

The Belong Classroom initiative

An example of implementing Dyadic Developmental Practice in a school

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Introduction

Trauma and attachment difficulties can create difficulties for children in all aspects of their development. School is a particularly difficult environment for children who don't feel safe with adults and whose emotion and attention regulation skills make it difficult for them to take advantage of learning opportunities.

In Ontario, there is little training available to teachers to understand the complex needs of students who have experienced trauma. Teachers and students become frustrated at the lack of progress seen with traditional behavioural strategies of punishment and reinforcement. Families who care for the children become frustrated as social and academic failures persist. Often they have to take time from work or spend hours battling homework issues with a child who does not yet have the emotional safety to learn.

What is the Belong Classroom initiative?

The Belong classroom initiative was developed for children who are not able to manage regular classroom or traditional behavioural classrooms because of trauma and attachment difficulties. The students may be in foster care or be with biological parents, but with support from family and children's services.

The program is a financial and clinical partnership between the public and catholic school boards in Kingston Ontario and Family and Children's Services of Frontenac Lenox and Addington. There is a maximum of eight students who can be enrolled in the program. Students are required to live within 20 minutes of the school program to avoid lengthy travel to and from the program.

After an application process, all partners discuss the appropriateness of a referral. Care is taken to ensure any new student will fit in with the core group in terms of age and needs.

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How many children are involved?

Currently we have 6 children ages 6-8 years, a full time teacher, a full time educational assistant and a half-time child and youth worker. Given the high needs of the students, a half time position is filled by two university students in occupational therapy, teaching or psychology.

How are the staff trained?

All staff have been trained in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and receive regular consultation to ensure that the attitude of PACE remains primary in interactions with students. The curriculum and structure of the classroom have also been developed to ensure emotional and physical safety.

How is the school day structured?

At the beginning of the school year, all learning was offered through story telling and play based activities. Sensory integration and mindfulness activities are also part of the daily schedule. Outside play is scheduled frequently throughout the day and is often spontaneously suggested to encourage exploration, gross motor coordination and social interactions. Recently, the school custodian procured skates, hockey sticks and helmets for all of the children. All six students coped with falls and frustration and learned to skate, an achievement that we all could delight in. A focus on literacy and regular curriculum is introduced as the student begins to show less dependence on strategies of self-protection.

How are children re-integrated into their classrooms?

Gradually, the students will be introduced to a regular classroom environment within the larger school and eventually back to their home school. A staff member accompanies them through these transitions ensuring safety for the student as well as offering ongoing consultation to the new teacher as they develop a relationship.

Does the initiative support the parents?

Family support is another critical component of the Belong program. Parents are regularly invited into the classroom to engage in activities with their children that promote attachment. Communication with parents is encouraged. Educational meetings about how to support children from an attachment perspective also occur throughout the academic year.