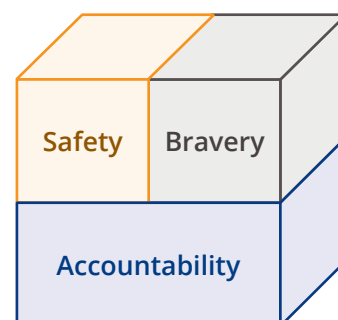
The concept of *safe spaces* focuses on protecting individuals from harm, whether physical or legal. As groups and organizations started to recognize the importance of psychological safety, the idea of *brave spaces* emerged. This term acknowledges that true safety is not always available and emphasizes the importance of creating environments where difficult, yet necessary, conversations can take place.

Psychological safety also includes an accountable space in which team members and leaders are accountable for their own words and actions, everyone's safety is valued, people use their power and privilege to support those at higher risk of harm, and discomfort is not equated to danger, oppression, or persecution.

Fostering psychological safety on teams does not mean that everyone on the team will always feel safe or brave enough to speak up but that the conditions for safety are present and each person is accountable for their own words and actions. Ask yourselves:

- ▶ What am I doing to create a welcoming and respectful environment in which it is safe for everyone to fully participate?
- ▶ What do I need to feel brave enough to speak up, even when my perspective differs from others on the team?
- ▶ What can I do to foster accountability, celebrate growth and learning, and recognize that we all make mistakes?

Consider how safety, bravery, and accountability are interconnected and serve as building blocks for psychological safety.



Psychologically Safe vs. Psychologically Unsafe

While team leaders and facilitators are responsible for building a psychologically safe “container” for the team, each team member contributes to the team’s (and their own) sense of psychological safety. The following activity and graphic illustrate some specific feelings and behaviors related to psychologically safe and psychologically unsafe environments (Gartner, Inc., 2020). Psychological safety is not static. Team members’ sense of psychological safety may shift over time, for example, as the team composition changes or when the team is grappling with a crisis. Team and project leaders can guide their teams through this activity to get a sense of their team’s current level of psychological safety. First, make time for each team member to complete the activity individually and then come together to complete as a team.

Team Activity

Use the scale below to reflect on how your team currently functions. Mark a point on each line to indicate where your team is most likely to fall on the continuum from psychologically unsafe to psychologically safe. For each item that falls closer to “psychologically unsafe,” use the blank box to identify at least one concrete action you could take to help move your team closer to psychological safety.

Have a conversation with your team about perceived strengths and areas for growth. Acknowledge up front that individuals on the team may have different perceptions and the goal is not to achieve consensus but to identify some particular areas that might benefit from attention.

Psychologically Unsafe	My Team Is More ...	Psychologically Safe	
Worried that mistakes may be harmful to our career		Willing to perceive mistakes as opportunities to learn	
Unwilling to disagree or step away from the status quo		Willing to speak up even if everyone else disagrees	
Unwilling or afraid to share differences in opinion or new ideas		Likely to openly share differences in opinions and new ideas	
Likely to avoid talking about challenges in group settings		Comfortable sharing strengths and challenges openly	
Afraid of teammates and/or supervisors		Able to trust each other	
Insecure in our role		Willing to step into new and unfamiliar roles	
Defensive and likely to blame others when something goes wrong		Likely to take accountability for actions and prioritize impact over intent	
Unlikely to share honest feedback; resentment and blame escalate during crisis		Likely to share honest feedback, even during times of crisis	

Consider revisiting this section after working your way through the entire publication to identify additional or alternative actions you could take.

Example: Teaming in Louisiana

As the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) embarked on a job redesign project in partnership with the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD), staff knew that success would require strong teaming supports. The project redesigned their existing Child Protective Services, Family Support, and Foster Care teams into a Prevention Team and a Permanency Team, both of which were supported by Child Welfare Team Specialists, to tailor caseworker tasks, reduce workload, improve quality, and retain staff.

Following preparation and training to facilitate the new team structures, DCFS rolled out a number of strategies to support effective and sustainable teaming, such as team-building exercises, a troubleshooting team, regularly scheduled “huddles,” coaching, and more. Leadership publicly acknowledged team members and lifted up successes through formal communication channels, such as newsletters.

QIC-WD held focus groups that indicated that staff morale is improved and job-related stress is reduced, while families are more engaged and are being connected to services more quickly. The focus groups also lifted up some challenges, including the effects of individual work style and personalities on the teams’ effectiveness. This finding presents the opportunity to assess and foster psychological safety on individual teams.

“Psychological safety is key. You need to be able to rely on others with knowledge and experience and be able to say “I’m not sure” when you have someone’s life in your hands. Our teaming structure helps us keep the human in front of us and prevents us from becoming jaded by the demands of our work. We don’t have to bear the burden alone. Let’s reduce the trauma and negative impact on children and families – we can do it through our team.”

