



**CREATING A SAFE SPACE ONLINE
FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING**

This resource aims to equip practitioners with the knowledge, skills and confidence to facilitate sessions online with learners in a variety of different contexts and settings

We know that, as with face-to-face learning, **delivering online safely** comes with challenges. So we will share ideas on how you can respond to some common issues that you might come across.

Creating a **Safe Space** for online teaching and learning is not just about the technology that we use but the behaviours we adopt. Our behaviour can have a significant impact on how others feel and how we keep ourselves and others safe online.

This resource will look at how we can create and maintain a Safe Space by using the right behaviours. We will look at those behaviours and how you can implement them in your online teaching. The resource has been designed to flow as a process. Each section builds upon the last, so it is important that you work your way through each stage to ensure you gain the maximum value and benefit. We've also included some activities and resources for you to explore concepts we've covered in more depth.



Watch Video: This short video explains a little more about what we are trying to achieve throughout this resource.

Learning objectives:

- **Understand** – the concept of a Safe Space and its parameters.
- **Identify** – factors that can influence creating and maintaining the Safe Space.
- **Develop** – a range of strategies to continually engage all individuals and promote a shared sense of ownership and responsibility.



The process for creating a Safe Space online for teaching and learning

Understand

Understanding what a Safe Space is and how it feels.

Connect

Connecting with meaning and influence, ensuring appropriate relationships are being built.



Create

Creating an online environment and set of behavioural norms that keeps everyone safe.

Communicate

Communicating with impact and ensuring key safeguarding messages are delivered.

 **Watch Video:** The process for creating a Safe Space

We will explore:

-  What is a **Safe Space** for teaching and learning online?
-  How can we **create** the environment that fosters a Safe Space?
-  How can we **connect** with those we are working with online to build relationships and rapport?
-  How can we ensure we **communicate** with impact and promote a feeling of safety?



PART 1 UNDERSTANDING: WHAT IS A SAFE SPACE FOR ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING?



We want you to understand what a Safe Space is and how you can create one online

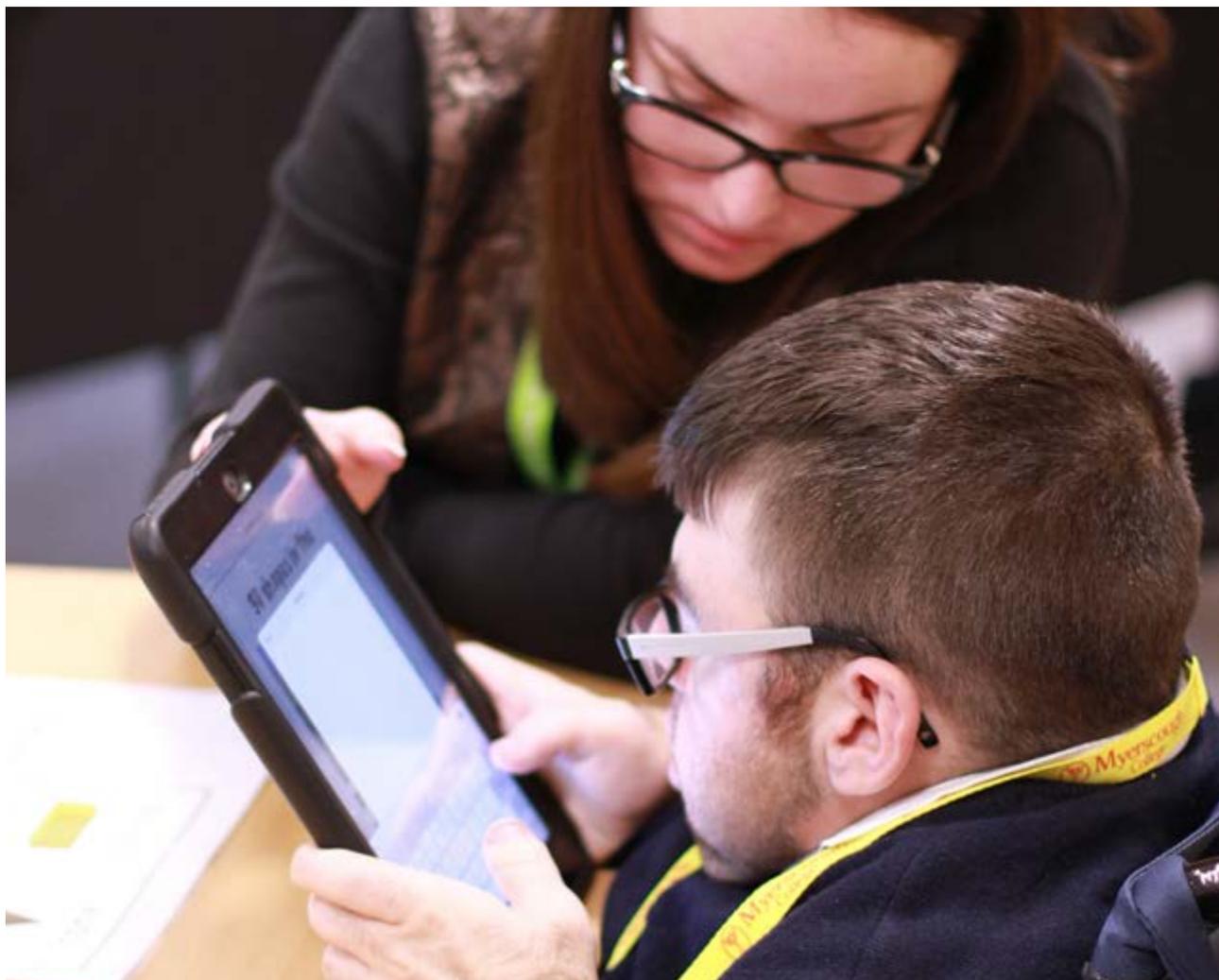
In this section, we will be looking at:

- Understanding the importance of knowing what an online Safe Space is
- Identifying factors that impact the feeling of safety
- Exploring principles that underpin an online Safe Space.

Having a vision of what a Safe Space looks and feels like is incredibly important as it enables us to have something to build and measure. Throughout this resource, you will see that we refer to the 'feeling' of safety that is required to create a Safe Space. The resource is designed to help you understand why this is important and how to help create an environment that fosters that feeling and how to respond when someone is expressing that they don't feel safe when engaging in online teaching and learning.

Below is a video that will introduce you to the concepts of a Safe Space. In the following pages and resources, there is further information on these concepts. This resource was developed so that learners have different ways of learning the material and can choose a method that best suits their learning style.

 **Watch Video:** Understanding what a Safe Space online is



What do we mean by a Safe Space?

We are here to explore creating a Safe Space for online teaching and learning for all.

