

# Getting to the Heart of Teaching and Learning

Creating a safe, nurturing environment is the key to reaching students.

BY TARA BROWN

“To get into their heads we must first get into their hearts.” In today’s educational climate with high-stakes testing, achievement gaps, Common Core, and RTI, these words have never been more applicable.

The extreme focus on data and test scores stresses students and teachers. With stress come negative factors that affect emotions, motivation, engagement, cognition, and memory. It’s time to fully embrace the need to foster an environment that supports kids emotionally as well as academically.

## Emotions and Learning

You can’t run from a lion and read a book at the same time. Students who do not feel safe truly cannot learn; they simply cannot process and store new information.

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It all starts with the brain. The amygdala, the part of the brain known as the Fear Center, is designed to assess and identify physical and emotional danger of

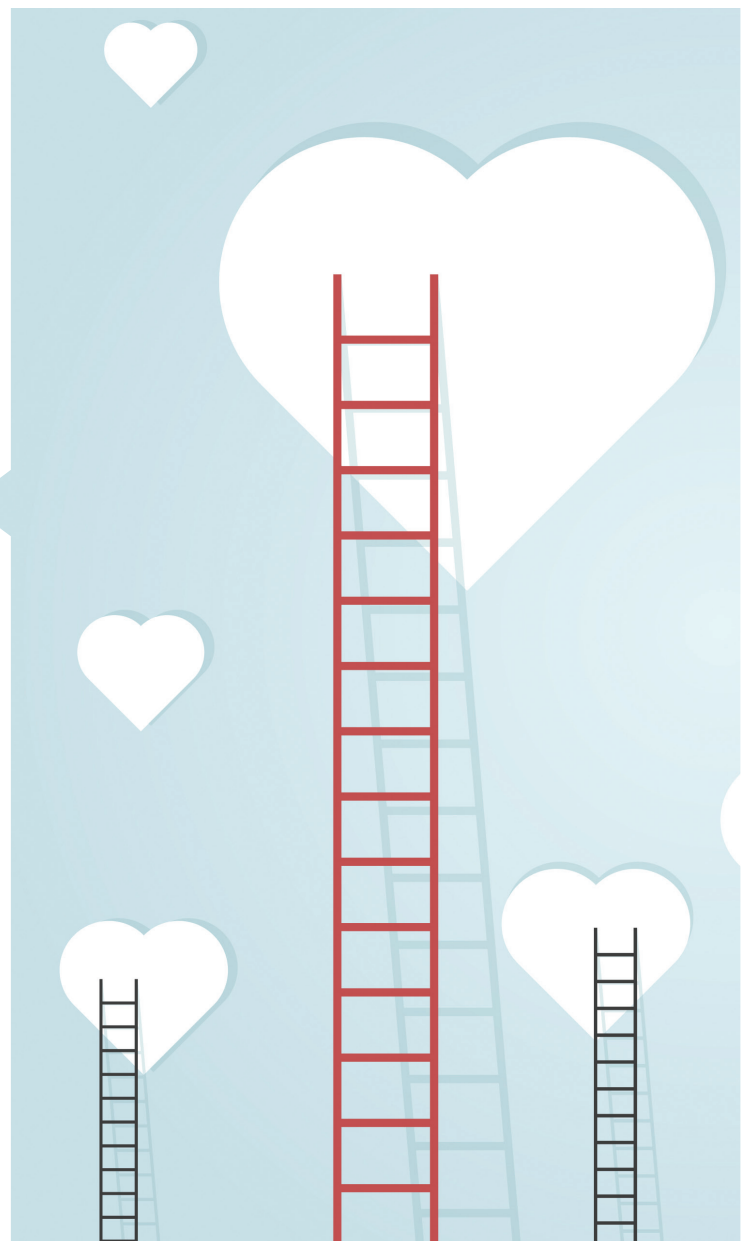
any kind—real or perceived. If the amygdala perceives danger, the body goes into the protective mode of fight, flight, or freeze, and learning takes a back seat.

