

Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Children in Care

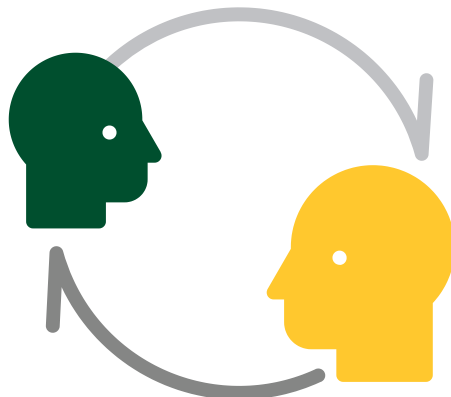
Background

Children and youth in schools enter the building coming from an array of diverse family situations, scenarios, and community involvement. Students in care of the government or other agencies enter schools with experiences vastly different than many of their peers.

This brief foregrounds the importance of trauma-sensitive communication, understanding, and language in the classroom.

Communication

Many times, being placed in care requires students to attend new schools. As each school has its own 'way of being,' this transition time is one marked by a significant learning curve for youth who have not yet built relational trust. For example, if a youth who was in a fight at school is returning to their housing unit, those staff who will be greeting them may be unaware of the struggles faced by the child earlier in the day. Building relationships between teachers and social service agencies can support increased and ongoing community and communication thus offering more wrap-around care for the student. Thus, not only is communication with the students themselves essential but so too is communication with the caregivers responsible for the student.



Understanding

Housing units are diverse settings, with diverse age groups of children coming from an array of backgrounds. An understanding that a student may be living with trauma supports educators in understanding how those struggles translate into academic hurdles. Despite the presence of these struggles, teachers can support students who are living in care, to meet classroom and academic expectations. For example, if a student is having trouble turning in homework on time, it may be due to the fact that the environment of their housing unit is unstable on a particular day, and this individual was unable to focus academically on the tasks set before them. Practicing trauma-sensitivity supports teachers to seek the reasons why, and to shift certain requirements to support a student's development. As well, children who live their lives in the social services system often find it difficult to trust adults and thus difficult to build healthy relationships with them. The avoidant behaviours they display are often protective in nature rather than defiant. Teachers who are aware of this can be patient and understanding as they learn more about the student and support them in the trauma-sensitive classroom structure. Seeking to understand the unique contexts and experiences of children in care enables teachers to slowly develop relationships that are strength-based rather than deficit-based.

Classroom Language

When describing social situations, familial interactions, and an array of other societal phenomena, it is easy for teachers to draw examples from the normative general population. Children in care often do not fall into these normative narratives. Teachers who are aware of this are able to shape the language and activities they use in the classroom to reflect the diverse array of students' experiences, including those who are transitioning from less than traditional home-school-community environments. Using the word "caregivers" in place of "parents", or refraining from using the diction "at home" or "family" when talking about activities and circumstances outside of the school work to unconsciously make children in care feel more included in their environment and work to improve their self-esteem in the classroom.