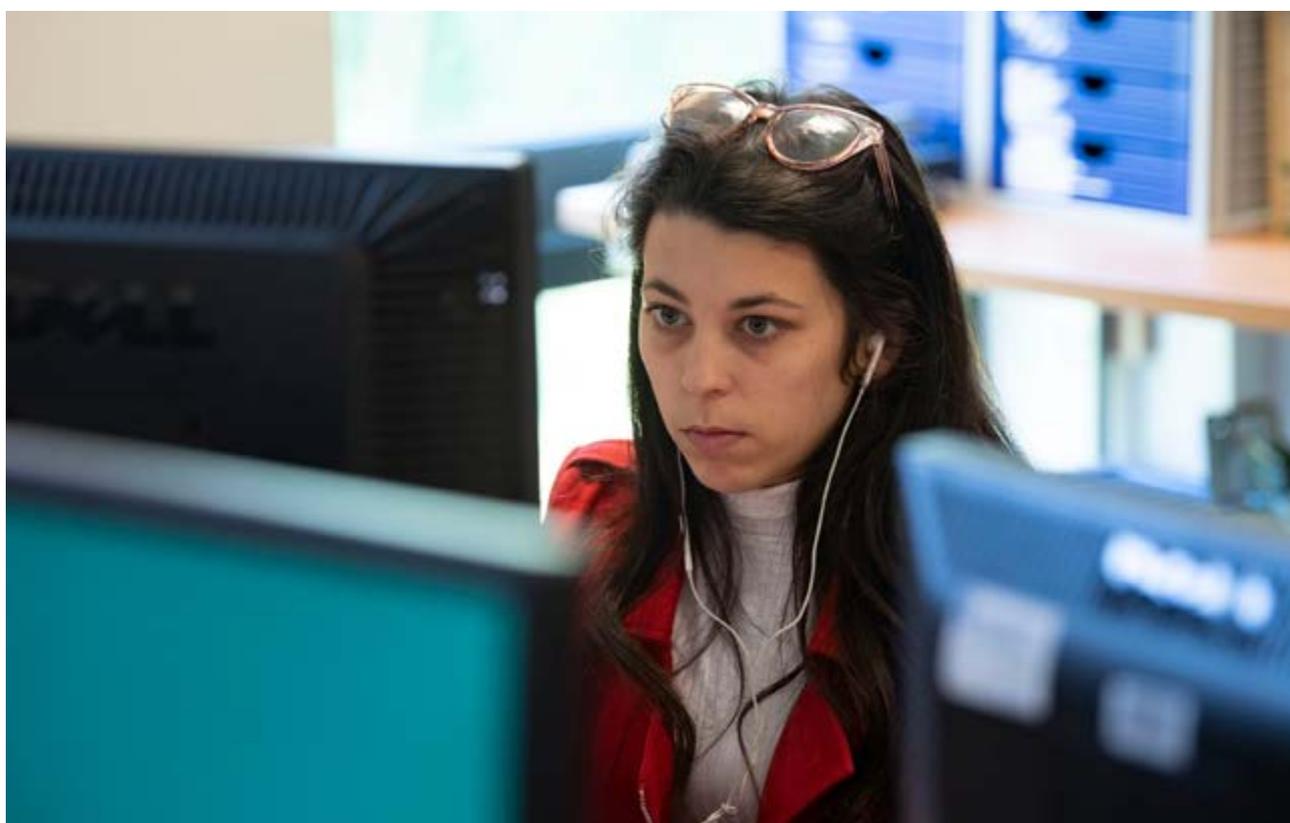
A sensible starting point would be to first define what a **Safe Space** is.

One place to start is your organisation's **safeguarding/digital safeguarding policy** or **pastoral support services**. These should clearly define what the term means.

The most commonly used and useful definition is the one provided by the Oxford Dictionary:

A Safe Space is a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other emotional or physical harm.'

The environment in this context is the online space in which communication flows and there is interaction between parties.



How someone 'feels' determines if it is a Safe Space

Feelings are subjective. They cannot be measured by an external party. The individual is the only person who can evaluate, measure and articulate that feeling. This is why it is important that we create an environment where it is clearly stated what we are trying to achieve: an environment that fosters **emotional intelligence** to recognise and respond to feelings and, in particular, feelings about how safe people feel in that environment.

Before we look at how we create a Safe Space online for others, we must first look at how you can create one for yourself. Please watch the video below to learn how you can achieve this.



Watch Video: A guide to keeping yourself safe

Choice theory

It is important to recognise that feelings are a quarter of our 'total behaviour'. Total behaviour is a term derived from the work of Dr William Glasser, who developed 'Choice theory'. Dr Glasser describes human behaviour as having four elements:

Thinking:

What we think about a particular situation, i.e., I don't think I am going to like this

Actions (doing):

How we act in a particular situation, i.e., I start to raise my voice

Feelings:

What we feel about the particular situation, i.e., I feel embarrassed, scared

Physiology:

How our body 'reacts' in a particular situation, i.e., I have flushed cheeks, sweaty palms

When we refer to online behaviours, we are not just referring to how someone is acting (doing), we are also referring to their thoughts, feelings and physiology. Our strategies for changing online behaviour should focus on engaging all four elements and specifically target the **thinking** and **doing** elements, which we will explore throughout this resource. You can explore choice theory in more depth by following the links provided below in Resources and watching the video below.

 **Watch Video:** What is choice theory

Now that we have considered how feelings link to other parts of our behaviour, we will look next at the three principle behaviours that underpin our approach to creating a Safe Space.

Resources and activity

 **William Glasser:** Choice theory

 **Activity 1:** 'Feeling' more in control of our behaviour

Three universal behaviour principles

We need to identify what behaviours may jeopardise a Safe Space and what we can do about them.

The learning environment must be safe, engaging and inclusive. It must also encourage feedback from all participants about how safe they feel.

The feeling of safety is ever changing. There are three universal principles that can foster this feeling.

The universal principles are:

1. The 'do no harm' principle
2. Inclusivity – we are all in this together and we all have a role to play
3. Adaptability and resourcefulness.

Each principle will now be explored in greater detail and we will look at what they mean in practice. You can also watch the video, 'Understanding what a Safe Space is' again for an overview of the three universal principles.

 **Watch Video:** Understanding what a Safe Space online is

Principle 1. The 'do no harm' principle

First and foremost, we must consider the potential of harm to ourselves and to others, including how our own behaviour may cause harm. Then, wherever possible, remove or reduce the likelihood of that harm from occurring.

Examples of potential harm could include:

- From the **content** someone is exposed to, such as violent, sexual or inappropriate images
- The **conduct** of someone's behaviour, for instance, inappropriate behaviour
- The frequency of **contact**: bombarding others with unwanted communication.

For more information on types of harm, see 'e-module 4: Safeguarding of the FE programme' linked in Resources below. We've also included a reflection activity to help you think about your teaching and possible harms that you might come across.

A starting point...