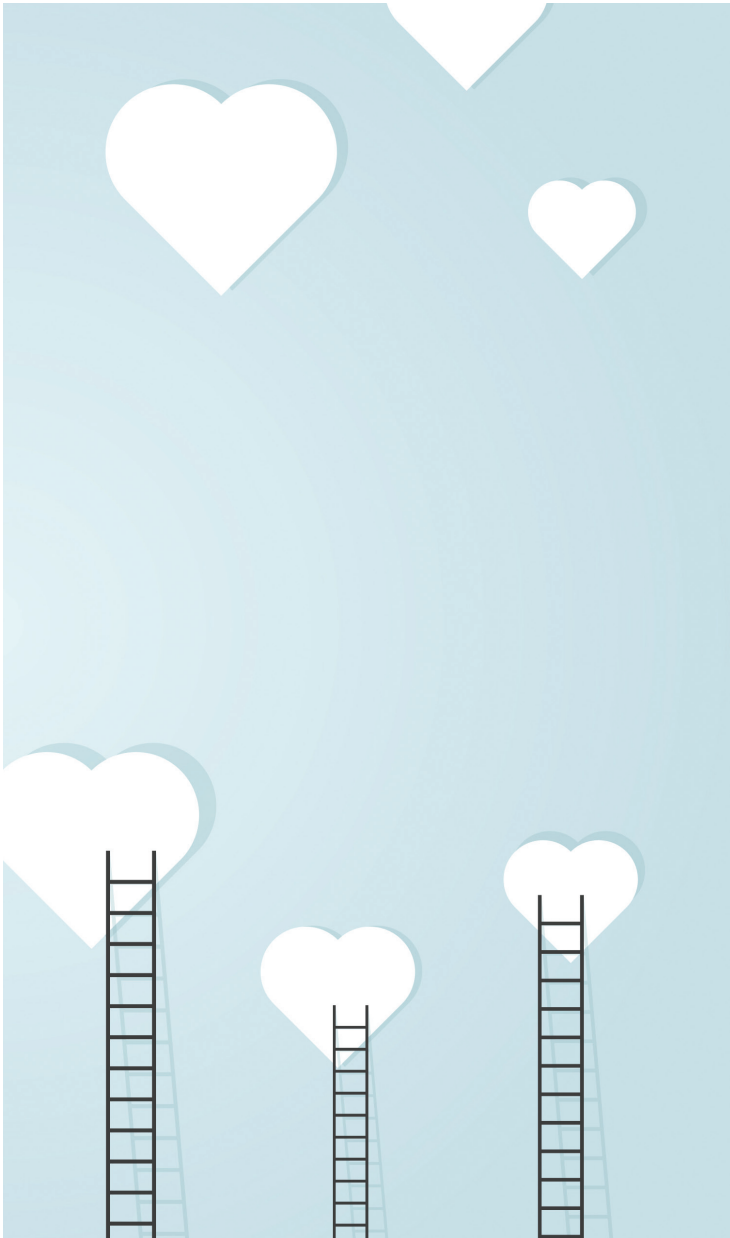
But there’s more. During times of stress, the adrenal gland secretes the hormone cortisol. As cortisol levels rise, the brain’s ability to take in and

process new information as well as retrieve stored information is greatly diminished.

What does that have to do with learning at school? In the classroom, this hyperactive state can be caused by students’ fear of making mistakes, fear of speaking in public, having a negative interaction with a teacher or classmate, bullying, and test anxiety. When students’ brains go into fear mode, they downshift, focusing on survival rather than learning.

When I was teaching in North Long Beach, California, my students’ stress was off the chart. In addition to battling hunger and poverty, many were entrenched in the gang life. Every morning they literally risked their lives walking to school. That’s a pretty big lion! We must help our students stop running from lions. We must identify real or perceived dangers and try to eliminate them from our classrooms by creating a safe learning environment.





## Meeting Basic Needs

Maslow's research supports the need to embrace a holistic approach to working with our youth. Until certain needs are met, they will not be in a place to learn, to seek new knowledge.

Tiers one and two on the hierarchy of needs are aimed at making sure the physiological needs (food, water) and safety needs (physical security) are met. Schools do this well, providing breakfast and lunch programs, health services, school resource officers, security procedures.

