

# Supporting Sex Educator Safety

## A Starter Guide for Managers

*This tip sheet is a starting point for thinking about your staff's safety. We break down different types of safety, provide general steps you can take to proactively protect your staff, and share a case study to show these steps in action.*

**Educators do their best to show up for young people, no matter the circumstances. You as a leader have the power to make that work a lot easier by proactively taking steps to keep your staff safer.** When educators feel safe and supported, they can give their attention to creating environments where young people can learn, heal, and grow.



***I always feel so much more free to be myself and share my full truth when I'm working with a professional who clearly feels safe bringing their authentic self into their workplace.***

***—Thrivology Youth Leader***

A strong sense of safety benefits both educators and the young people they support. Educators who feel safe are better able to stay engaged, energized, and focused on building meaningful connections with young people. Educators who do not feel safe at work may experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout,<sup>1</sup> which can make it harder to focus on supporting young people.<sup>2</sup> As a manager, collaborating with your team to prepare for and respond to threats makes it clear to staff that their well-being is a priority and that they aren't alone in navigating challenges.



***When youth workers and adults are well, the children in their lives also experience a greater sense of happiness and well-being.***

***—Dr. Shawn Ginwright, Flourish Agenda's Healing-Centered Engagement Certification Program, Module 1***



## Having a holistic understanding of safety can prepare you to better assess your staff's safety needs and proactively take steps to create a safer environment.

Below, we clarify four relevant types of safety for sex educators. As you read the definitions, reflect on your own work. How does each of these types of safety show up in your workplace? Is there one type that you have thought about most when supporting your staff's well-being? Are there any types of safety you tend to overlook?



**Physical safety** means being protected from violence, theft, and exposure to weapons and threats.<sup>3</sup>



**Emotional safety** is having the necessary systems and structures to feel connected, respected, and valued so individuals can fully engage in relationships and express themselves authentically.<sup>4</sup>



**Psychological safety** is similar to emotional safety, but at a group level. Psychological safety means group members believe that it is safe for them to be themselves, voice their opinions, and experiment without fear of rejection, humiliation, or other negative consequences.<sup>5</sup>



**Digital safety** is having the risk awareness and technical support to be personally protected from harm related to devices and online networks.<sup>6</sup>

*Creating a safe environment is foundational to **trauma-informed care**, a service delivery approach based on an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma.<sup>7,8</sup>*

*When you work to keep your staff safe, you support their ability to create safe environments for young people. Safe learning environments are necessary for sex ed programs to be effective, especially when working with young people who navigate the impact of trauma and systemic barriers to their well-being.<sup>9</sup>*

## How can I support my staff's safety?

As a manager, your duty isn't to remove all risks, but to ensure your staff feel prepared to face them and confident they will get the support they need. By proactively working to create a safe environment, you play a powerful role in building trust, clarity, and care with your staff.



***It matters a lot to me that I have someone that I can go to if I'm ever feeling unsafe in any way or not sure how to handle a situation. Knowing someone has my back lets me feel confident to keep getting out there and doing the work.***

—Sex educator

Below are three general steps to get you started with keeping sex educators safer. We suggest collaborating with your leadership and peers to figure out how to apply them to your specific context.

### Step 1: Assess

***Figure out what risks your staff face, make sure they are aware of these risks, and support them in identifying their own safety priorities.***

Sex educators face unique, varied safety risks. During your risk assessment, try to think beyond what's most common in your workplace. Consider potential risks in all areas—physical, emotional, psychological, and digital. Taking a broad approach can help your team feel more prepared and confident to handle whatever challenges come their way.

***These strategies can help you create a safer environment for everyone on your team—including you! Consider who you can go to for support and to talk through any safety concerns that come up.***



***For me, creating safe environments is always going to come down to having the conversation with the professionals on what can happen, even if it's a scenario that feels unlikely."***

—Community Health Worker and manager of sex educators

When possible, have open conversations with your staff to get clear about what they fear, which situations feel challenging vs. unsafe, the likelihood of various safety concerns actually happening, and what they need to feel safe navigating safety issues. It's important to take all of your staff's safety concerns seriously, even if they do not align with your (likely well-informed) perspective.

Keep in mind that staff may face different risks based on their role. Additionally, sex educators with different lived experiences will likely respond differently to the same possible threat. Some factors that may impact your staff's risk perception include how long they've been in their role, whether they have young children, and if they belong to communities that are more likely to experience violence and discrimination.<sup>10</sup>

Having staff talk first with others in similar roles could also help them feel safer sharing their concerns with leadership.

## Step 2: Act

***Create tangible safety procedures and let staff know what they are.***

Once you understand the main risks your staff face, you can prioritize the trainings, safety measures, and resources that matter most. Sex educators can feel more confident and prepared when facing uncertain and challenging situations if they have clear procedures that are shared in an accessible way and revisited regularly as a team.

Try to collaborate with staff to ensure that the safety procedures you create are relevant and realistic. Whether or not you are able to involve staff in the initial decision-making process, you can also build trust and buy-in by getting their feedback after a plan has been documented, then adjusting accordingly.



***Regular review and reevaluation of policies and procedures, as well as additional review and evaluation when new violent incidents occur, can help a workplace violence prevention committee keep its program current and responsive to changing circumstances and needs.***

***—Occupational Safety and Health Administration<sup>11</sup>***

### Step 3: Adapt

***Make sure staff have supportive spaces to voice concerns. When incidents happen, collaborate to find solutions.***

Creating an open line of communication is key for making sure staff feel comfortable letting you know if they've experienced a safety incident. In recurring individual and team meetings, keep a safety check-in as a standing agenda item, even if you go for a while without something to discuss.