In our safeguarding practice, we know that individuals may be suffering from a form of harm and not realise it or be able to tell you. As a starting point, you should make sure that everyone is aware that:

- They have the right not to be harmed
- They have the right to get help if they need it
- They have the right to be listened to.

In raising awareness about the types of harm, we can educate ourselves and others about the steps we can take to minimise the risk of harm occurring. One way to minimise the risk of harm is to ensure that everyone knows what is and isn't an appropriate way to act. A **working agreement** sets the standard of behaviour. It is really important that you have a working agreement in place before you start any session. In the next section, 'Creating' a suitable online environment, we will explore working agreements further.

When considering the 'do no harm' principle and how you can reduce the likelihood of causing harm, it is good practice to consider the content you covering in your session to see if you need to include a trigger warning. A trigger warning (TW) alerts the audience that sensitive subjects may come up as part of the discussion and to be aware and take appropriate action for self-care.

An example of a trigger warning can be audio or text that says: 'During today's session we are likely to discuss topics that may prove sensitive for some. If this is the case, please ensure you look after yourselves either by leaving the session or speaking to someone about any support that you may require.'

Now that we have considered how we may be causing harm and how we can prevent this, we must think about how we can include everyone in creating a Safe Space to ensure they know that they have a role to play.

Resources and reflective activity



Digital Safeguarding for the FE and Training Sector



Reflective activity 1: Introduction to reflective practice and activities

Principle 2. Inclusivity – we are all in this together and we all have a role to play



Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone."

George Dei

A Safe Space should be **inclusive**. Inclusivity is 'the quality of trying to include many different types of people and treat them all fairly and equally' (Cambridge Dictionary).

We should consider everyone within the environment and include ALL individuals. We must create an environment where all members take responsibility and don't see it as 'someone else's job'. The facilitator also has the right to be included in the process and to have their voice heard about what will help them feel safe online.

We need to create a '**speak out**' culture that enables individuals to communicate, in whatever means they feel appropriate, their feelings of safety and whether or not they feel included and listened to in an online learning space. Our environment should inspire individuals to take responsibility and a course of action that will enable them to meet their needs, in this case, feeling safe and included. There are some suggested activities linked below that can help you to facilitate discussions in group and one-to-one settings.

As facilitators and participants within the online learning environment, we should model the behaviour we would like to see and, therefore, we should speak out if we feel unsafe or not included and challenge ourselves to take a course of action that will help change this and become needs fulfilling.

Now that we have considered what we could be doing to cause harm and how we can be inclusive to ensure individuals feel safe in the environment and listened to when they don't, we will next look at how to underpin our practice with the ability and resourcefulness to respond to any challenges that may occur.



Reflective activity



Reflective activity 2: Educating, informing or challenging perceptions of harm

Principle 3. Adaptability and resourcefulness



If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

Maya Angelou

We want to reinforce and promote POSITIVE online behaviours and help develop mental wellbeing as a protective factor.

Things will inevitably sometimes go wrong and there will be challenges that will arise whilst engaging online. Practising a growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset, means we approach challenges in a positive way. We can train our brains to be more adaptive and resourceful. You can explore the growth mindset concept in the activity linked below in Resources and activity.

Building resilience

Being adaptable and resourceful can help improve **resilience**. "Resilience is not just your ability to bounce back, but also your capacity to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing. Resilience isn't a personality trait – it's something that we can all take steps to achieve" (Mind.org). Resilience can help individuals keep things in context so that they are more likely to adopt behaviours that help them overcome any challenges that may threaten a feeling of safety.

When someone feels more in control it empowers them to take action to keep themselves safe. This is central to the safeguarding process and increases the likelihood of the individual receiving appropriate and timely advice and support when required. You can learn more about the growth mindset and digital resilience by looking at the resources linked below and watching this video on 'Digital resilience'.



Watch Video: Digital resilience

Resource and activity



MindsetWorks



Activity 2: Growth mindset





Recap and reflect

- ✓ A Safe Space online is an environment where ALL individuals feel safe.
- ✓ All individuals have a responsibility to behave in a way that keeps themselves and others safe.
- ✓ Individuals understanding the types of harm, actions they can take to minimise the risk of harm, and how they can raise concerns are fundamental characteristics of a Safe Space.



Top tips

- ✓ Have a clear definition and vision of what a Safe Space for online teaching and learning is.
- ✓ Ensure all participants are part of the process of creating and maintaining a Safe Space and that they are clear about what their roles and responsibilities are.
- ✓ A Safe Space online is more than the technology that we use. It is about the behaviours that we adopt. Behaviour is not just what we do, it is also about how we think, feel and our physiology.



PART 2 HOW CAN WE CREATE THE ENVIRONMENT THAT FOSTERS A SAFE SPACE?



Welcome to the second part of the Safe Space for teaching and learning online resource. We will build upon each section when we move forward to the next, so let's remind ourselves of what we covered. In the last part, we discussed:

- ✓ A Safe Space online is an environment where ALL feel a part of it and feel safe.
- ✓ How we behave impacts how we and others feel safe.
- ✓ We need to create an environment where everyone understands what is and isn't appropriate behaviour.

In this section, we will look at simple and easy ways to ensure everyone knows what behaviours create a Safe Space online and what we can do when we need to challenge a specific behaviour that isn't appropriate. In this section we will:

Learning objectives:

- **Understand** the value, importance and process of creating a Safe Space
- **Identify** barriers and factors that may prevent or impact a Safe Space
- **Develop** a range of strategies and practical resources to create and maintain a Safe Space online.

 **Watch Video:** Create a Safe Space



Creating a Safe Space starts with behaviour

Building on Section 1, we will now look at how we create a Safe Space. We will go beyond the technology and look at our behaviour and that of others.

Our first starting point is to clarify what we mean by behaviour and then to apply it to an online context. Behaviour isn't solely what is 'done' by us or other people. Behaviour has FOUR elements: what we do, what we think, what we feel and how our body responds. Behaviour is learnt through exposure to different situations and having the opportunity to apply it to a variety of different contexts.



Understanding and responding to behaviour via technology

Our understanding of behaviour predominately comes from face-to-face experiences in the real world. Almost everything we have learnt about behaviour comes from what we have seen, heard and felt. However, we have to recognise that behaviours evolve and we aren't just exposed to real-world situations, we are also living in a digital world where behaviours sometimes have a different meaning. An example of this is: in the digital world, an individual may feel more confident to speak out as they are not in a real-world context. This may lead to an individual saying or doing something they feel is acceptable in a digital environment but they would not do in a real-world environment.

Understanding and interpreting other people's behaviour online is more challenging than face to face as we don't have as many cues we can see and 'read into' a situation. We have to adapt to online interactions by working harder to understand the behaviours that we experience and having the knowledge and confidence of how to appropriately clarify behaviours that we feel uncertain about.

