

# Responding to the Ongoing Effects of Covid-19 In Schools

## Impacts of Disruptions

Much has been written about the impacts of the shifting to and from remote learning in the 2020-2021 school year such as the increased vulnerability of students living in marginalized contexts, the reduction of access to resources and supports, increased levels of neglect, online exploitation, and increases in alcohol and substance use, among others. However, the return to face-to-face instruction in the fall of 2021, and the surge of the Omicron variant in the winter of 2021, saw ongoing and prolonged instructional disruptions in schools. Classes were often not at capacity, educators were often expected to offer both in-person and virtual instruction, extracurricular activities were canceled; many educators were sick leading to combined classroom, class coverage, loss of prep-time, etc.

For many young people, the return to school meant a return to cohorted times and space, the continuation of masking, the lack of access to supports, and extra-curricular activities. Equally, for some, the return to schools marked a return to a place that no longer felt predictable, stable, and constant.

## COVID-19 in Schools

COVID-19 in schools has led to disrupted classrooms, fluctuating attendance, teacher and staff illness, loss of preparation time, loss of extra-curricular experiences, increased health-related precautions and rules, cohorting/ isolation, etc.

It has also led to social reconnection, routine, in-school learning, and increasing opportunity. The spectrum of behavioural responses is to be expected, including trauma responses. Thus, trauma-sensitive responses will support educators and staff now and into the future.

## COVID-19 & ACEs

Some researchers are calling for COVID-19 to be named an Adverse Childhood Experience for the following reasons:

- Indirectly, COVID-19 could exacerbate ACEs in children's lives.
- COVID will have both short and long-term impacts on mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- Like other ACEs, the impact is not measured by the presence of the ACE, but by personal experience with it.
- Not all people, nor all children, will be able to "bounce back" and "get back to normal."
- Doing so, supports COVID to be understood as a potentially traumatic, individualized experience, with associated behaviours that can be supported through trauma-sensitive practices.

## Possible Behaviours

- Student troubles and frustrations during transitional periods (activity to activity; or, in-between classes).
- Exuberance and hyper-sociability.
- Anxiety (anxious when in close proximity with large groups; anxiety relating to fear of contracting the virus; excessive optimism).
- Intense behaviours.

## Trauma-Sensitive Responses

- Specific daily/weekly schedules and agendas posted in the same places/classrooms.
- Clearly defined and posted behavioural expectations.
- Clearly defined sequence of actions for transitional periods.
- Preparation warnings and countdowns to transitions. For example, “In 10 minutes we will be switching seats... In 5 minutes we will be switching seats.”
- Redirection to assigned activity or task.
- Reminders of expectations.
- Praise for obedience: “I notice you have taken your books out already, good job Jeremy.”
- Movement breaks, community walks.
- Listen to and look for individual student concerns.
- Encourage/facilitate play and interaction with one or two other students.
- Refrain from overemphasizing the potential dangers of COVID-19 and maintain consistent protocols and expectations.
- Make the return to school feel as “normal” as possible by modeling optimism and a reflection of displayed behaviours prior to COVID-19.

## Is it Really Learning Loss?

Learning loss has been defined as the discrepancy between the grade-level expectations and the actual academic performance of students. Learning loss as it pertains to COVID-19 assumes that no learning took place, or the learning that did take place remotely or online during COVID-19 was indefinitely less valuable than the prior means at which children were educated. Although there have been mixed results and an emergence of issues due to the pandemic's effect on learning, the assumption can not be made that all learning was halted for all students, or that only school learning should be privileged. Terming the effects of the pandemic as learning loss puts pressure on teachers to make up for this “loss”, in ways that largely reflect the need for improving standardized test scores. These scores often undervalue the remote and land-based learning that became more common during the pandemic.

Similar to the emphasis on teachers to “self-care”, the responsibility placed on teachers to help “make up” for learning loss can exacerbate the current turnover and employment crisis within the teaching profession.

## What was gained?

Through the described phenomena of learning loss and its misinterpretations, we have been able to isolate a silver lining. The recent situation brought on by the pandemic has re-instilled within education what has always been known. This is that education is a social process centered around the development and fostering of relationships. During times like that of the COVID-19 pandemic, the connections teachers make with students, their families and the wider school community are of the utmost importance.

## Conclusion

As COVID-19 moves into being endemic, the effects of the experience will remain and will continue to shape school landscapes in many ways: as ACEs, as PTSD, as illness, as grief, as loss, as neglect, as violence, as poverty, etc.

Moving forward it is important for teachers to understand the impacts of ACEs on themselves and on their students; how they manifest in our complex social environments in times such as COVID-19 or future interruptions to regular academic delivery; and how to implement and respond to the realities so as to be a positive source in the lives of the students with whom teachers interact.