



# Creating Schools That Are Physically, Psychologically and Emotionally Safe

*The TREP Project works to connect research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of developmental trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We focus on schools serving communities coping with high levels of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, such as housing and food instability, household and neighborhood violence, and drug dependence. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of not one or two children who have been exposed to traumatic levels of chronic stress, but the needs of a classroom of traumatized children.*

TREPEducator.org

The need for safety and security has long been established as a foundational need that must be attended to before more abstract aspects of self and interpersonal development can flourish. The default is to focus on physical safety, but it is equally crucial that we attend to psychological and emotional safety in schools. This is particularly important for schools located in high crime neighborhoods where students navigate real threats on the walk to and from school, while playing at the park with friends, or just hanging out on the sidewalk in front of their homes.

Schools must be contexts where students' feel a sense of safety on all levels. Physical safety is protection from violence and threats of violence from peers, staff, and any other member of the school community. Psychological safety is protection from derogatory statements that negatively affect one's sense of self. Emotional safety is feeling protected, supported, and enabled to take learning risks, make mistakes, and fail without feeling like a failure.

When a child's brain and nervous system is constantly activated by stress, brain development is interrupted. To counter this and ensure that children's brains and bodies are functioning in ways that are conducive to learning, children need to **trust** that their schools and classrooms are safe spaces where they can reduce their hyper vigilant focus on identifying threats and direct their attention to learning.

**Without safety, real and perceived, students will have substantial difficulty learning self-regulation, how to build trusting peer relationships, or academic content.**

Suggested Citation:

Williams, S., Keels, M. (May, 2018). Creating Schools That Are Physically, Psychologically and Emotionally Safe. Practice Brief #8. TRFP Project.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## HIERARCHY OF NEEDS AT SCHOOL

HIERARCHY OF NEEDS AT SCHOOL ..... 2

THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN SCHOOL SAFETY ..... 3

SCHOOL-BASED RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS ..... 4

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND VALIDATION ..... 5

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE RESPONSES TO MISBEHAVIOR ..... 6

EMOTIONAL SAFETY ..... 7

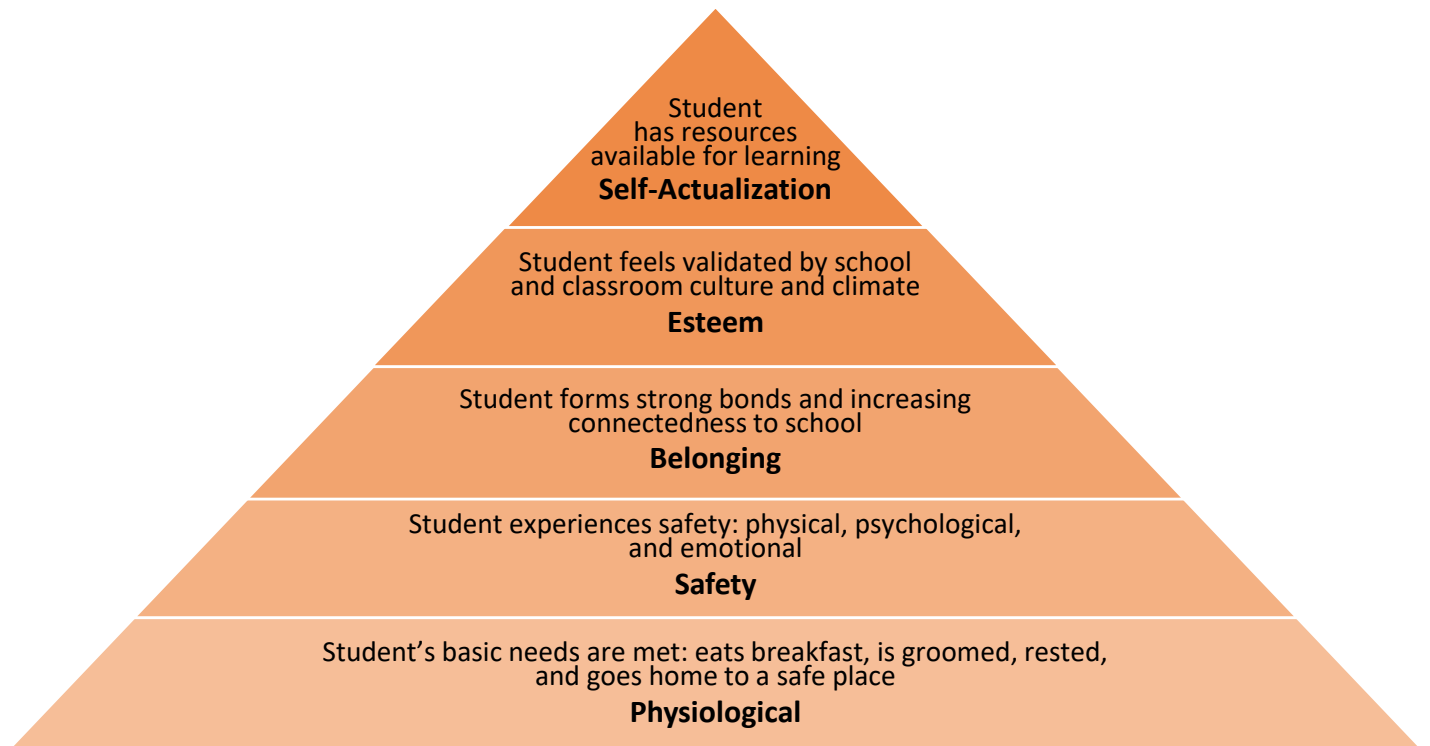
EMOTIONAL SAFETY CLASSROOM CHECKLIST ..... 8