Yet many administrators and teachers I have worked with ignore the research regarding students' emotional needs on tier three (love, belonging, friendship) and tier four (self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect). Instead, they want students to leap up to tier five (self-actualization) where students are ready to learn, motivated to seek knowledge. Students must have their self-esteem, belonging, and

love needs addressed before they can move on to higher-level thinking.

Again, it's important that we create the optimum learning environment before we can expect students to succeed. Case in point: One school made it a priority to work with students who failed end-of-course tests or who were in danger of failing. A committee of educators compiled a list during the summer of those students who were struggling and committed to working with them at the beginning of the new school year to close the gap.

Before they started focusing on academic issues, they focused on and addressed the emotional needs of each student that weren't being met. They reported that between August and October, those students made more gains academically than any group they had worked with in prior years.

## Strategies for Success

You are the CEO: the Chief Emotion Officer. How you interact with students verbally and nonverbally sets the tone for the level of safety and connection your students feel. The type of relationship they have with you is a huge piece of the academic puzzle. Here are some strategies to help you reach and teach all students:

**1. Be positive.** The positive relationships that develop between students and teachers and which, in turn, influence academic performance, are key to creating an emotionally safe classroom environment.

Positive social interactions cause the brain to release dopamine, which is a naturally occurring neurotransmitter that helps humans feel good. In addition, it plays a powerful role in decreasing cortisol, strengthening neural connections, and increasing attention, comprehension, and memory. When dopamine is present during the learning process, the synapses are literally bathed in dopamine.

The brain uses dopamine like a big sticky note that reads, "Remember this! This is important!"

International speech coach Doug Stevenson says, "Emotions are the fast lane to the brain." Smiles, laughter, community building, compliments, non-contingent interaction, positive peer connections, one-on-one teacher/student time all can contribute to the release of dopamine.

If you want to deepen cognition, comprehension, and memory, become a world-class Dopamine Dispenser!



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## 2. Incorporate novelty and excitement into lessons.

The reticular activating system (RAS) is the part of the brain that monitors all the stimuli we are bombarded

**“Through neuro-imaging...we now have visible evidence that there is a profound increase in long-term memory and higher order cognition when students have trust and positive feelings for teachers, and supportive classroom and school communities.”**

—Dr. Judy Willis  
Neuroscientist/Middle School Teacher

with every second of the day. It decides what to pay attention to and what to ignore. With all the stimulation—and overstimulation—our students experience, we must get the RAS to pay attention to the right stimuli.

The RAS pays close attention to novelty. When lessons include elements that are new, different, and exciting, the RAS perks up and is ready to allow that info into the brain. Rearrange the classroom periodically, change the lighting, play

music, wear a hat. Those simple changes in your classroom environment will wake up the RAS and get it primed for learning.

If we don't get students' attention, learning won't take place. Bring the WOW factor to your lessons so you can grab 'em from the beginning.