Having an appropriate connection and relationship with those that we are engaging with online makes it easier for us to interpret behaviours and to challenge and clarify, whenever required.

Engaging with others online for learning purposes is a relatively new concept. There are many challenges to making this new way of working a success as we adapt. Ensuring the environment is a Safe Space is a key indicator of this success.

Therefore, it is important that we recognise that we need to create an environment that clearly outlines what is and isn't appropriate behaviour and what we can expect if someone behaves in a way that isn't appropriate and may challenge that feeling of safety.

Reflective exercise



Reflective exercise 3: Thinking about your online behaviours

Identifying different types of behaviours

It is vital that we seek to **understand the behaviours** that we are experiencing and what other people are trying to **achieve by behaving in a certain way** in order to prevent misunderstandings. As we grow older, behavioural norms can become deep rooted within an individual and this can lead to misunderstandings and conflict because we may wrongly assume a particular behaviour means something other than what it is intended to.

Misunderstandings, miscommunication and conflicts are not only harmful to those who experience it, but it can also break down and damage the learner-educator relationship.

Appropriate online behaviours need to be clearly defined and communicated. Appropriate behaviour is prerequisite of an online Safe Space.

To start with, have a look at your organisation's policies. Your organisation should have a digital safeguarding policy that clearly outlines procedures and practices in line with creating and maintaining a Safe Space. Specifically, it should cover the three risk Cs. The three risk Cs are **content, contact and conduct**. The policy should be very clear on what the risks are, what behaviour is expected to prevent and minimise the risks, and what action should be taken if these risks are present.

We want people to understand and behave in a way that creates a Safe Space. First, we need to:

- Identify and agree what behaviours we want to see (acceptable behaviour)
- Understand how to role model those behaviours ourselves
- Identify and agree what behaviours are not okay (unacceptable behaviour)
- Identify what behaviours may cause harm (harmful behaviour).

Acceptable behaviours can include:

- Waiting for someone else to finish speaking before unmuting
- Using the raise hand button when wanting to speak
- Visually clapping when agreeing with someone
- Using the chat function when asking a question.

Unacceptable behaviours can include:

- Not muting when someone else is talking
- Inviting other people in the real-world environment to join in the session
- Visibly doing something else other than engaging in the session.

Harmful behaviours can include:

- Appearing visually aggressive
- Excessive contact
- Sharing inappropriate content
- Mocking others.

Activity



Activity 3: What kinds of behaviours can you think of?

Communicating the agreed behavioural standards

One aspect that is often overlooked is creating and communicating a set of agreed behavioural standards, such as a working agreement or learning contract. We use the term 'working' agreement as it is a more effective term. It indicates that this is an evolving and responsive process, based on mutual cooperation and agreement by all parties.

To be effective, these standards must be **clearly** and **consistently** communicated to all. The standards should be in line with the organisation's digital safeguarding policy but also reflect the voices and needs of all those participating in sessions.

In the Resources section below, you will find more information on working agreements: why and how to facilitate them and information on the different types of agreements, as well as a video on how to introduce the concept of an agreement.

Resources



Working agreement resource: The why, what and how of working agreements



Watch Video: The value of working agreements



How to challenge unacceptable behaviour in an online environment

In this section, we will help you develop a solution-focused approach to challenging unwanted behaviours. You will find that having this approach will help keep things in context so you remain calm and focused on the aim of achieving a Safe Space online.

We will also look at ways to respond and challenge, educate and inform ourselves and others in understanding the impact of their behaviour. When challenging behaviour we need to have a model that is simple to use and easy to remember. Any challenge of behaviour should be done with the intention of providing structured feedback.

Having strategies for responding to unacceptable or harmful behaviours will enable us to feel more in control and confident to deal with them. Feeling more in control is empowering. Feeling empowered and confident helps promote a feeling of safety.

Informed by policy and associated procedures, your organisation should create clear guidance on what should be challenged, by whom and how.

Challenging others' behaviour in an online environment is very different to that of the real world. We can't pick up as many non-verbal cues, which often help us decide what is our best course of action. Technology and other sources of interference may impact our interpretation on the situation. In addition, challenging individuals in a respectful and discreet way is more difficult as opportunities can be more limited.

It is vital that you are familiar with your organisation's policy and have a clear understanding of what is expected of you in regards to your role and responsibility in responding to online behaviours.

So to think about how we are going to respond, we must consider the following steps. You can also re-watch the video, Create a Safe Space, for more information and ways to challenge behaviour.

 **Watch Video:** Create a Safe Space

Step 1: what behaviour are you challenging?

You need to be clear about what you are specifically challenging and why. This will inform the most effective strategy you have for dealing with the behaviour.

Be specific, don't generalise. For example, if you say, 'Your attitude is not appropriate': what exactly are you witnessing that suggests their attitude is not appropriate? Is it something that they have done, said, or communicated in another way?

Any challenge of behaviour must include an example of a behaviour you are challenging.

Step 2: Why is the behaviour being challenged?

Be clear as to why you are challenging the behaviour. What about that behaviour needs to be challenged and then changed? Be sure of Steps 1 & 2 BEFORE you attempt Step 3.

Step 3: How will you challenge the behaviour?

This should be informed by policy and procedure, but whatever approach is used, it must be systematic, that is, there must be a clear and consistent process. The most effective behaviour management systems are the ones that are clear and consistently followed. They are respectful, meaningful and offer the opportunity for reflection and growth.

We will explore a framework of responding to behaviour in the next section.

Strategies for responding to behaviours

Before exploring different strategies for responding to behaviours, we must first familiarise ourselves with some key principles found in effective behaviour management systems.

These principles will help you to begin to understand behaviour and target your response more appropriately with meaning and impact.

- 1) The behaviour you see is the person's best attempt at that moment in time to get what they want/need.
- 2) We only have a limited number of behavioural responses to any given situation.
- 3) We are all capable of learning and adopting new behaviours.
- 4) We are more likely to adopt new behaviours if we have had a positive and supportive environment to foster them in.
- 5) Behaviour is only a temporary response to a situation.
- 6) You cannot control someone else's behaviour but you can influence it. The strength of the influence comes from the strength of the relationship.

Strategies for responding to different types of behaviour

Some behaviours are clearly more unacceptable than others. Your policies and procedures will stipulate how these are to be dealt with. However, some behaviours are borderline or specific to the learners you work with. It may be less clear-cut how you should respond.

First, seek to understand the person's behaviour. As we saw in the principles above, a person will behave in a certain way to fulfil an unmet need. Understanding this not only helps you to have empathy but it also can enable you to tailor your strategy to that person, reducing the likelihood of conflict and increasing the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Glasser's needs model for challenging behaviour

Dr William Glasser, creator of Choice Theory discussed earlier, created a simple needs model that helps when responding to challenging behaviour. Dr Glasser believed that behaviour was driven by one or more of the following needs:

- Love and belonging
- Self-worth
- Fun
- Freedom
- Survival.