SCHOOLS AS SANCTUARIES ..... 9

REFERENCES ..... 10

American psychologist Abraham Maslow long ago recognized that the most basic needs must be met in order to progress in other areas of development. Maslow placed our need for safety just above food and shelter. This order of needs can be applied to school experiences, as shown in the pyramid below.

Creating schools that are physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe requires that we examine the ways schools may be perceived and experienced as unsafe places by some students. As Gale Morrison notes, *“weapons on campus are not the problem, they are a glaring, powerful symptom of a fundamental interpersonal and structural weakness in the school community. If kids bring guns to school for personal security, the ultimate objective is not solely to punish those who bring the guns and to prevent others from bringing them, but rather to understand the source of their insecurity and to correct it.”*



## THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN SCHOOL SAFETY

For children and youth growing up in high crime neighborhoods, providing for their own safety can become a central issue that organizes all other aspects of their lives. To stay safe, students need to be hyper-vigilant on their walk to school as they pass active or past threats to their safety. While at school, students are already preparing for what they may encounter when they leave on top of watching out for which peers or teachers may be a physical, psychological, or emotional threat. Many educators may not realize that the students in their schools perceive the adults in the building as oblivious to the safety challenges that they navigate.

When children and youth no longer believe that the adults in their lives will keep them safe, they turn to self-defensive, proactive, aggression. Unsurprisingly, previous exposure to violence and victimization is the strongest predictor of use of violence by youth. Often, appearing tough is an attempt to protect oneself. Escalating aggression, bullying, and fighting in a school is a sign that the students don't trust the adults in the building to intervene and provide safety, and are instead resorting to immature strategies for resolving conflict and gaining a sense of safety.

Because too often school safety is conceptualized as being primarily about guns, knives, and other weapons that students may bring to school, we rarely take the time to deeply consider why students feel so disconnected from their schools or so unsafe in their schools that they are bringing weapons to school.

### **STRATEGY FOR ENSURING PHYSICAL SAFETY: CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT WHERE ALL STUDENTS FEEL LIKE THEY HAVE A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF THE SCHOOL**

In the wake of the increasing frequency of school violence, schools are responding by making themselves a "hard target," which means increasing the visible presence of security officers and metal detectors, having students use clear backpacks and instituting random locker searches. The expectation is that these visible security measures will increase students' feelings of safety at school. However, existing research suggests that these actions may have the opposite effect because they can also make students and teachers more mistrustful of each other, and decrease feelings of school belonging. The visible presence of heavy security measures may only increase student and teacher concern over crime, creating an atmosphere of danger, vulnerability, and ultimately, lower levels of perceived safety. Research suggests that student feelings of safety are directly correlated with feeling welcomed and connected to their school, and is tied to things like being treated with fairness, experiencing relationships with caring teachers, and feelings of belonging to their school community.