## 3. Create a community in your classroom from Day One.

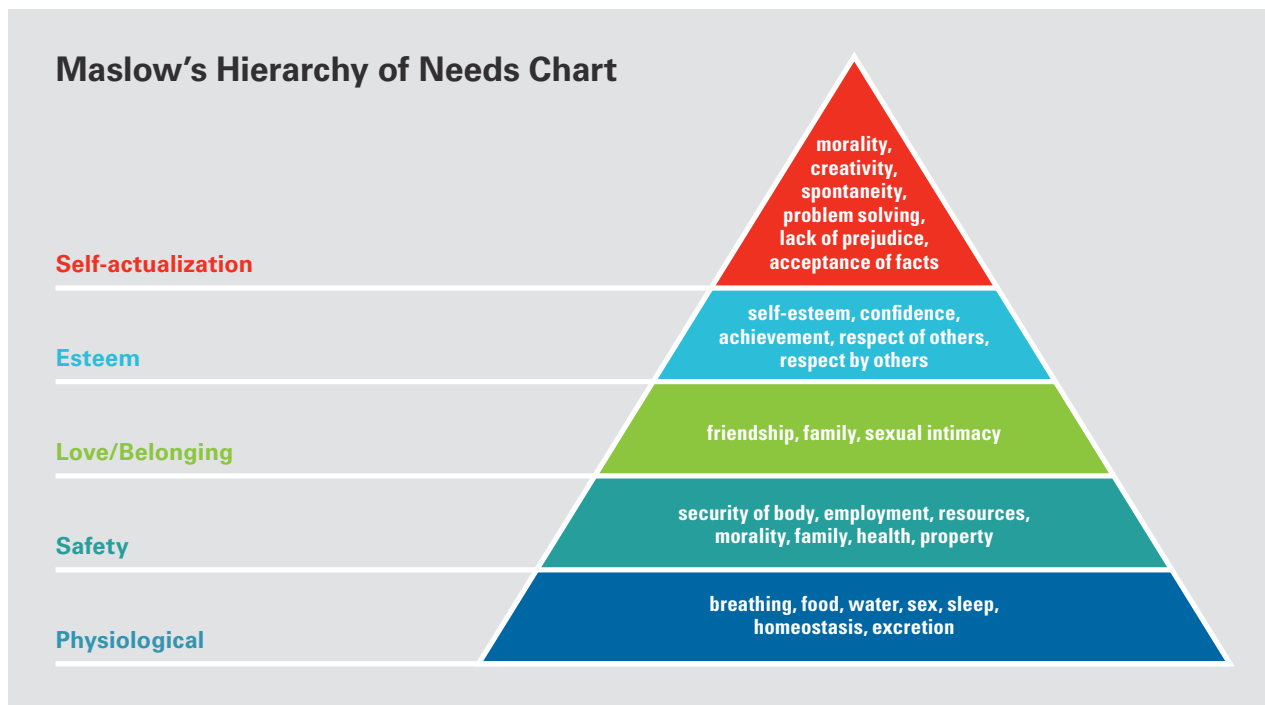
When students have opportunities to get to know each other, have a positive connection to the teacher, contribute to the class norms/rules, and feel connected, their feelings of emotional safety increase. Here are some strategies to promote community in your classroom:

- At the beginning of the year, use “get to know you” ice-breakers to help students learn each other's names and common interests.
- Learn your students' names as soon as possible and address them by name at every opportunity.
- Create a suggestion box and encourage students to share their ideas and concerns.

## 4. Teach students that academic success is not just about IQ.

They need to know that, just like the muscles in their body, the brain gets stronger and more efficient the more it is worked. They can actually “grow” their brain by creating neural pathways.

**5. Encourage risk taking.** Embrace and celebrate mistakes. Help reduce anxiety and embarrassment about being “wrong” by helping students understand that with all new learning comes fumbling, mistakes, and missteps. Give students individual whiteboards on which they can write and display their answers.



This is a great way to minimize stress and keep students actively engaged.

**6. Be “present” when interacting with students.**

Listen actively. Make eye contact. Be aware of your facial expressions and body language. This level of interaction helps students build trust and respect.


**7. Celebrate your students.** Display a large year-long calendar on the wall where all students can record their birthdays. Have monthly celebrations. Not only does it help kids find commonalities, for many, this might be the only birthday recognition they experience.

**8. Strengthen self-esteem.** Compliment them with specific praise, point out their strengths, talk about non-school-related topics, value and celebrate individuality, and by all means, catch them being good!

**9. Let students use all five senses.** Encourage them to be active learners. Get them talking in groups, teaching a concept to a partner, acting out parts of a concept, eating food as part of learning. As author Sharon Bowman reminds us: Movement trumps

sitting. Talking trumps listening. Images trump words. Writing trumps reading. Shorter trumps long. Different trumps same.

**10. Demonstrate respect, compassion, and commitment.** Help students maintain their dignity at all times. When students believe you will keep the classroom safe from put-downs, slights, and ridicule, their respect for you will increase, as will their emotional safety.

The emotional state of the learner is the foundation upon which all learning is built. No longer can we make the emotional well-being of our students an either/or proposition. Abraham Lincoln said, “Give me six hours to chop down a tree, I’ll spend the first four sharpening my ax.” The time spent creating a safe space in the school environment and addressing the emotional needs of students is time needed and time well-spent. Start sharpening! 

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