



# Keeping Students Safe from Harm

Promoting a sense of belonging is more important now than ever before.

BY RUBY K. PAYNE

What are you dealing with this year that you have not dealt with before?

When I ask educators across the country that question, increasingly the answers at the middle level identify student anxiety and “cutting.” The World Health Organization reports that in the past 10 years, there has been a threefold increase in the

number of teenagers who engage in self-harm.

Why is this happening?

First, there are websites dedicated to explaining how to “cut” yourself. But cutting hurts—unless there is something that hurts more. What is the “hurt” underneath the self-harm and the increase in anxiety among our young people?

It has to do with connections, safety, and belonging.

## Generation K: Ages 13–20

Researcher Noreena Hertz studied 1,000 British and American girls via Survey Monkey and dubbed young girls ages 13–20 as Generation K—a reference to their Hunger Games icon, Katniss Everdeen ([www.noreena.com](http://www.noreena.com)).

Unlike the millennials before them, Generation K has deep distrust of institutions—especially governments and corporations. They watched the Great Recession and the spike in terrorism. They learned that the world is not a safe place, nor is it to be trusted.

According to Hertz, 30% are unsure or do not want to be married. Thirty-five percent are unsure or do not want to have children. Ninety percent consider it important to have a well-paying career.

Most are very worried about their future. In fact, 86% of the Generation K girls surveyed are worried about getting a job and 77% are worried about going into debt. Constant worry creates anxiety. This generation is more sober than the previous—less alcohol and fewer drugs. However, 22% have considered suicide.

What about the boys? Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Duncan, researchers at Stanford University (*The Demise of Guys: Why Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It*), found that the average teenage boy watches 50 porn clips a week and that by the time boys are 21, they have played more than 10,000 hours of video games—mostly in isolation. In fact, these are “arousal” addictions, and their brains are being rewired for constant arousal, novelty, and excitement. Most of the boys in this young generation

actually prefer the isolation—they tend to be “risk averse.”

## Safety and Belonging

A key factor in emotional wellness is safety and belonging. Today’s adolescents generally perceive their external environment as harsh, unpredictable, and unsafe. Terrorism, Facebook Envy, and cyberbullying are all part of their daily reality. The school environment has become harsher under the pressures of state assessment (you make it or you don’t) and zero tolerance in discipline. And in middle school, students often are bullied in school and out of school—in person and via social media. No place is safe.

John Bowlby, in his research on bonding and attachment (*Attachment: Attachment and Loss*), found that when you see yourself as belonging and in a safe environment, you are emotionally secure. For this generation of middle level students, the external environment is not safe, so they strive for “connection” or belonging. But if they cannot “belong,” they respond with anxiety (cutting or suicide attempts) or avoidance behavior (screen addictions such as video games or pornography).

## What Can You Do?

Because all learning is double coded both cognitively and emotionally, according to Greenspan and Benderly (*The Growth of the Mind and the Endangered Origins of Intelligence*), the emotional wellness of our students becomes critical to higher achievement and lifetime success. Schools cannot change the external world nor the perception that the world is “not safe,” but they can address the issue of “belonging.”

So what can you do to promote a sense of belonging among your students?

- Have students volunteer or engage in community service. Volunteering is a powerful way to gain a broader perspective and get outside one’s own fears and concerns. Because lack of transportation is often a problem for students, especially those in poverty, ask them if there is someone in their own neighborhood (probably an older individual) whom they could help in some way.
- Have students do academic tasks in groups of two. There cannot be a group “dropout” that way, and both are compelled to interact. Both students can have the same answers, but they both have to do the work. This approach is particularly good for boys, as it lessens the potential for social isolation.
- Connect students to an individual in another country via the Internet. Help the students establish connections in a global way—particularly to a Third World or less-developed nation. It changes their perspective. When I was in college, I lived in Haiti. It changed my world view. And while most of your students cannot travel to or live in a less-developed country, they can certainly go there via Internet, Skype, or Google Hangouts.
- Never allow a student to eat lunch alone. Assign student ambassadors whose explicit responsibility is to befriend.

One concerned counselor surveyed her students with the question “Who is your best friend(s)?” She asked the students to identify their best friends and the topics they discussed. She

discovered that “friends” exist by “cliques.” So the counselor took all the “best friends” and taught them how to be “better friends” by asking questions rather than giving advice, and by alerting adults about issues that warranted intervention, such as references to suicide, cutting, heavy drug use, and porn. This approach became a safety net for the school.

## Making Students Safe

In the past 20 years, the push for high achievement, along with a very narrow definition of achievement at the federal level, has forced many schools to neglect the very foundation of learning: safety and belonging. Yet these are key building blocks in life success. By recognizing the importance of safety and belonging, we can include these vital elements in our schools, even if they are not mandated. Your students may not thank you, but they will be the beneficiaries. 

**RUBY K. PAYNE** is an educator, author, and founder of *aha! Process, Inc.* She is the author of *Achievement for All: Keys to Educating Middle Grades Students in Poverty*, available at [www.amle.org/store](http://www.amle.org/store).

 [rpayne@ahaprocess.com](mailto:rpayne@ahaprocess.com)  
 [www.ahaprocess.com](http://www.ahaprocess.com)

Bring Ruby K. Payne to your school. Contact AMLE Director of Middle Level Services Dru Tomlin at [dtomlin@amle.org](mailto:dtomlin@amle.org).



### Tablet App EXTRA!

To watch a video with Ruby K. Payne, download the App at [www.amle.org/AMLEMagazine](http://www.amle.org/AMLEMagazine).