## SCHOOL-BASED RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Children’s ability to cope with ongoing exposure to violence increases when they can identify areas in their lives where they can experience some measure of control, can see their efforts produce results, and can plan for the future. Schools can provide opportunities for meaningful experiences in each of these areas.

### School Based Risk and Protective Factors

When the school is a risk factor	When schools “reclaim” youth placed at-risk
<i>The School Itself</i>	<i>The School Itself</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcrowding</li> <li>• Limited capacity to avoid/prevent student confrontations</li> <li>• Inflexible behavioral routines and demands for conformity</li> <li>• Negative expectations for some students</li> <li>• Applying visible social consequences for school failure</li> <li>• Inconsistent and punitive discipline</li> <li>• Poor quality instruction</li> <li>• Teacher apathy</li> <li>• Disconnected from families and community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequate, well-maintained space</li> <li>• Awareness of and prevention of student confrontations</li> <li>• Empowerment of student voice and agency</li> <li>• High expectations and high support for all students</li> <li>• Positive, proactive, and restorative discipline</li> <li>• Varied opportunities to demonstrate and experience success</li> <li>• Teachers, parents, and community members engaged</li> </ul>
<i>Experiences At School</i>	<i>Experiences At School</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor school performance and adjustment</li> <li>• Rejection by peers</li> <li>• Lack of attachment/belonging or commitment to school</li> <li>• Academic failure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Varied opportunities to demonstrate and experience success</li> <li>• Acceptance by peers</li> <li>• Sense of school attachment/belonging and ownership</li> <li>• Mastery experiences at school</li> </ul>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND VALIDATION

Validation communicates value, self-worth, and affirmation. When students are validated by educators they develop trust in their own ability to learn and grow. They are empowered to achieve academically and develop interpersonally. The validating classroom cultivates trust, respect, and empowerment and instills confidence in students to take risks with their learning.

### 10 Ways to Foster a Validating Classroom

	Academic Invalidating Model	Academic Validating Model
1.	Students expected to disconnect with the past	The past is a source of strength and knowledge
2.	Faculty instill doubt and fear in students by focusing on what they don't know and not rewarding effort	Faculty structure learning so that students are able to see themselves as powerful learners
3.	Students are oppressed, silenced, and cast in subordinate roles	Students are allowed to have a public voice and share their ideas openly
4.	Faculty focus on abstract concepts and don't connect them to how they matter for students current and future lives	Faculty recognize the importance of life experience as a base of knowledge and power of out-of-class learning
5.	Students are positioned as passive learners and only teachers bring knowledge into the classroom	Faculty employ active and collaborative learning techniques such as simulations demonstrations, field trips, etc.
6.	Evaluation instills fear of failure and mediocrity and is rigid and impersonal	Learning standards are designed in collaboration with students and students are encouraged to re-do assignments until they master them
7.	The classroom is fiercely competitive	Students work together in teams and are encouraged to share information
8.	Fear of failure permeates the classroom environment	A climate of success is fostered by faculty and students
9.	The core curriculum is male-centered and Euro-centered	The core curriculum is inclusive of the contributions of women and minorities
10.	Students encouraged to give automated and rote responses	Learning allows for reflection, multi-perspectives, and imperfection

## PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE RESPONSES TO MISBEHAVIOR

Sandra Bloom makes a convincing case for why schools need to be sanctuaries for students by cautioning us to remember that children and youth feel relatively helpless most of the time and depend on adults to feel safe. If the adults around them are scary (threatening students to get them to comply with your requests makes you a scary adult), it is impossible for them to feel safe. When they feel unsafe, or feel that the adults around them are undependable, they are likely to show their distress through undesired behavior rather than through words.