Whilst there is no hierarchy to these needs, Dr Glasser believed that love and belonging was the strongest need within humans. You can learn more about applying Glasser's model in the real world by exploring the links in resources below.

Resource and reflective exercise



Reflective exercise 6: Glasser's needs model and behaviours



Activity 5: Applying Glasser's model in the real world

Managing Online Behaviour

Recognising that the online environment limits our opportunities to challenge behaviour in the same way we would in a real-life environment means we need a clear and easy process that enables us to respond in a variety of circumstances.

A tried and tested methodology is one called SAID. This stands for **Standard Action Impact Do/Develop**:

- **Standard:** This refers to a specific behaviour and the expectation of what is/isn't appropriate.
- **Action:** What happened (specifically)?
- **Impact:** What was the impact of the identified behaviour?
- **Do/Develop:** What does the person need to do or develop next time so the behaviour doesn't occur again?

An example of the SAID model could be:

Standard: We will mute our mics when not talking.

Action: Someone unmutes themselves.

Impact: The session can be disrupted/people may become frustrated.

Do/develop: What do you think you can do to prevent this from happening again?

The purpose of this model is that there is a structure to challenging other people's behaviour. It also helps to depersonalise the challenge process and reduce the potential of escalation and conflict. You can see more about the SAID model in the Create a Safe Space video and read more about it in the Resources section below.

 **Watch Video:** Create a Safe Space

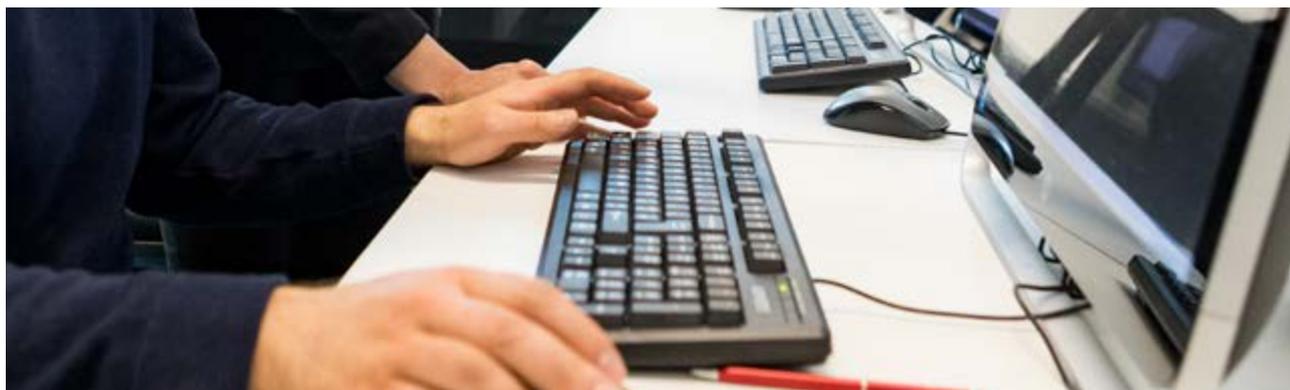
Depending on the working agreement and guidance from your policies and procedures, you may choose not to challenge every specific example of inappropriate behaviour. As the saying goes, 'Pick your battles', but there does need to be a level of consistency.

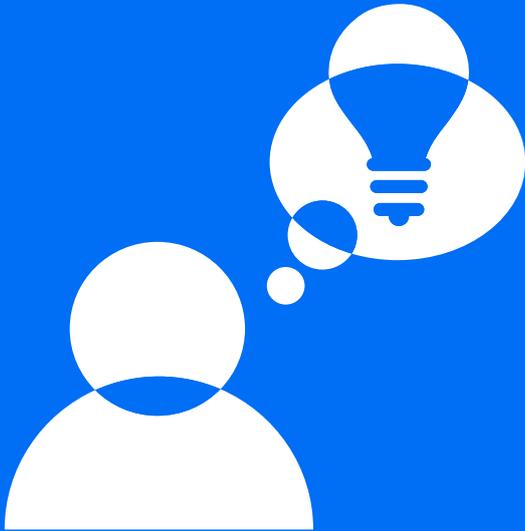
If you challenge everything, you will spend more time responding to behaviour than delivery. You will also lessen the power of your challenge as your audience will generalise, delete or distort your voice. They will simply switch off.

Resources and reflective exercise

 **Reflective exercise 7:** Applying the SAID model

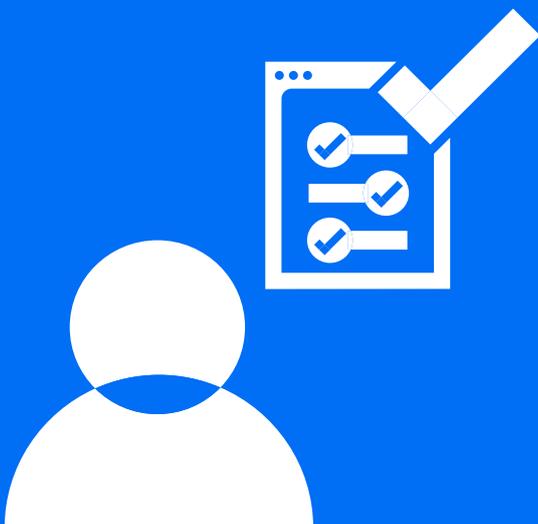
 **SAID resource:** Learn more about the principles of SAID





Recap and reflect

- ✓ A Safe Space online is created by the human behaviours experienced both online and in a real-world environment.
- ✓ Behaviour is learnt and we must educate ourselves and others on what behaviour is and isn't appropriate and not assume everyone knows how to behave in online environments.
- ✓ A working agreement plays a fundamental part in creating a Safe Space online and it should always be covered. It should be flexible and work with your audience and delivery context. It needs commitment by all to ensure a Safe Space is created and maintained.
- ✓ All behaviour has a reason and a purpose. It can be influenced by the real world (R), technology (T) and knowledge of how to use it, and online by an unmet behavioural need (O).
- ✓ Any behavioural challenge should be respectful, educational and transparent, using a process like SAID.



Top tips

- ✓ Know your organisational policy and procedures so you are clear of what is expected of you and what is expected of others.
- ✓ Be creative with your working agreements. Involve all and help them come up with something that they can own and be proud of. Maybe set them a creative task of how to communicate the working agreement to others whilst online. Could they create a video?
- ✓ Teach learners the SAID model so they have a process for challenging behaviour that may threaten a Safe Space.

PART 3 HOW CAN WE CONNECT ONLINE TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND RAPPORT?



Welcome to the third part of the Safe Space for teaching and learning online resource. Building on the concepts in the previous two sections, here we will look at why it is important to form connections with your learners and how to promote connections between individuals that can help build appropriate relationships and establish rapport online.

