



NextGen
teachers

CREATING CLASSROOMS WHERE STUDENTS FEEL SAFE TO TAKE RISKS

Students are often told to take risks in their learning. But real academic risk-taking only happens when pupils feel safe enough to try, fail, and try again.

A practical guide for schools to encourage curiosity, confidence and deeper learning.



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Why Risk-Taking Matters in the Classroom

Imagine you're asked to try something completely new in your job, and everyone will be watching and judging the outcome.

Now imagine being asked to try something new with support, guidance and time to experiment. The second situation feels very different.

Students experience this same feeling in classrooms every day. When learning feels high-pressure or public, many pupils choose the safest option rather than the most interesting one.

Instead of taking academic risks, they may:

- Stay quiet even when they have ideas
- Stick to answers they know are safe
- Avoid challenging tasks
- Disengage when work feels too difficult

Creating a classroom where students feel safe to experiment doesn't remove challenge; it makes challenge possible.





Why Students Avoid Taking Risks

Risk-avoidance often looks the same among students, but the reasons behind it can vary widely.

Students who struggle academically

These students may avoid risks because they are worried about getting things wrong. If a pupil already believes they might fail, trying something difficult can feel like confirming that fear.

High-attaining students

Students who are used to getting things right may also avoid risks — but for a different reason.

Their identity is often built around being “the clever one”, so making a mistake can feel threatening. Instead of experimenting, they produce safe and predictable work.

In both cases, students are protecting themselves.

This is why building a classroom culture where mistakes are normal and learning is valued over perfection is so important.

Safety Comes Before Challenge

For students to take academic risks, they first need to feel secure.

Psychologists have long highlighted the importance of safety and belonging in learning environments. When students feel anxious about embarrassment, peer judgement or failure, their attention shifts away from learning and towards protecting themselves.

Teenagers are also naturally drawn to risk-taking as part of their development. If the classroom doesn't provide positive outlets for curiosity and experimentation, that energy can sometimes appear as:

- attention-seeking behaviour
- testing boundaries
- social performance for peers

The goal isn't to remove risk from the classroom, but to redirect it into learning.



What Productive Risk-Taking Looks Like

A useful way for teachers to reflect on their classroom environment is to examine the types of behaviour they observe most often.

Signs of academic risk-taking

- Students share ideas they are unsure about
- Pupils ask deeper “why” or “what if” questions
- Students are willing to revise their work
- Learners attempt challenging tasks voluntarily
- Class discussions focus on ideas rather than just answers

These behaviours show that students feel comfortable exploring their thinking. If these behaviours are rare, it may indicate that students feel safer playing it safe.



Practical Ways to Encourage Risk-Taking

Build strong relationships

Students are far more likely to take risks with teachers they trust.

Small actions can make a big difference:

- greeting students as they arrive
- showing interest in their lives beyond the classroom
- responding to mistakes with curiosity rather than correction

Simple phrases such as “Talk me through your thinking” can shift the tone of a conversation.

Make mistakes visible

Students often assume that good learners always get things right the first time.

Teachers can challenge this by showing that learning is a process.

For example:

- share early drafts of work
- talk through how ideas evolve
- discuss common mistakes as learning opportunities

When mistakes are treated as useful rather than embarrassing, students become more willing to experiment.

Focus on the process, not just the answer

Praise can shape how students approach learning.

Instead of focusing only on correct answers, highlight effort and thinking.

For example:

- “That’s an interesting idea.”
- “I like the approach you took.”
- “That was a good attempt at something challenging.”

This reinforces the message that trying something new is valuable.



Creating Low-Pressure Opportunities to Try

Students need regular opportunities to experiment without worrying about being judged. Some simple approaches include:

- Verbal first drafts – discussing ideas before writing
- Thinking journals – a private space to explore ideas
- Collaborative problem solving before independent work
- Practice tasks that don't contribute to grades

These low-stakes moments help students build confidence before tackling more demanding tasks.

Over time, this encourages learners to take intellectual risks, ask better questions and develop deeper understanding.

Final thoughts

Encouraging risk-taking in the classroom isn't about making learning easier. It's about creating an environment where students feel secure enough to challenge themselves.

When classrooms prioritise curiosity, reflection and experimentation, students are far more likely to:

- share ideas
- attempt difficult tasks
- learn from mistakes
- develop confidence in their thinking

Ultimately, students take academic risks when they trust that mistakes are part of the learning journey.





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At NextGen Teachers, we're committed to supporting schools and the dedicated educators who make learning possible every day.

From helping you find the right teachers and support staff to sharing practical resources that strengthen classrooms, we aim to help your school create environments where both staff and students can thrive.

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