

Stressful or Painful School Experiences That Compromise Emotional Safety

By Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. Reprinted with permission.

The items on this list were compiled from a number of print resources as well as surveys and interviews conducted over a two-year period. (Many items suggested in the literature overlapped or were repeatedly expressed in interviews and surveys.) Any of these events or experiences can have a negative impact— not only on the student directly involved, but also students who observe the experience, and on the emotional climate of the learning environment, as well.

- Being placed in educational material above actual ability level
- Unclear directions; directions not repeated or available if you didn't get them the first time
- Not being given enough help or assistance
- Not having resources, structure or guidelines, people or information needed to complete an assignment (before having to respond or explain)
- Not having enough time to complete work; unrealistic deadlines
- Not having enough time to think about a question or process new information
- Inability to speak the language
- Teacher's impatience, annoyance or disgust
- Overhearing teachers or other significant adults discussing you negatively within earshot (either deliberately or accidentally)
- Having a seemingly uncaring, uninvolved or weak principal
- Rarely (or never) being given any choices or input in decisions that affect you
- Not being taken seriously; being ignored or dismissed, laughed off
- Rigid application of rules and negative consequences (punishments)
- Spanking, paddling or whipping used as punishment
- Rough physical contact used deliberately to control or punish (pinching, grabbing, pushing, hitting)

- Witnessing classmates being shamed, spanked or punished
- Being punished for moving, squirming, wanting to touch things, doodling, swinging your leg, or other forms of “hyperactivity”
- Routinely recognized or praised, threatened or punished with conditional approval from teacher or other adults
- Favoritism of some students over others
- Prejudice or discrimination (by adults or peers) based on race, ethnicity, religion or other cultural factors
- Prejudice or discrimination by adults or peers, including judgments, ridicule, rejection, devaluing, shaming, insulting, demeaning, exclusion or other negative reactions, whether verbal or nonverbal, based on clothing (style, cost, value or where purchased), hairstyle, jewelry, or other factors related to appearance
- Prejudice or discrimination (by adults or peers) based on abilities and interests, or on a lack of abilities or interest in a particular area
- Prejudice or discrimination (by adults or peers) based on sexual orientation, whether expressed or inferred
- Being left-handed and being pressured or required to use one’s right hand
- Being punished long after an incident occurred
- Being wrongly accused or wrongly punished
- Inability to read or otherwise perform on grade level
- Unpredictable or inconsistent teacher behavior
- Teacher’s reliance on someone else (principal, counselor, parents, for example) to handle or punish discipline problems
- “Gotcha” tests, pop quizzes, useless tests or evaluations used mainly to “catch” or punish students
- Unrealistic rules and expectations

- Demands that do not respect students' developmental or ability level
- Ineffective professionals trying to help; adults who don't know how to help even if they want to (or who inadvertently make things worse)
- Not being positively recognized or acknowledged for positive behavior, achievement, effort, cooperation, etc.
- Little variety in day-to-day curriculum
- Little variety in day-to-day schedule
- Feeling little love in school in general
- Teachers' inability or unwillingness to help the slow learners or kids who need extra help
- A lack of understanding or difficulty communicating thoughts and feelings that is frequently interpreted as laziness
- Feelings of helplessness and lack of power to change an uncomfortable situation; inability to see a possible solution to a problem
- Teachers' hollering, explosive behavior
- Not being allowed to express problems openly and verbally to a teacher
- Not being allowed or able to express feelings without fear of negative reaction or consequence
- Being called names that suggest stupidity or incompetence
- Being told you're not applying yourself
- Being shamed or criticized for dropping something or knocking something over; being told you're clumsy
- Being shamed or criticized for not understanding something the first time it is explained
- Feeling afraid to share, speak up or say anything in class
- Feeling sad and lonely and not being able to share these feelings with anyone

- Feeling that no one really cares about you
- Being picked last for a game in recess or gym class
- Being bullied, harassed or intimidated by other students
- Going to a new school, having to make new friends
- Not being supported or protected by teachers or other adults who witness other children hurting you (verbally or physically)
- Being punished or excluded from an activity because you did not respond quickly enough
- Speaking, reading or presenting in front of the class
- Being in the lowest reading group; knowing that your classmates think you are slow (not as smart as they are)
- Anticipating an activity or class you know you're not good in
- Having your grades read in class (low or high)
- Having to wait to go to the bathroom until the scheduled time; being denied access to the bathroom when needed
- Having to sit so long at your desk that your mind and body become numb or restless
- Being shamed, ridiculed, humiliated or set up to fail in front of your peers
- Being sensitive to noise, visual stimulation or movement in the classroom
- Not having any privacy
- Not being able to rest when you feel you need to
- Poor match of learning style to teaching style; learning styles and preferences not accommodated

Excerpted from *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.
Buy the book at: <http://janebluestein.com/2012/book-creating-emotionally-safe-schools/>.