- Leslie B. Calloway, L.M.S.W., Deputy Assistant Secretary, Workforce Development, Louisiana Department of Children and Families

Conditions That Foster Psychological Safety

Psychologically safe teams are those that help members “feel included, learn, contribute, and challenge the status quo” (Clark, 2021). They rely on trust, accountability, and a culture of growth and learning. These include:

- ▶ Humility and vulnerability
- ▶ Empathy and curiosity
- ▶ Effective collaboration

Leaders who prioritize psychological safety celebrate differences, actively work to ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute, provide safe opportunities to take risks, and encourage team members to support each other and celebrate accomplishments. Leaders celebrate authentic effort, even when it results in failure, and encourage innovation. Team members know that they will not be punished for asking questions, making mistakes, or raising concerns.

Take some time to explore factors that support psychological safety, reflect on some individual questions for consideration, jot down your strengths and areas for growth, and then dig into some additional resources to learn more.

Team leaders should reflect on the questions for all team members and the additional questions for team leaders.

Humility and Vulnerability

On psychologically safe teams, members are able to be vulnerable with each other. Leaders normalize both humility and vulnerability by admitting their mistakes openly and sharing their own limitations while lifting up and promoting skills and knowledge on the team. Transparent communication is expected and encouraged, and the team does not shy away from difficult or challenging conversations.

Questions for All Team Members	Additional Questions for Team Leaders
1. How open am I to sharing my own mistakes in front of others on my team? What would help me feel more comfortable? 2. What am I doing to normalize vulnerability on our team? Think about something that is difficult for you to talk about (such as a mistake that you made or something you do not understand) and what it would look like if you brought it up with your team. 3. How do I discuss challenges and failures with my team? 4. What do I do when I feel uncomfortable during a team discussion? Do I tend to sit with that discomfort, or do I try to change the subject or disengage? 5. What do I do when I disagree with what someone is saying or doing? Do I behave differently when I am the only person who disagrees? 6. How openly and transparently does our team communicate? What am I doing to communicate openly and transparently with my other team members?	1. What am I doing to model and normalize vulnerability and humility? How do I talk about mistakes that I have made with my team? 2. How do I model—and actively reinforce—open and transparent communication? 3. How have I honestly shared limitations in my own knowledge and skills and made space for others to step up?

Based on your answers above, use the table below to identify at least one thing you will continue to do and one thing you will do differently.

What Will I Continue Doing?	What Will I Do Differently?

Empathy and Curiosity

Psychologically safe teams are empathetic with one another and genuinely curious about each other's perspectives and experiences. They seek to learn from the varied perspectives on the team. They extend their empathy and curiosity outside of the team environment and into their work with children, young people, and families. Leaders model and reinforce empathy and curiosity and encourage team members to share honest and open feedback about their own practice.

Questions for All Team Members	Additional Questions for Team Leaders
▶ How do I practice active listening? How do I check myself if I immediately begin offering my own perspective? ▶ What are some examples of how I seek out perspectives that are different from my own? How do I use those opportunities to learn and grow? ▶ What are our expectations for approaching our work with young people and families through a lens of empathy and curiosity? How does that inform our team's cohesion and culture?	▶ How do I celebrate and encourage members of our team who bravely speak up with new ideas or opinions that differ from the norm? ▶ How do I work with team members to reframe mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow? ▶ How do I model active listening? How do I check myself if I immediately begin offering advice? ▶ How do I encourage our team to share feedback honestly, even when it might be challenging for me to hear?

Based on your answers above, use the table below to identify at least one thing you will continue to do and one thing you will do differently.

What Will I Continue Doing?	What Will I Do Differently?

Effective Collaboration

Psychologically safe teams collaborate with one another to achieve goals. Team members know they can rely on one another for feedback, support, and ideas. While teams may operate within a hierarchy (there may be a defined leader and decision-maker, for example), leaders recognize the power that all members hold and work to address power differentials.

Understanding Power Differentials

Understanding more about power differentials includes acknowledging that everyone holds power and that many factors contribute to differences in how some power can be used. For example, organizational hierarchies mean some people have the power to hire and fire employees. In addition, the child welfare system and its staff have the power to become involved in families’ lives without their permission. Addressing the power differential means—in part—recognizing your own power, openly communicating about differences in power, and taking meaningful action to level the playing field. Learn more in the resources linked at the bottom of this section.

Questions for All Team Members	Additional Questions for Team Leaders
▶ How would I describe the power differential on our team? ▶ What power do I hold and how comfortable am I acknowledging it? Why or why not? ▶ How do I actively collaborate with my team members? ▶ What could I do to help us become a more cohesive team? ▶ What can we do to acknowledge and address power differentials on our team? How could it influence the way we work with children, young people, and families? ▶ How can power differentials be acknowledged and addressed within child welfare agencies in which some people have more authority than others?	▶ How do I solicit feedback, ideas, and questions from all team members? ▶ What kinds of opportunities do I provide for team members to grow and stretch? ▶ How do I help team members become more autonomous while reinforcing individual and team accountability? ▶ What concrete actions have I taken to neutralize the power differential on our team? ▶ How do I actively encourage and nurture collaboration within our team? ▶ How do I foster external collaboration with other partners, communities, young people, and families?

