

Strong relationships help kids catch up after 6 months of COVID-19 school closures

September 18 2020, by Lisa Bayrami



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Many Canadian children are now returning to their classrooms [after schools shut down in March](#) to stem the spread of COVID-19.

Classrooms under strict health guidelines are [very different to the settings children knew last spring](#). The children may be different too,

having experienced family stress brought about by fear, uncertainty or [life-changing events related to the pandemic, such as family violence](#).

[Students' learning loss](#) over the summer months has long been the [subject of research concern](#)—some call it [the "summer slide"](#).

COVID-19 school closures have been almost three times as long as a summer vacation, prompting some to discuss a potential [COVID-19 slide](#). Researchers have projected [that due to pandemic school closures some students may have lost a year's worth of learning in some elementary grade subjects](#)—particularly more vulnerable students who have faced traumatic events during the shutdown.

The amplification of the effects of [learning loss](#) is an [important consideration](#). But directing attention to missed learning should not mean overlooking the powerful contribution of relationships, well-being and mental health to student success—an elevated priority for children who have experienced fear and trauma related to the pandemic. How [school districts](#) respond may have a lasting effect on this generation.

Excessive stress prevents learning

Educators can alleviate some of the negative consequences of excessive stress and enhance children's well-being through [positive and attuned relationships](#)—relationships where educators are [tuned in, aware of and responsive to children's emotional needs as they are being expressed](#). Well-being is a required condition upon which achievement is built.

The growing international body of evidence on the impact of [social isolation](#) on the mental health and well-being of young people has led to calls for school systems to take a [balanced approach](#) to reopening, addressing children's [mental health](#) as well as their educational needs.

Children experiencing increased stress, anxiety [and worries](#) as a result of

the pandemic are operating in a state of high alert. This affects their ability to regulate emotions and impulses, and to attend to, reflect upon and [remember information](#), as well as to engage in constructive relationships with others.

In a spring report for UNESCO, as children and their teachers were entering the new world of distance learning and isolation, renowned educator [Armand Doucet and his colleagues argued that students needed to feel safe and have their basic needs met as a priority](#).

Regulation of stress through relationships

The ability to regulate students' stress and anxiety through classroom relationships is a powerful tool to support academic outcomes.

Attempts to fulfill urgent academic expectations, without addressing children's fundamental need for emotional safety, will exacerbate children's feelings of stress and anxiety and even further challenge their ability to self-regulate.

When children experience this state of imbalance, they [perform more poorly in school](#). Their bodies go into a state of fight-or-flight, with survival being the primary focus, leaving little room for learning.

Educators have been subject to the stresses of the pandemic too. [In a survey](#) of 17,352 Canadian educators by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, 44 percent expressed concerns about their own mental health and well-being.

Here are three ways school systems and school leaders can support student emotional well-being to ground academic success.

1. Foster teachers' sense of personal and professional safety. In order for educators to attend to the well-being of their students, they must also prioritize their own well-being.

When [school systems](#) and school leaders provide reassurance of personal safety, opportunity to collaborate with peers and time to adapt their classroom practices, they contribute to educators' sense of well-being. Research suggests that [perceiving that decisions and actions can impact life outcomes](#) is associated with lower work stress, greater likelihood of asking for support and positive thinking.

Teachers need to have agency to shape the learning environment, and to assess and address their students' emotional well-being and readiness to learn before embarking on an ambitious plan to make up for lost academic time. When teachers feel safe and supported, they will be better positioned to support their students through responsive relationships.

In turn, students connect to teachers' cues and feel soothed and safe. Through the important co-regulating responses of the educator-student [relationship](#), children's autonomic nervous systems (the primary mechanism [behind the fight-or-flight response](#)) are calmed. This creates a state of readiness to engage and learn.

2. Modify academic expectations.

Curriculum documents lay out expectations for each grade. There is no prescription for the timing of delivery, nor of the pacing. As professionals, teachers are well-aware of curricular expectations, and they modify pace and order to suit their class. Principals, vice-[principals](#) and any teachers in school leadership roles should recognize this need,

and signal to teachers that this is OK. Teachers will plan to meet curriculum expectations as they always have, but there may be modification in their planned timelines particularly at the start of the year.

Encouraging teachers to set reasonable expectations and [being kind](#) to themselves will also support positive [mental health](#). [Self-compassion](#) supports feelings of safety and security.

By accepting that things are different, and curbing the propensity to take on unrealistic timelines for improvement, educators can help students transition from a state of heightened [stress](#) to a more balanced state—a precursor to learning and success.

3. Build relationships with families.

By taking an interest in how families are doing, and really listening, school-based educators take the lead on building more caring relationships with children and their homes. Home-[school](#) partnerships are crucial to understanding children's well-being needs, and prioritizing them would help realize the pandemic's catch phrase of collaboration and mutual support: "We're all in this together."

Making children feel emotionally safe and supporting their ability to self-regulate through positive relationships, and prioritizing teacher well-being and family connections, will support the quest for academic success.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Strong relationships help kids catch up after 6 months of COVID-19 school closures (2020, September 18) retrieved 15 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-strong-relationships-kids-months-covid-.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.