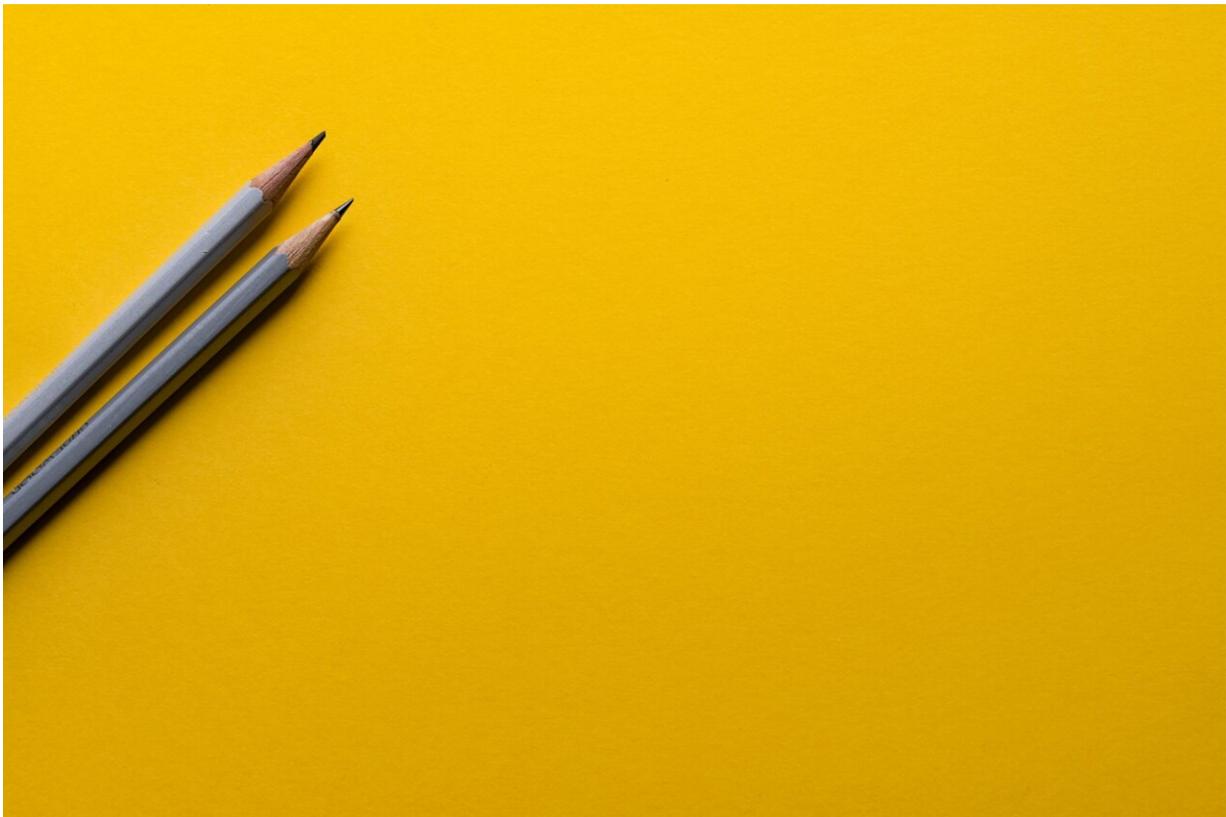


# Trauma-informed classrooms can better support kids in care

September 3 2019, by Melanie D. Janzen, Dawn Sutherland And Kathryn Levine

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As teachers return to school, they're thinking about the students who they'll be getting to know. In our province, Manitoba, there are some

students who are becoming more prominent in the minds of teachers, particularly the students who arrive at school in the care of Child and Family Service agencies.

Our team of researchers from the faculties of education and [social work](#) at the University of Manitoba are learning about how educators in one school division are working to better support children in care.

In part, that is through understanding and enacting trauma-informed practices in classrooms and schools. That means engaging children in ways that acknowledge how trauma may have shaped their experiences.

## **Children in care and trauma**

Manitoba has among the [highest rates of children in care in the world](#). In 2015, Marni Brownell, a professor at the department of community health sciences and a researcher at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) at the University of Manitoba, led a team that studied [the educational outcomes of children in care in the province](#).