When children display problem behavior that is rooted in their immature attempts to gain a sense of safety by exerting inappropriate control at inappropriate times, the adults around them tend to get very angry with them. Grownup anger scares children **and youth**. But because they lack the skills to figure out how to solve this problem or communicate their fear they just get more scared, feel more unsafe, and then show their distress through more problem behavior. Often times the problem behavior is internalized, like when they withdraw from others, become depressed, or go inside themselves for comfort.

It's very easy to get caught in vicious cycles:

The child feels unsafe and "acts up" →

The adult punishes the child for "acting up" →

The child feels frightened and more unsafe and "acts up" some more →

And so on...

What children and youth learn from these interactions is how to distrust and avoid adults.

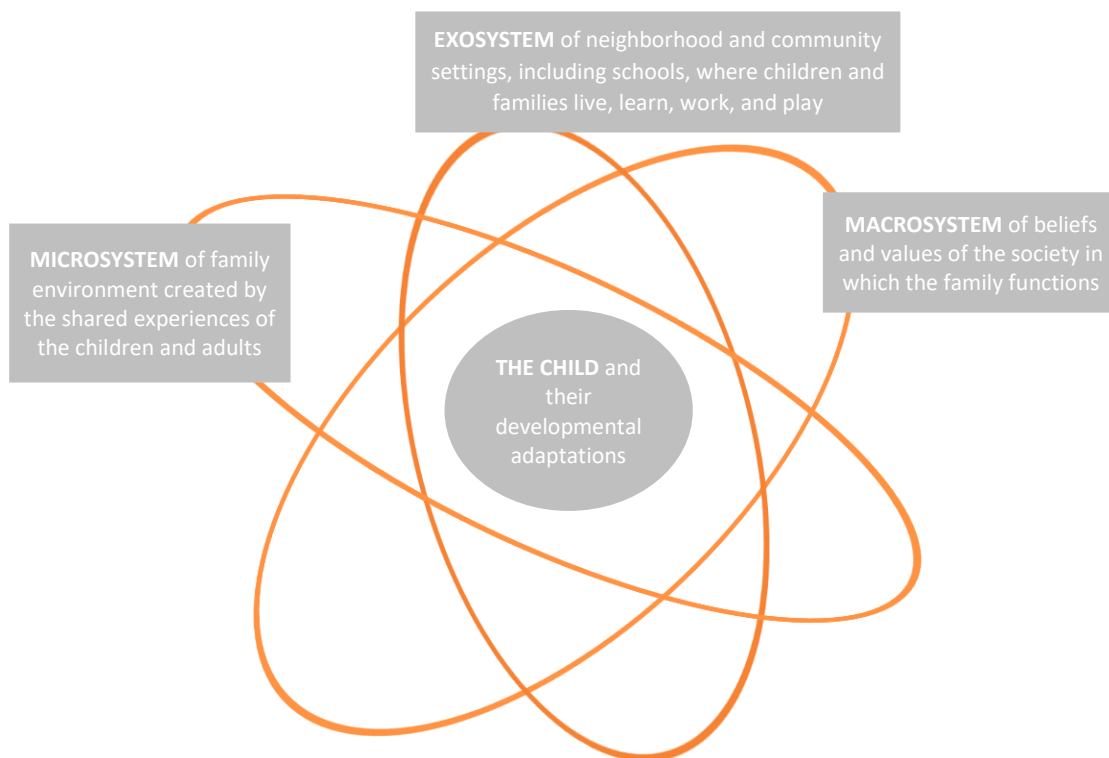
### STRATEGY FOR PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: BE AWARE OF YOUR POWER

- ✓ Remember what it felt like to be a student and what you wanted from your teachers
- ✓ Remember that as a teacher, you are teaching your students the way relationships work
- ✓ Remember how powerful you are in relation to your students
- ✓ If your students experience traumatic events, let them know that you are willing to talk about it whenever they are ready to talk about it
- ✓ Remember educators also learn from students
- ✓ Be curious about your students' behavior – especially their undesired behavior
- ✓ When your students make behavioral errors utilize consequences that result in them learning something you WANT them to learn and not something you DON'T want them to learn

## EMOTIONAL SAFETY

A negative sense of self is one of the developmental consequences of experiencing abuse or neglect. Children with these experiences often do not see their own value or worth and do not feel able to be valued by others. They have learned not to depend on others to meet their needs and often even view the world as dangerous or hostile. This makes it difficult to risk failure—risk, experimentation and failure are necessary for learning to occur.

