

SECTION I: DEVELOPING A PROBLEM SOLVING ENVIRONMENT

Chapter C: Creating and Sustaining a Safe Classroom Environment

The “Developing a Problem Solving Environment” chapters in the grade level books are a resource for teachers to turn to when wondering how to get started with setting up a problem-based environment. There are many parts to consider in setting up that classroom.

Students learn best when they are actively engaged in the lesson. Working with tasks such as those found in *Making Sense of Problem Solving* means that students may experience disequilibrium at times. This can be uncomfortable for students. To ensure that they don't shut down even in uncomfortable situations, there are many things that need to be considered.

First, a student needs to feel comfortable in the classroom when he or she is asking a question, sharing a solution method and possibly sharing errors in thinking or solutions. In other words, a student needs to feel **safe**. When students take the risk to share their thinking, encourage the rest of the class to look for what is right in the ideas presented. Often, looking for the "right" in one child's thinking is just the piece another student needs to springboard toward more complete understanding. View any ideas presented as contributions to the class as a whole. Mistakes in this setting are not seen as failures, but as opportunities for everyone to learn and grow.

Tell students that they are all expected to follow classroom rules and be respectful of each other. Teachers need to be vigilant to ensure that no mocking, teasing, laughing or inattention occurs when others are sharing their thinking. Be sure that classroom rules include treating everyone with respect, treating classroom materials with respect and expecting students to be actively responsible for their own learning.

Students know that they are being respected as individuals when they are given choices and when the teacher provides lessons that are tailored to match their levels of understanding. The *Making Sense of Problem Solving* materials offer many suggestions for adjusting instruction to match the needs of individual students.

At the end of a lesson or at class meeting time, give students the opportunity to give and receive acknowledgments for actions that have contributed to the group.

Students can also acknowledge themselves, because they know how much energy was expended to complete a task.

Most important of all is establishing a trusting relationship with the teacher. It has been said that a heart-to-heart connection must be established before a teacher and student can really make progress with head-to-head communications. If a teacher has not established a rapport with his or her students, it is not likely that the students will take risks and push themselves to do their best. Oregon's 2007 Teacher of the Year, Jackie Cooke, has found one strategy that assists in developing rapport with the children she is teaching. She tells them stories from her own childhood, about her children and grandchildren, and about former students she has taught. The stories are structured around key messages she wants to impart to her students.

Two of Jackie's *Family Fables* are available on the Internet.

Math Difficulties

<http://www.teachertoteacher.com/samples/elementary/MathDifficulties-1.pdf>

Perseverance

<http://www.whateachersknow.com/moreforparents/storybymrscooke.html>