***Staff need ways to debrief and process after something happens. In the moment you have to decenter yourself if you're with the kids, you have to handle it. But what's the aftercare?***

***—Manager of sex educators***

When someone does share an issue, work with them to figure out an actionable solution that addresses their concerns. If they shared privately, consider checking whether they're open to involving the whole team in problem solving. The issue may be relevant for everyone. Taking a collaborative approach can build your staff's trust in sharing concerns with leadership.



***You don't want to implement a solution without your staff's consent and [without] getting them involved in that process, because you can unintentionally cause harm if you deal with a safety issue in a way that they don't feel good about.***

***—Manager of sex educators***

Be sure to document your safety plan and updates to your procedures. It's also a good idea to plan a time to check in with staff later and see how the changes are working.





## Digital Safety Case Study

**The imagined story below shows how a manager can proactively and reactively respond to a safety threat faced by their staff.**

Morgan manages a team of five sex educators at an organization that partners with local schools. Recently, she was chatting with her friend, Dante, who is also a sex educator. Dante shared that he was feeling anxious after seeing a social media post by a sex ed opponent that mentioned him. It didn't just talk about his work; it also disclosed personal information that he felt nervous about having online. Morgan realized that while she has put procedures in place to protect her team's physical, emotional, and psychological safety, she hasn't given much thought to their digital safety.



### ***Step 1: Morgan Assesses Risks***

Morgan starts by looking into digital safety risks that are most relevant to her organization. She also gets advice from peers whose organizations mostly operate online. Morgan learns that, like Dante, many of us have a lot of personal information online without being aware of it. She also learns that having your sensitive Personally Identifiable Information (PII) shared online without your consent is a digital attack called “doxing.”

Morgan starts talking to her team to get a sense of what they know about the digital safety threats she recently learned about. She also checks whether they have digital safety concerns she hasn't considered and finds out which risks feel most worrisome for them personally.

## Step 2: Morgan Takes Action

Morgan dedicates a couple of team meetings for everyone to go through Thrivology's guides on [Managing Your Personal Information Online](#) and [Protecting Yourself From Hacking](#). Based on their team discussions, Morgan successfully advocates to their organization's leadership for staff to have the option to anonymize some of their info on the "About Us" page of their website. She also adjusts her team budget to pay for a password manager where staff can safely store strong, unique passwords for all their accounts. Finally, she records these and other changes in their team's ongoing safety procedures document.

## Step 3: Morgan Adapts After an Incident

A few months later, one of Morgan's direct reports, Lin, shares a concern during his weekly meeting with Morgan. Lin mentions that a parent from one of the schools he partners with asked to meet with him and discuss concerns. A couple of weeks after the meeting, a friend of Lin's sent him a social media clip posted by the parent with video clips of the conversation. She had secretly recorded them and shared Lin's words out of context.

Before diving in to figure out next steps, Morgan takes time to check in with Lin about how he is holding up emotionally. Lin tells Morgan that he still feels new to teaching sex ed, and he's freaked out by this unwanted attention online. Morgan and Lin look at the post again and are relieved to realize that it's getting very little attention so far. They make a plan for monitoring it and discuss available mental health support resources.

With Lin's immediate safety needs met, Morgan turns her attention to making changes to their safety procedures. She asks Lin if she can bring this issue to the team. After he says yes, Morgan dedicates time in the next team meeting to share what happened and hear concerns and reactions. The team conducts online research about consent and recording laws in their area. Afterwards, Morgan crafts guidance for one-on-one meetings with parents, administrators, or legislators, including tips for stating recording consent at the start of any meeting. She then gets her team's feedback on the new guidance and makes updates based on their input. Finally, she shares the guidance with their organization's leadership in hopes of getting it added to their official policies.



Safety incidents like this can be scary, and both Lin and Morgan feel a bit shaken by this experience. Lin makes his online accounts more private so that he feels in control of his personal information. He also receives extra care from the whole team in the following weeks that helps him not feel alone. Morgan seeks support from other leadership at the organization, who reassure her that nobody can anticipate every risk. They also validate that the thoughtful way she collaborated with her team and guided them through the incident could help build trust going forward.

## Conclusion

Creating safe environments is an ongoing process, not a one-time task. As a manager, every proactive step you take—understanding risks, setting clear procedures, and making space for staff to share concerns—helps your team feel supported, valued, and able to fully focus on their important work with young people. By approaching safety with intention and care, you not only reduce risks but also foster a culture of trust, resilience, and connection that benefits everyone.

## More Resources

- [Managing Your Personal Information Online: A Starter Guide for Sex Educators](#). This workbook includes practical information to take control of your personal information online.
- [Protecting Yourself From Hacking: A Starter Guide for Sex Educators](#) shares actionable steps to protect your accounts and devices from being accessed without your permission.
- [Building a Safe Workplace and Community: Violence Mitigation in a Culture of Safety](#). This brief outlines a framework for reducing workplace and community violence in the healthcare setting, as well as strategies to foster a culture of safety in the workplace.
- [Building a Safe Workplace and Community: Providing Trauma Support to Your Workforce Following an Incident or Threat of Violence](#). This report highlights how health care leaders and organizations can strengthen workplace safety by supporting staff after incidents.
- [Prioritizing our Healthcare Workers: The Importance of Addressing the Intersection of Workplace Violence and Mental Health and Wellbeing](#). This blog shares the impact of workplace violence on staff and patients, and emphasizes how employers can support staff mental health and wellbeing.
- [Outreach Worker Safety Tips](#). Created by the Office of Justice Programs and National Gang Center, this tip sheet offers practical advice for outreach workers to stay safe while engaging with gang-involved individuals.
- [Understanding Parent Aggression Directed against Teachers: A School Climate Framework](#). This study looks at how parents' aggression toward teachers is affected by the school environment, and shows how leadership, communication, and safety policies can help protect and support teachers.



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