Childhood abuse and neglect is not just about the individual family, it is the whole ecological system that extends to our societal beliefs about protecting vulnerable families and children. Every level of this system holds potential for both risk and resiliency factors.



### STRATEGY FOR PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SAFETY: NARRATIVE PROCESSING

Classrooms can become contexts that facilitate the processing of traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect by utilizing expressive writing assignments. Traumatic events are first experienced at the affective level—they feel the experience first. This is especially true for children. Ungraded expressive writing activities aid in bringing coherence to disorganized, emotional, fragmented, and non-verbal memories. This coherence can give traumatized children and youth, the words to begin to share their experience and break through the loneliness and isolation many traumatized children experience.

John MacDevitt's article [Responding to Student Traumatic Writing: A Psychologist's View](#) can prepare educators to support students through these writing activities.

## EMOTIONAL SAFETY CLASSROOM CHECKLIST

This checklist will help you determine the degree to which your classroom or school employs the kinds of beliefs and behaviors that contribute to an emotionally safe community. The higher your level of agreement with each item, the more likely you are to see improvements in achievement, learning, on-task behavior, commitment, cooperation, and responsibility.

Always Do – 4	Sometimes Do – 3	Rarely Do – 2	Never Do - 1
<p><b>Need for Success</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I provide opportunities for success to each child in the classroom, encouraging growth from wherever they start.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I assess students' abilities and adjust instruction to an appropriate level of challenge for each one.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I offer students a variety of ways to demonstrate their knowledge, intelligence, and mastery.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I attempt to build interpersonal skills, positive social behaviors, character skills, and resistance to failure.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I attempt to accommodate a variety of interests, modality strengths, and learning preferences in my directions, instructions, motivators, and assignments.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I attempt to accommodate tactile, kinesthetic, visual, verbal, and auditory learners.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I make sure kids have ample opportunities to move around and help them learn to maintain an appropriate level of alertness and activity without disrupting classmates' concentration.</p>		<p><b>Need for Power, Structure, and Positivity</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I sometimes allow and encourage students to make decisions about their learning (what, where, with whom, how, and how much).</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I sometimes allow students to create, design, or renegotiate assignments to make them personally meaningful.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I motivate through access to positive outcomes, rather than avoidance or fear of negative outcomes. I emphasize the positive consequences of cooperation.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I consciously anticipate what students, teachers, and parents will need in various situations in order to prevent problems from occurring.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I follow through immediately, avoiding warnings or threats.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I make students and their parents aware of changes in behavior or performance that could affect grades or promotion.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I utilize parents, administration, and support staff for feedback and support (not for punishing students).</p>	
<p><b>Need for Dignity and Respect</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I avoid using humiliation, sarcasm, ridicule, anger, impatience, or manifestations of disappointment in dealing with students.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I honor students' needs for respect, dignity, purpose, success, acceptance, attention, and motivation.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I model standards of behavior, language, and tone of voice that I expect from my students.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I work to <i>eliminate prejudice</i> towards students based on racial or cultural background, physical characteristics, behavior issues, sexual orientation, or academic, artistic, or athletic competence.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I strive to stay aware of put-downs or slurs expressed by students or staff, responding immediately.</p>		<p><b>Need for Recognition, Attention, and Emotional Safety</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I attempt to meet students' needs for attention in positive, constructive, and proactive ways.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I reinforce <i>positive behaviors with positive outcomes</i>.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I <i>communicate with parents</i> regularly and frequently about what their children are doing well.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I respect students' active needs and am committed to listening and supporting their feelings and problem-solving skills in positive ways.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I respect confidentiality to the degree that doing so will not put anyone in danger.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I immediately respond to incidents involving any form of <i>bullying</i>, harassment, or danger.</p>	