In the last two parts, we discussed:

- ✓ That a Safe Space for teaching online is an environment where all individuals feel safe. We looked at the importance of all individuals understanding what the term meant and what their role was in creating a Safe Space.
- ✓ Then we looked at how we 'create' and maintain that environment, identifying the importance of an effective working agreement as a tool to set behavioural norms and expectations.
- ✓ We explored the ways in which working agreements can be created and the important role they play in strategies for challenging difficult or inappropriate behaviour online.

In this part, we will learn what impact we can have on other people's behaviour and how we can question the appropriateness of our own behaviour and how that impacts others. Despite the many challenges of digital delivery, we will look at how you can have the greatest influence upon your learners and ensure they are kept safe and engaged in the learning process.

Learning objectives:

- **Understand** the value, importance and process of **connecting**
- **Identify** behavioural drivers that may help or hinder the connecting process
- **Develop** a range of strategies and practical resources to create and maintain connecting relationships.



Introduction: Connecting within a Safe Space

In this section, we will explore the role and impact of 'connecting' within a Safe Space and the importance this has on appropriate relationships that not only improve educational attainment but also keep us and others safe. The video below, Connecting in a Safe Space, will give you an overview of the material we cover in this section. There is more information, resources and activities in the following sections to explore the concepts in more detail.

 **Watch Video:** Connecting in a Safe Space

Applying positive behavioural psychology, we look at what online behaviours promote connections and how they can increase your influence, an influence that can promote safer behaviours and optimise the learning experience.

Whilst technology can help connect individuals all over the world, research shows us that the online environment can also feel quite distant and lonely. There is emerging evidence that experiences online can have a negative impact upon our mental wellbeing.

Technology may connect us but it is the feeling of connection that is vital to positive online learning experiences.


As the world becomes a more digital place, we cannot forget about the human connection."
Adam Neumann



Reflective exercise

 **Reflective exercise 8:** Your online teaching experience

Overview: Teaching and learning in a digital age

Digital education is a relatively new concept. Whilst many have been using digital platforms to communicate for social purposes, there has been limited opportunity to evolve interactions for formal learning experiences. It is easy to presume that most people have the necessary skills to engage in online learning, particularly if they use technology for social purposes.

However, research has shown that there is a considerable digital skills shortfall at this moment in time. Whilst the past year in particular has increased the opportunity to engage in more online learning and to develop our skills, knowledge and confidence in using technology, we have not had sufficient time to develop 'online behavioural norms'.

Online behavioural norms are the accepted core behaviours and they are modelled unconsciously in an online environment. These takes time to evolve. There needs to be an appropriate amount of exposure for people to understand what is and isn't appropriate behaviour.

Technology can also limit our ability to understand and respond accordingly to other people's behaviour because we may not be able to see the same full picture that we could if we were in the same room as someone. Technology can interrupt the flow of someone's communication, for example, if they are sharing something meaningful and the video freezes or the audio cuts out, interrupting them.

Behaviour is about fulfilling an unmet need

As we discussed in the last section, our brains are predominately negatively wired so it is easy to assume someone's behaviour is negative when we don't understand it. As we saw, it is important to understand that behaviour is needs driven, and there may be other reasons for someone's behaviour.

All behaviour is trying to fulfil an unmet need. There are a number of needs models available but one of the simplest to use is the needs model devised by Dr William Glasser, which was discussed in the last section. At any point, a person's behaviour is about trying to meet a need, whether it be love and belonging, self-worth, fun, freedom or survival.

Behaviours to create a Safe Space

When considering behaviour, we need to think about the behaviours that create a safe space and an optimal learning environment. In previous sections, we outlined what a Safe Space is, what behaviours are required and how we can educate ourselves and others on what the behavioural expectations are and what happens if we do not follow them.



Whilst we are aware of potential sanctions for not following working agreements, we must also ask ourselves: 'How can we ensure the behaviour is suitable for an online teaching and learning environment?' Many people fall into the trap of believing that they can control the behaviour of others through threats of or the use of sanctions. However, a fear of sanctions will only last so long. We also need to look at this another way: If we have a strong connection with someone, we are more likely to have appropriate behaviour for the environment and less likely to require any sanctions.

As we work through acceptable behaviours and working agreements, it is very important that we accept that, as Dr William Glasser states, **we cannot control another person's behaviour**. We can only influence it, and the strength of the influence comes from the strength of the relationship.

The stronger the relationship, the stronger the influence

In the rest of this section, we will look at how to improve the relationship, connecting through behaviours not just technology.

Reflective exercise



Reflective exercise 9: Your relationship with your learners

Building relationships to build connections

A stronger connection means a stronger relationship. A stronger relationship reduces the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour.

Connecting behaviours don't need to be time-consuming and resource intensive. They can be via a simple icebreaker. An example to demonstrate this is:



"Whilst delivering a live online lesson, I knew there were some learners that I didn't have a strong connection with so, as an ice-breaker, I asked the group to put the following in the chat: a greeting to their fellow classmates, a description of the top that they were wearing or a noticeable feature, and their favourite song. That helped me identify particular learners that I wanted to work further on the connection. I looked for their response in the chat and then later, when running a group activity, I made sure their favourite song was playing in the background."

Louise Willis-Keeler

There are simple tasks that you can do online that shows that you are connecting.

Reflective exercise



Reflective exercise 10: Connecting online with learners

How do we connect with others online?

There are many real world influences and distractions that impact the online environment and the connections we form. Some can be overwhelming for an individual. Class learners just had to deal with influences within the learning environment, maybe with some minimal external distractions, such as someone talking out of turn in class.

Now, online learners have to deal with distractions online in addition to distractions offline. The influences or distractions in the real world are also likely to be more disruptive because learners are in a home environment rather than in a formal learning environment. Some examples are below.

Real-world learning environment (classroom) distractions

- Someone talking
- Someone moving
- Mobile phone alert
- Technology not working
- Heating/room temperature
- Late arrivals
- Feeling physically uncomfortable
- Resources not working

Online learning environment

- Both real world and online environment distractions
- Too much stimulus, i.e., technology, processing information and participation
- Distractions in the home environment whilst online

Online environment distractions

- Technological challenges
- Unmuted distractions
- Someone 'gate crashing'
- Inappropriate content
- Inappropriate conduct
- Inappropriate contact

The real-world environment

Forming connections in the real-world environment is likely to feel more 'normal' for both parties. There is more stimulus and immediate feedback to interpret. For example, we can read if someone is looking confused, agitated or happy from additional visual and audio cues. Our subconscious picks up on more subtle details than we are aware of. These details give us that 'feeling' of whether or not we are establishing a rapport with someone. We don't pick up on these details or cues when we engage online.