The MCHP provided clear data on what many families, students and education and child welfare professionals already knew: that the educational outcomes for children in care were abysmal. The study found that whereas 89 percent of Manitoba's students graduate on time, only 33 percent of students who are or who have been in care realize that same achievement.

We collaborated with one Manitoba school division that has decided to prioritise the needs of children in care in order to improve their educational outcomes and experiences.

## **Trauma and hyperarousal**

Many children, adolescents and families who are involved with the child welfare system have been exposed to multiple and chronic traumatic experiences. These can range from witnessing domestic violence and addiction, to experiencing neglect and emotional, physical, sexual or psychological abuse and intergenerational trauma. This includes the legacy associated [with Indian Residential Schools](#) and systemic underfunding of First Nations infrastructure. Canada's [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), advocates and researchers have linked both to [cultural genocide](#).

Children and youth have made it clear that [when they are removed from what is assessed as an unsafe environment like their home, this does not result in feelings of safety](#).

The trauma associated with allegations and investigations of abuse, being separated from family and siblings, being placed with strangers and having to conform to different expectations all act to maintain a state of [hyperarousal in the child](#).

Trauma has pervasive physiological, psychological and emotional impacts: research from the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) shows that children who have experienced trauma can have difficulties identifying and managing their feelings, controlling their impulses, forming relationships and concentrating and interpreting [social situations](#) , among other things.

In the short term, children may not have the coping or social skills to engage with teaching staff or peers. Children who have experienced trauma often have [impaired academic performance](#) and are likely to internalize these difficulties as failure. In the long term, these challenges are likely to result in low academic achievement and higher rates of absenteeism both of which are [significant factors influencing school drop outs](#).

Clearly, teachers must be sensitive to the trauma experienced by children and their families who are involved with the child welfare system.

## **A trauma-informed lens**

[Through practice and research](#) and in response to the lived experiences and advocacy of the families, social workers' conceptual understandings of children and families involved with the child welfare system are shifting.

A [trauma-informed perspective](#) prompts professionals to shift from asking what is wrong with people involved with the child welfare system, to considering what has happened to the child and family.

The question "What is wrong?" implies that once identified, the problem can be fixed by focusing on the individuals. It also may imply a fault of the individuals rather than systemic inequities, approaches and issues.

Conversely, the question "What happened?" recognizes that the seemingly challenging behaviours, maladaptive coping responses and interpersonal relationship difficulties are responses to traumatic experiences.

## **Sense of safety**

In our preliminary research, we are documenting schools' collaborations with various child welfare agencies and their efforts to better support children in care.

Educators are starting to engage in trauma-informed practices as a way to recognize that the most urgent need is to establish the child's sense of safety in the school.

What makes a school environment feel safe? According to Australian psychologist Howard Bath, the [consistency, reliability, predictability, availability, honesty and transparency of adults](#) who care for children contribute to both emotional and physical safety of children.

When children feel safe, they can form trusting relationships. It is only in the context of these connections that they can then learn to understand and manage their trauma responses.

School leaders that we interviewed shared many examples of how they are enlisting what Bath identifies as [the three pillars of care into their school and classrooms: safety, connections and coping](#).

Educators described making sure that children had a number of "go-to" adults in the building in addition to their classroom teachers, as well as "go-to" places if they felt overwhelmed. Others talked about the importance of making space for and really listening to kids' questions, such as "Where are my siblings?" Then, these educators would work with the social worker to find answers for children.

## **Connections and envisioning the future**

Educators also spoke of the importance of children forming connections with others and building trusting relationships. They talked about the importance of making sure kids were connecting to other kids and setting aside time and space to ensure that happens, for example, in the form of supportive recess groups.

Some educators organised regular lunches with children. One high school principal explained how he worked to get children in care involved. He described one student whose confidence was excelling as she led the environmental club's campaign to ban plastic bags.

Another school told us how they supported a group of high school youth in care in forming their own advocacy club where the youth could bring allies. This led to these students supporting each other in their advocacy, academic pursuits and in conversations about life after high school.

Sometimes trauma manifests in what looks like to adults as misbehaviors. The educators we spoke to recognized how children or youth who have been traumatized often need support in learning how to identify, cope with and manage emotions. These educators reassured [children](#) that their [school](#) was a place where all of their feelings were welcome and worked with them to better understand and express these feelings.

We encourage all [educators](#) to think about the variety of experiences students may have had this summer.

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