

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

The Safe Person

What it means in practice

Why this matters

Resilience research consistently identifies ONE finding above all others: children who experienced significant adversity but later thrived almost always had at least one consistent caring adult in their lives. Often this was a parent or relative. Often, however, it was a teacher. This is one of the most replicated findings in developmental psychology. It is also the most practical thing we know about helping vulnerable children. The teacher who becomes a child's 'safe person' may genuinely change the trajectory of that child's life. This is not metaphor. It's research.

What a safe person actually is

Predictable The child knows what to expect from this adult. Same warmth on Monday and Friday. Same response under stress. No mood swings. No favouritism that flips week to week.	Available The child can find this adult. Not always — adults are busy — but reliably enough. They're at school. They notice. They make time.
Attuned Notices what the child is feeling, often before the child can name it. 'You look a bit tired today.' 'Something on your mind?' Reads the signals.	Boundaried Not a friend, not a parent, not over-involved. The adult holds the role of teacher firmly. This boundedness is part of what makes them safe.
Repairing When ruptures happen — and they will — they repair quickly. 'I'm sorry I snapped earlier.' Models that relationships survive mistakes.	Believing Believes in the child's potential. Sees more than the behaviour. Can hold a positive picture of the child even when the child can't hold it of themselves.



How to BE one (in practice)

1. **KNOW THE CHILD.** Their interests. Their family situation (within reason). Their friends. Their fears. The thousand small details that signal 'I see you.' 2. **GREET BY NAME.** Every day. Eye contact. A small specific comment. 'I noticed your new shoes.' 'How was football last night?' 3. **CHECK IN.** Not interrogation. Quick noticing. 'You seem quiet today. You OK?' Doesn't always require a long answer. 4. **BE THERE WHEN HARD THINGS HAPPEN.** The day a parent doesn't pick them up. The morning after a bad weekend. The first day back from time off. Just be there. 5. **HOLD STEADY UNDER PRESSURE.** When they're testing — and they will test — don't withdraw. Don't take it personally. Hold steady. Respond to behavior as needed but maintain the relationship. 6. **KEEP TINY PROMISES.** 'I'll see you Monday.' 'I'll bring that book in tomorrow.' The small things matter most.

What a safe person ISN'T

Misconception	Reality
A surrogate parent	Not their parent. A teacher. The role is bounded.
Always 'on' for the child	Available reliably, not constantly. Boundaries protect both of you.
Permissive	Holds expectations firmly. The boundaries are part of the safety.
A confidant for everything	Listens, but reports anything safeguarding-related. Not a secret-keeper.
The only adult that matters	Builds bridges to other safe adults. Not the only one.
A long-term relationship	Often lasts a year. Sets the child up to find safety with the next adult.

What NOT to do

1. **DON'T MAKE PROMISES YOU CAN'T KEEP.** Children with trauma have heard a lot of broken promises. Be careful with what you say. 2. **DON'T BREAK CONFIDENCE INAPPROPRIATELY.** If the child tells you something serious, you may need to act on it (safeguarding). Be honest about that — don't pretend you'll keep secrets you can't. 3. **DON'T BECOME OVER-INVOLVED.** Going too far — buying gifts, giving phone numbers, special outings — confuses the role. Stay in the bounded teacher position. 4. **DON'T TAKE THEIR BEHAVIOR PERSONALLY.** They will test. They will say cruel things. They will reject you. This is part of attachment — children have to test that the adult will stay. Don't take the bait. 5. **DON'T WITHDRAW WHEN IT'S HARD.** The temptation, when a child you've invested in is having a bad



week, is to step back. Don't. Hold steady through the hard weeks especially. 6. DON'T MAKE IT ABOUT YOU. The relationship is about the child's needs, not yours. Your fulfilment from being a safe person is a side effect, not the goal.

Sustaining yourself in the role

Being a safe person to a struggling child is genuinely demanding work. To do it well over time: • Don't try to be safe person to every child. Pick the ones who most need it; trust other staff with others. • Talk to colleagues. Not gossip — debrief. Carrying these stories alone is heavy. • Have your own boundaries outside school. Don't let school become your whole life. • Notice secondary trauma in yourself. Talk to a supervisor or therapist if needed. • Remember: you're not fixing them. You're being one consistent presence, while their development does its work. The outcome isn't yours to engineer.