We also feel more natural in a real-world environment because that is where we are normally engaged; the online world is only temporary. Real-world environments are more 'real' and feel more 'natural', so it is easier to connect with others. We feel more equipped to deal with real-world distractions because we are able to do something more physical than in an online environment, for example, get up and walk about or physically gesture more, knowing that the other person can see more of our gestures because they aren't limited by screen space.

The online world

When trying to connect to others online, we are very aware that this is an artificial environment and that there are many things that can go wrong, which are out of our control. For example, the dreaded Zoom or Teams session when the WiFi drops and someone's image freezes or the audio feed breaks up and you miss what someone is saying.

Technological challenges can lead to frustration, frustration that things are out of our control and sometimes unpredictable. This can impact the relationships that we form and maintain online. We need to remember that whilst we cannot control the technology that we use, **we can control our response to it.**

Be realistic, things will inevitably go wrong when using technology. There is little we can do about it but we create an environment that acknowledges these challenges and shows that we will not be deterred by them. Rather, we will adapt and move forward.

Modelling behaviour online

Remember, it is important that we model the behaviour that we would like to see in others.

How we display particular behaviours online, such as frustration, can impact the rapport that we have with others. Being aware that others in a digital environment will only see a small percentage of our actual behaviour, due to camera restrictions and other reasons, is important and we may need to give more of verbal explanation when things do go wrong.

We all know that technology can influence the rapport and relationship-building process, so it is important that we acknowledge this. We spoke in the first section about having a **speak out** culture online. It is important that individuals feel comfortable questioning someone's behaviour and what it means to question it in a non-confrontational way in order to understand and connect better. For instance, saying to someone: 'Hey, you seem frustrated, are you?' I am challenging a behaviour that I see, but hopefully in a non-confrontational way. The reason I am challenging your behaviour is that I want to understand you better, help you if possible, and to connect.

“

I define **connection** as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the **relationship**.”

Brene Brown

Understanding patterns of behaviour

A key to speaking out and to connecting is understanding patterns of behaviour. Sometimes relationships online are combined with relationships in the real world. Sometimes relationships are only online. The challenge is to understand what is and isn't normal behaviour for an individual.

Understanding patterns of behaviour is important because we can see what is and isn't normal behaviour for someone and we can become more attentive when we start to see someone behaving not in their usual way. A change in behaviour may indicate something is threatening that feeling of safety either in the real world or online environment. For example, you may have a student who seems to really engage in lessons. Suddenly you notice that her body language seems uncomfortable. She keeps putting her head down or looking offscreen. It is a sign for you: you are noticing a change of behaviour that is out of character and not what you are normally used to.

This scenario would require you follow your safeguarding procedures.

Activity



Activity 6: Promoting connections



Habits that can make or break connections

“

It is not until they know that we care, that they care what we know.”

Dr William Glasser

Now that we have considered how we can promote a connection in the online environment, we must also consider how our behaviour impacts that connection. How we behave will influence others people's behaviour towards us.

Replace harmful habits with positive habits

Dr William Glasser found that certain negative behavioural habits are more likely push someone away and potentially destroy a connection rather than foster it. If we use these types of behavioural traits, we are modelling that they are ok. The work of Dr Glasser demonstrates that if we use them frequently and become reliant upon them, they will damage our relationship with a person. They could cause conflict, making the learner less likely to engage in the learning process. It can also lead to a toxic relationship, which impact one or both people's wellbeing.

These behavioural habits, with online examples, include:

- 1) **Criticising:** 'Come on, you should know that by now.'
- 2) **Blaming:** 'We are running behind schedule because you took so long in the discussion.'
- 3) **Complaining:** 'Why haven't you figured out the mute button by now?'
- 4) **Nagging:** 'How many times do I have to tell you how to use the 'join the room now' button?'
- 5) **Threatening:** 'If you don't stop now I am going to end the session.'
- 6) **Punishing:** 'You will not be allowed to take part in...'
- 7) **Bribing or rewarding to control:** 'If you don't do this/or if you do this, you will get...'

We need to recognise that these behavioural habits are deeply engrained in our society and ways of working, however, if we want to make a real difference, influencing learners to gain the most from online learning and to create a Safe Space, we must start choosing from the more positive behaviour habits below.

The focus should be on reducing the use of these behavioural habits and replacing them with more positive and connecting habits, such as these:

- 1) **Supporting:** 'If you are struggling with something, please let me know. I'll be happy to explain.'
- 2) **Encouraging:** 'You came up with some great points in our last discussion, well done! I am really looking forward to hearing what you say next.'
- 3) **Listening:** 'That is great to hear, thank you.'
- 4) **Accepting:** 'It's ok, we all have WiFi problems.'
- 5) **Trusting:** 'I know that if you turn your camera off you will still listen in.'
- 6) **Respecting:** 'It's ok if you don't agree with what is being said. Thanks for sharing your thoughts.'
- 7) **Negotiating differences:** 'How do you think we can make this work for us all?'

Engaging with online learning can present many challenges. There can be many things that threaten an individual's feeling of safety. One thing that may threaten that feeling is how they perceive they will experience behaviour in an online learning environment. If they are subjected to a large amount of the negative behavioural habits, they will not feel connected within the environment nor feel safe. Therefore, we must use, where possible, as many of the positive behavioural habits. The more we use them, the stronger the connections will be and the more likely we will see others adopting those behavioural traits and creating a healthier online working environment.

You may wish to include the seven positive habits in any working agreements that you create. You can also watch the video , Connecting in a Safe Space, to reinforce your learning.

 **Watch Video:** Connecting in a Safe Space





Recap and reflect

- ✓ To understand what a Safe Space is and how we create it, we must look at how we ensure that we connect with learners in a digital environment in a meaningful and impactful way.
- ✓ There are many challenges in digital delivery but acknowledging them and focusing on how we can overcome them and still connect with one another is a key element of successful online learning.
- ✓ Individuals must feel and safe and connected, both in the real world and online learning environment.
- ✓ If there is no connection, engagement will be limited, difficult behaviours may arise and learning opportunities missed.
- ✓ Focus first on connection and this will enable you to ensure your desired outcomes are more likely to be achieved.



Top tips

- ✓ Ensure that you actively plan connection activities and opportunities into your session plans. These do not need to be lengthy – they can still be impactful with five-minute sessions.
- ✓ Vary your style of activities, from discussions to the use of digital tools, such as Mentimeter or platform filters.
- ✓ Building relationships and establishing rapport will enable you to start building a picture of what is/isn't regular behaviour for an individual.
- ✓ Practise the seven connecting habits in your online interactions.

**PART 4 HOW CAN WE ENSURE WE
COMMUNICATE TO PROMOTE A
FEELING OF SAFETY?**



Welcome to the fourth and final part of the Safe Space for teaching and learning online resource. In this section, we will explore the messages that need to be communicated to ensure learners and engage and an online Safe Space for all is created. The groundwork for the impact of any messages being communicated has been set in the previous sections. Now, we will look at what to communicate and how.

