

Deni Melim & Sian Phillips with help from
Doug Hepburn & Jerry Fowler

drsianphillips@bell.net
melideni@alcdsb.on.ca

We know that early relational trauma can have a huge impact on the developing architecture of the brain. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect really struggle to develop a healthy brain.

These children then come to school and unfortunately are poorly understood or served by our current education models. Our school's business is to impart knowledge and learning skills. Unfortunately, for children who have experienced trauma and neglect their brains do not have the luxury of operating smoothly at a cortical level. These children are typically in driven by their sympathetic nervous system that keeps them at high alert for danger and any possible vulnerability. Alternatively they are in a dissociative state. Neither state is compatible with learning. School, learning, peers, teachers can all represent danger to a child who has experienced ongoing abuse and neglect.

Because fear remains high and emotion regulation is poor, these children, not surprisingly, present with challenging behaviour. Physical aggression, verbal aggression, stealing, lying, social difficulties, defiance, attention difficulties, inability to learn from consequences, lack of remorse are all common to children with disorganized attachment. Our education system, although well-meaning, has typically responded by further shaming the child through suspensions, expulsions and restrictions. Teachers, parents, children, mental health workers, protection workers become frustrated with the ineffectiveness of these responses. Behavioural or cognitive-behavioural approaches are only successful with children who have secure attachment and enough cortical resources to allow for self and other awareness.

Research is now showing that children in care have much less success in school. They do worse in all cognitive and social measures, typically drop out of school early and struggle with learning and mental health difficulties.

In 2013 we proposed an educational program that will meet these children's needs and increase academic and social success. This program is informed by attachment principles and has at its core the establishment of safety. Emotional (and physical) safety is essential to help children calm their nervous systems, increase oxytocin production through the establishing of safe relationships with staff and for the production of dopamine that will allow the experience of pleasure and reward from relationships and learning. Only through safe relationships can these children begin to change their brain and develop new neural pathways that will allow them to then be open to learning.

THE BELONG PROGRAM

Our program is a clinical and financial partnership between Algonquin School Board (Catholic), Limestone School board (public) and Family and Children's services.

Staff: We have three full time staff: a teacher, an educational assistant and a child and youth worker. We also look for support from students enrolled in programs such as social work, occupational therapy, child and youth worker or psychology.

Supply teachers are sometimes needed. Every effort is made to keep supply teachers consistent. Ms. Melim ensures that they understand the different approach in the classroom before they come.

Core staff team is trained in PACE and receive regular supervision.

Children: A section 23 classroom allows for 8 students. We started last year with a core group of four boys ages 7-8 yrs. We added two girls. One of the girls moved in January due to an adoption and another boy aged 6 years was brought into the group. Group dynamics are very carefully assessed and children are brought into the program not because they are first on the wait list, but because they will work with the group.

One student moved province at the end of the school year. We now have seven boys ranging in ages from 6 to 10 years.

All students require an open file with Family and Children's Services.

Transitions towards integration: When students are thought to be ready, we transition them first to the school where our program is housed. Children may join their grade for one subject and build to spending the majority of their day there. The Belong classroom serves as a secure base where they are always welcome. A teacher or staff member initially stays with the child to help regulate their emotions as well as to help the teacher respond to the child in ways that will build trust in that relationship. When successful at this step they are transitioned to their home school.

Not surprisingly the relationship with the new teacher is critical. As part of this initiative staff from both boards have attended a workshop providing information on how trauma impacts on brain development and the importance of the PACE model to help a student who has experienced trauma be more successful in a school environment. Our goal is to increase capacity for understanding and working with this group of children. When a BELONG student is transitioned from the program, work is done prior to that transition to ensure a good match between student and teacher and to build the relationship before the transition occurs. The teacher also remains involved after the transition to provide support to both teacher and student.

Parents: Some of the children are in foster care, may have been adopted from foster care or continue to reside with their biological family. Ongoing communication is a critical component of our program. Communication is focused on the positive. Parents are invited regularly into the program to participate in attachment focused activities with their child. Parent support groups are also provided where parents are taught PACE and helped to understand what lies behind their child's difficult behaviour. Parents are invited to bring issues and topics for discussion.

Our staff from Family and Children's Services works with parents of students to support other issues that might be impacting on their relationship with their child.

Progress: A number of questionnaires are completed by parents and teachers at the beginning of the program, at the end of the first school year and again at the child's transition from the program. Measures include;

Brief Affective Neuroscience Scale	(parent)
Parent Stress Index	(parent)
Assessment Checklist for Children	(parent & teacher)
Behavioural and Emotional Rating Scale	(parent, teacher & student)
Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function	(parent & teacher)
Adaptive Behaviour Assessment System	(parent & teacher)
Trauma Symptom Inventory for Children	(parent & teacher)

Many other variables are recorded such as attendance, height, weight, reading level, math level, number of behavioural incidences.

Preliminary data suggests positive change in executive functioning, both behavioural regulation and meta-cognitive skills, and teacher and parent perception of affective strength and interpersonal strength.

Consultation; It is our hope to expand our program to older age groups as well as to rural areas. Please contact Dr. Sian Phillips at drsianphillips@bell.net or Deni Melim at melideni@alcdsb.on.ca if you are interested in learning more about our program.