

Intentional Fostering of Relationships

Background

The thoughtful and intentional fostering of relationships can be one way educators support children and youth living with trauma. This is because healthy development following a history of adverse experiences depends on the quality and reliability of a student's relationships with the important people in their lives. This is done through the building of relationships between student and teacher and the creation of scenarios for peer relationship-building guided by the teacher. Teachers can support students by using clear communication and by having clear expectations, rhythms, and routines for student behaviours in the classroom. These simple consistencies within the classroom can give students who are "on edge" the comfort, predictability, and safety they may lack elsewhere.



Suggestions for the Intentional Fostering of Teacher-Student Relationships

Below are examples of how educators can equip themselves to better facilitate these interactions with the hopes of developing relationships with students:

- Intentionally connect and develop a relationship with each student in your classroom. Refer to them by their names (or as they would like to be called), smile when interacting with them, learn some of their interests and what accommodates their learning the best.
- Use a calm and respectful tone at all times.
- Be aware of the explicit and implicit messages you are giving to your students; show you want them to do well in school, and that you believe they can, through both actions and words.
- Spend some time individually with each student, especially those who are more withdrawn or showing more internalizing behaviours.
- Focus on improving your relationships with your students, without forgetting to facilitate the development of positive relationships among classmates (student-student).
- Show unconditional positive regard to students; address less than desirable behaviours while sustaining the students' dignity.
- Do not allow other students to affect the dignity of other students (one student repeating loudly the teacher's commands to a student in question).
- Hold classroom wide conversations/activities (facilitates teacher-student and student-student relations).
- Address student concerns in a way where the child/youth is free from the judgment of their peers.
- Assume positive intentions and/or logical reasons for the behaviour of all students.

In attempting to develop relationships with students, educators may encounter some tensions. Human relationships are complex, take time, and are often influenced by ambiguous elements. The following are some suggestions to keep in mind when encountering the slow development of teacher-student and student-student relationships:

- Do not stop trying with students who seem to not reciprocate your intentional interactions with them. Each student takes a different amount of time to know, and each has a vastly different trust threshold.
- Do not assume respectful interactions with students are all that is needed. Students' observations of teachers' interactions with others within the school, with other staff, with parents, etc, will influence how the student views the teacher and how the relationship will progress.
- Do not wait to observe negative behaviours from the child before intentionally interacting with them. Avoid showing your first signs of interaction after these types of moments. Strive to continuously engage.

Why is this important?

As some students are entering with elevated stress levels that impact brain function and development, educators are perfectly poised to ensure classrooms promote a trauma-sensitive culture/environment. Such a shaping supports the regulation of students entering the class with elevated cortisol levels. This effect is enhanced when teachers, through their interpersonal relationships, are able to help students co-regulate if behaviours signaling stress persist. Strong social support has been correlated with the moderation of behaviours related to depression and other life outcomes that can impact academic success.

Intentional fostering of relationships with students and the structuring of the setting/environment to create trauma-sensitive classrooms aids students most affected by adverse experiences / trauma. However, it is important to note that the strategies and approaches of each educator may be different, based upon that individual's strengths/personality, and based on the class' unique composition any given year/semester. What is important is that teachers feel free to incorporate this knowledge into their classrooms in the ways that makes them feel most comfortable and that support them to stay consistent.