In the last two parts:

- ✔ We explored why it is important to understand what a Safe Space for teaching and learning online is and how we create and maintain that environment.
- ✔ We discussed that a key element for making it a success is through the strength of the connections we have with individuals in that environment. The stronger the connections, the stronger the influence we have in promoting positive, safe and achieving behaviours in an online teaching and learning environment.
- ✔ We have worked through a process in this resource to understand, create, connect and communicate within an online environment.

In this part, we will look at what messages need to be clearly and continuously communicated to all those engaged in an online learning environment. Built upon safeguarding best practice, we will ensure the messaging enables all to feel safe and enables everyone to know what action to take if they do not. Feeling safe when engaging with online learning is vital for an effective learning experience.

Learning objectives:

- **Understand** the impact of effective **communication** in a Safe Space online for teaching and learning
- **Identify** key messaging for keeping everyone safe and engaged in online learning.
- **Develop** a range of strategies and practical resources to communicate effectively and ensure meaningful and helpful information is communicated.



RESPONSE: Key principles to promote a Safe Space online

Research shows us that despite living in a digital age, more people are feeling disconnected, lonely and isolated, especially due to the current social restrictions we have faced over the past year. Many individuals and organisations have jumped in, with both feet, into engaging online. Some people will have had prior experience of engaging online; for others, it will be a relatively new and possibly overwhelming experience.

Effective delivery of key messaging can reduce this sense of panic and not feeling safe quickly and effectively. This is why we have explained the process. Watch the video, Communicating key messages in a Safe Space online, and have a read through the resources below to learn more about how you can communicate safe behaviours online.

 **Watch Video:** Communicating key messages

Communicating safe behaviours online

Now that we understand the environment we are trying to create and the importance of the connections we form, we are going to explore the **key principles** that need to be communicated in order to promote positive, safe behaviour online. Following on from that, we will explore some of the challenges that we may face and how we can overcome them.

An easy way to remember the key message is to think of our **RESPONSE**. That is:

- **Recognising:** We need to recognise signs of a concern.
- **Educating:** We must educate ourselves and others on the types of harm and what can be done to minimise risk.
- **Safeguarding** is everyone's responsibility.
- **Preventing** potential harm by responding in a timely manner.
- **Owning** our feelings and behaviours.
- **Not alone:** There is always someone who can offer support and guidance.
- **Signposting:** Our role is to signpost to the most appropriate person/service to best help someone.
- **Everyone** has the right not to be harmed and to engage in a Safe Space online.

Resources and activity

-  **Ann Craft Trust:** Types of harm
-  **Resource:** RESPONSE: key principles to promote a Safe Space online
-  **Activity 7:** Identifying types of harm

Overcoming challenges to communicate effectively

As discussed through this resource, there are many challenges to online learning, but with a resourceful and resilient mindset we can overcome them and ensure that we create a safe and positive learning experience. To do so, we must consider what some of the challenges are that could prevent us from effectively communicating key messages. Below are some of the more common challenges but please note that this is not an exhaustive list. You may wish to note down other challenges that you have come across that are not listed here.

Information overload

In a digital space, it is quite easy to become overwhelmed and overloaded with information. It is really important to make things simple and easy to understand. So, remember the principle of small and often.

It is better to communicate in bite-size chunks frequently, than to overwhelm with too much information too quickly. The priority should always be that people know first how to recognise a concern and then know who to go to for help and support.

An evaluation question could be: Does everyone in this learning environment know how to recognise and respond appropriately to any concerns?

Lack of understanding

Due to language, cultural and accessibility challenges, some of the messages being communicated may not be fully understood. Question how you can assess whether the messages have been understood and how you can help others understand fully what is being communicated.

One way, referenced throughout this resource, is to 'model' the behaviour you would like to see. For example, are you challenging any behaviours that might make others feel uncomfortable? Are you praising someone when they are able to speak up and ask a question or raise a concern? Do you question, appropriately, when someone says something you don't understand or are not clear on?

Evaluation questions could be: What are the most common challenges that you face when communicating online, either as a facilitator or a learner? How do you deal with them? What lessons have you learnt about dealing with communication challenges? How do you share your learning with others?

Disruptive behaviours

We understand what a Safe Space is and we have looked at what we need to do to create a Safe Space and the importance of connection in ensuring the messages we are trying to communicate are successful. Having a working agreement defines what is acceptable behaviour and unacceptable behaviour in a Safe Space online. We also understand behavioural needs and we have a framework to challenge behaviour, such as the SAID model.

Having said that, we must recognise that we may still experience disruptive behaviours. Be alert to the possibility that if you are communicating the key messages outlined above and someone seems to be disruptive, argumentative and/or disengaged, that, too, could be a sign that they are suffering from a form of harm and this might be their best attempt at getting help.

An evaluation question could be: When you are noticing behaviours that are disruptive or cause a concern, what needs do you think their behaviour is trying to satisfy and how can you help them understand their behaviour and choose an alternative, healthier behaviour?

Communicating with impact to promote a feeling of safety

In summary, how we communicate with others is part of our 'doing' and it is one element of our own behaviour. How we behave influences the behaviour of others and we have a vital part to play in ensuring that we create and are part of a Safe Space online.

We don't want to cause harm, we want to minimise it, so that is why it is vitally important that everyone understands the environment we are trying to create. A clear process and effective communication is fundamental to everyone's wellbeing and experience of online learning and we must be proactive in upskilling all learners with the digital social skills to thrive, not just survive, online.

Remember the greater connection you have with your learners, the greater the impact the message you are communicating will have. This will help to ensure we create an 'Online Safe Space for teaching and learning'.





Recap and reflect

- ✓ Have a clear understanding of what key messages you need to communicate in order to ensure a Safe Space.
- ✓ Work your way through the RESPONSE model, which demonstrates what we should be doing and thinking as part of our behaviour online.
- ✓ You are not a safeguarding/behavioural specialist. Your role is to ensure that you follow your organisation's policies and procedures and appropriately signpost.



Top tips

- ✓ Deliver small, bite-size pieces of information.
- ✓ Consistently deliver the key messages. Don't vary the message, but you can vary how you deliver the message.
- ✓ Keep it interactive and engaging.
- ✓ Be creative and accessible.
- ✓ Create a space for discussion and allow silences. Sometimes, there is pressure to ensure there is no silence, especially in a 'live' situation. However, silences are proven to be effective in enabling those struggling to speak out to do so in a space where there isn't as much pressure to say/do something and then move on.
- ✓ Model the behaviour that you want to see.

OUR PARTNERS



Department
for Education

THANK YOU

157–197 Buckingham Palace Road,
London SW1W 9SP

020 3740 8280
enquiries@etfoundation.co.uk
ETFOUNDATION.CO.UK

Company registration number (England and
Wales): 08540597. Charity number: 1153859