## SCHOOLS AS SANCTUARIES

### 10 Steps to Creating a Safe & Welcoming School

Create a welcoming environment of positivity, enthusiasm, and cleanliness

Convey safety by responding to acts of aggression and peer disrespect quickly and in a calm, caring manner

Regularly monitor student behaviors to notice when changes occur and intervention is necessary

Inform students *and parents* of the roles they can play in making the school safe

Equip students *and parents* with skills and training on ways to intervene on issues of safety such as bullying

Provide factual information on community and world crises

Have a trained crisis response team available for emergencies

Enforce consistent, uniform, and fair discipline policies school wide

Integrate substance abuse prevention into curricula, policies, and messages

Surround students with positive motivation to build an atmosphere of success

Schools seeking to create safety must change the question they ask from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s happened to you?” and “How can we help you?”

It is now widely acknowledged that students experiencing traumatic stressors cannot be expected to leave their problems outside the schoolhouse doors and show up in the classroom ready to learn. Educators and schools are evolving and adapting to meet the needs of the children coming through its doors.

One of the most damaging effects of exposure to violence and trauma is hopelessness. Schools that understand this and position themselves to be a sanctuary—a place of healing, wholeness, and rest— can instill hope in children and release the power of resilience to withstand the challenges they face outside of the school walls.

Children must feel physical, psychological, and emotional safety at school to experience it as a sanctuary. Cultivating and nurturing a caring classroom community can utilize the relationships among students to meet the needs of one another and build meaningful connections. Such a classroom community can foster a sense of belonging and purpose that may be lacking outside of school. Likewise, teachers who share the responsibility of community building with students communicate trust, high expectations, and belief in students’ abilities to make good decisions in the best interests of one another. Instilling a value of responsibility to the community can guide their individual behaviors and decisions.

## REFERENCES

- Bloom, S. L. (1999). Give Sorrow Words: Emotional Disclosure and Physical Health. *The Psychotherapy Review*, 1(7), 312-313
- Bloom, S. L. (2000). The Neglect of Neglect, Part I. *The Psychotherapy Review*, 2(5), 208-210.
- Bloom, S. L. (2013). Children and Grownups Are Different: A Book For Grownups Who May Have Forgotten About Being A Kid.
- Bluestein, J. 2001. Creating Emotionally Safe Schools: A Guide for Educators and Parents. Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI Pub.
- Collins, K. S. (2001). Children's perceptions of safety and exposure to violence. *International Journal of Adolescence And Youth*, 10(1-2), 31-49.
- Dods, J. J. (2015). Bringing Trauma to School: The Educational Experience of Three Youths. *Exceptionality Education International*, 25(1), 112-135.
- Duncan, D. F. (1996). Growing up under the gun: Children and adolescents coping with violent neighborhoods. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 16(4), 343-356.
- Huitt, W. (2017). Hierarchy of needs. In F. Moghaddam (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of political behavior* (pp. 356-357). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Mayer, J. E. (2007). Creating a Safe and Welcoming School Environment, International Academy of Education. *International Bureau of Education*.
- Morrison, G. M., Furlong, M., & Morrison, R. L. (1994). School violence to school safety: Reframing the issue for school psychologists. *School Psychology Review*, 23(2), 236-256.
- Rasmussen, A., Aber, M. S., & Bhana, A. (2004). Adolescent coping and neighborhood violence: perceptions, exposure, and urban youths' efforts to deal with danger. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1-2), 61-75.
- Rendon, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 33-51.
- Schreck, C. J., & Miller, J. M. (2003). Sources of fear of crime at school: What is the relative contribution of disorder, individual characteristics, and school security? *Journal of School Violence*, 2(4), 57-79.
- Sheehan, K., Kim, L. E., & Galvin, J. P. (2004). Urban children's perceptions of violence. *Archives Of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 158(1), 74-77.
- Skiba, R., Simmons, A. B., Peterson, R., McKelvey, J., Forde, S., & Gallini, S. (2004). Beyond guns, drugs and gangs: The structure of student perceptions of school safety. *Journal of School Violence*, 3(2-3), 149-171.