Based on your answers above, use the table below to identify at least one thing you will continue to do and one thing you will do differently.

What Will I Continue Doing?	What Will I Do Differently?

Team Activity

Consider bringing your team together to discuss your individual reflections on the conditions for psychological safety using the following prompts:

- ▶ What are some things you will continue doing?
- ▶ What are some things you will do differently?
- ▶ Was there anything that surprised you?
- ▶ What resources or supports do we need to move forward together?

Tips for Team Leaders in Offering and Receiving Authentic Feedback

A **feedback loop** is an important component of psychological safety. Team leaders and team members should be prepared to give and receive feedback frequently using approaches rooted in learning and curiosity. Feedback can be shared in both formal and informal settings and is an opportunity to grow and build trusting relationships. Consider how you can:

- ▶ Include opportunities to give and solicit feedback in each supervision session
- ▶ Invite feedback from your team and model how you would like to see others receive it; recognize the risk that others take when they share honest feedback with you
- ▶ Model vulnerability and a growth mindset by being transparent and offering reflections about what you could do differently
- ▶ Examine your own perspectives and how they might affect how you give feedback to (and receive feedback from) different members of your team

Giving difficult feedback can be hard. Read through the following tips and examples and take some time to reflect on your own practice. As you read the examples, think about how you would approach such a conversation. Are there similarities or differences in how you would deliver feedback?

- ▶ Provide feedback directly, honestly, and without judgment:
 - **Example:** “I noticed that you interrupted Mary today while she was sharing her experience as a family member on the Family Permanency Team. What do you think her reaction was to your interruption?”
- ▶ Refrain from trying to soften difficult feedback with insincere praise, but provide honest reassurance if needed:
 - **Example:** “My goal in sharing this feedback with you is to support a culture of learning in which you can grow as a professional.”
- ▶ Recognize effort even when addressing unintended outcomes:
 - **Example:** “I know you worked hard planning the meeting to accommodate family schedules so that Mary and others could participate. I want to be sure she knows that we value her perspective and feedback. Sharing her experience with us might have been daunting and being interrupted could have made her feel like we aren’t interested in hearing about it.”

- ▶ Ask for, listen to, and work to understand the perspective of the person receiving the feedback:
 - **Example:** “I really want to hear your perspective about what happened, what you might have done differently, and what you’d like to do to move forward.”
- ▶ Talk honestly about any defensiveness or a lack of receptivity to feedback:
 - **Example:** “I know it can be difficult to hear feedback sometimes. I’m committed to supporting our team’s culture of growth and learning. We all make mistakes and get things wrong—if we don’t get feedback, we don’t have an opportunity to grow. Please let me know what I can do to share feedback more effectively.”
- ▶ End with an action step:
 - **Example:** “I’m so glad we had the opportunity to talk this through. I really like your idea to reach out to Mary directly to apologize and convey how much we value her perspective. I wonder if we could ask her thoughts about what we could do differently to ensure she feels comfortable speaking up. I also like your thinking about exploring how we can provide space for her to share her thoughts at Tuesday’s meeting. Let’s check in at supervision next week to see how things are going.”

Reflect on the following questions as you consider how you give and receive feedback and then dig into the resources below to learn more.

- ▶ How often do I give feedback? Do my team members understand immediately if there is a concern or cause for celebration?
- ▶ Am I cognizant of my reaction when I receive difficult feedback? Am I holding myself accountable for how I respond?
- ▶ How would team members describe the way that I give feedback? Would they describe it as well-intentioned, effective, specific, and actionable? Or would they describe it as punitive, unclear, and one-sided?
- ▶ Do I encourage team members to share their point of view in supervision and in team meetings?
- ▶ Would team members describe feeling valued and heard after sharing feedback? Would they express fear of retaliation?
- ▶ How often do I ask for feedback? How would my team describe my willingness to hear feedback and use it to learn and grow? Would they say that I am curious and empathetic or defensive and uncomfortable when hearing feedback?

Learn more +

- ▶ [How to Receive Feedback \(Part 1\)](#) (The Management Center)

Moving Forward

Achieving psychological safety on teams takes effort over time. The sense of psychological safety may ebb and flow with changing dynamics on teams, including different membership, crisis and stressful situations, and organizational culture and climate changes.

Staying focused on results can help teams in their work to foster psychological safety to improve team performance, nurture a culture of learning and curiosity, increase team member well-being, and improve retention.

Start by sharing this resource with other team members and having a conversation about how you can learn together, assess strengths and areas for growth, and take concrete actions to foster the conditions for psychological safety as a team.

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