Risk-Taking is not fearing failure and embracing new challenges or activities. A risk-taking environment fosters support, challenge, and cooperation by establishing norms for students to learn from one another and to continually attempt to improve.

Explore these strategies to intentionally support Risk-Taking as part of the Learning Environment in your classroom.

Greeting Every Kid, Every Day
If you want students to be curious, they first have to feel that their ideas and their wonderings matter. Make an effort to greet every student every day. Look each student in the eye and welcome them to your classroom. It's a small gesture that makes a big impact.

Sticky Note Surprise
When students feel like they matter, they're more likely to be engaged and curious. To make sure each student knows you value them, use your calendar. Each month, place students' names on a day in your calendar. For elementary, you may have one student per day. For secondary, you may have 3-4 per day. On that day, write a quick sticky note with a positive message for that day's students and leave it on their desks. Each students gets a note from you each month, building the rapport and connection that is required for a culture of risk-taking.

Nicknames of Greatness
Students often rise to the expectations we set for them, and sometimes we inadvertently set that bar too low. Once you learn what students are interested in, give them nicknames that take that interest to its highest level so they know you think they are capable of greatness. Yolanda is interested in politics, call her President Yolanda. Sam is interested in space, call him Astronaut Sam.

Something New: Inside the Classroom
You want students to be willing to try new things and be open to new ideas. To promote this culture in your classroom, challenge your students to try one new thing each week. This could include working with a new partner for an investigation, setting a class or individual goal, or trying a "flipped learning" unit. Let them know that continually trying new things can help them discover new interests and more efficient ways of doing things.

Something New: Outside the Classroom
You want students to be willing to try new things and be open to new ideas. To promote this culture in your classroom, make it a habit to try something new every month. Share your efforts with students, especially any failures. Use the construct, "I tried...I failed...I learned..." to model openness to new ideas, perseverance, and a growth mindset.

Getting to Know You
Establishing a safe environment in the classroom is critical for students to take educational risks. One way to practice and affirm risk-taking is to spend a few minutes in class assisting the students in getting to know each other. Regularly have students share information such as their middle names, stories about a pet, or a family tradition. Periodically, play “who in this class bingo,” providing opportunities to take a risk in a supportive environment.

Tinker Time
Allow students some time to tinker with materials or ideas just for the fun of it. They can create a variety of objects out of the same materials. They can expand on ideas in a variety of ways and directions. During sharing time, encourage students to share the results of their tinkering with descriptive and precise language. Tinker Time outside of an investigation promotes risk-taking and student curiosity.

Be a Skeptic
A skeptic questions statements and requires evidence in order to confirm an idea. Help students understand that informed skepticism is helpful to develop and refine ideas. Periodically, have them practice being a skeptic. Read students a statement from a newspaper or magazine. Encourage them to ask questions and to evaluate the evidence that is provided to them in the article. Are they convinced? Do they need more evidence?

Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down, Thumbs Sideways
Periodically, ask students if they could teach their learning to someone else. Ask for thumbs up (yes), thumbs down (not yet), or thumbs sideways (I'm not sure). This will provide a quick formative assessment.

White-boarding
Use whiteboards to capture ideas and thoughts. The temporary nature of a white-board promotes risk-taking and collaboration. Students can develop models that show their understanding of a process or concept. They may use pictures, diagrams, and words to convey their meaning. Other strategies that are good for white-boarding include Gallery Walk, Board Meeting, Graffiti Wall, and Floor Display.

Think-Aloud
Model self-direction and metacognition by thinking aloud. You can share your rationale as you design an investigation plan so that students learn to emulate that thought process when they design their own investigation plans. You can share possible reasons for a particular result so students see what ongoing critical thinking looks like. Thinking aloud also supports a culture of risk-taking by modeling the communication of ideas freely and without judgement.

Use "Yet"
Help students learn the power of the word "yet" for a growth mindset. Instead of, “I can’t do multiplication,” say, “I can’t do all my multiplication tables, yet.” Instead of, “The class isn’t ready to read chapter books,” say, “The class isn’t ready to read chapter books, yet.”

Connect Throughout the Year
Throughout the year encourage sharing by your students. The more they know about each other, the safer they will feel and be more willing to share innovative ideas. Around Thanksgiving, they can share what they are the most thankful for. Around Valentine's day, they can share what they love to do in their free time. Use the holidays as opportunities to connect with one another and foster a supportive classroom environment.

Grade Free Zone
Students are often afraid to take risks because they think their grade will be affected. Errors and mistakes should be embraced as a positive part of the learning process. Build in several activities each day that are grade-free to provide a learning environment that promotes risk-taking.

Free to Fail
Post all the first attempts at creating a flying machine on one side of a board. Post a jet airplane on the other side. When students attempt an engineering design problem, have them post pictures of their first trials on the board under the flying machines. Have them post their best solution under the jet airplane.

Power of Prediction
Revisiting predictions is a good opportunity to promote risk-taking in your classroom, especially if your investigation yields a result that differs from the prediction. Explain that the reason we do investigations is to learn, and remind students that scientists make incorrect predictions and mistakes all the time. That is how they learn and move their science forward.