

Supporting Children as we Re-open Programs

Trauma is any event or series of events that is perceived or experienced that undermines a child's sense of physical or emotional safety and has lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional or spiritual well being.

We are all managing the stresses of Covid-19 differently. When we look at the definition of trauma it can help us to understand that the children that we work with may be returning to childcare having experienced trauma while isolating at home.

Some things to consider as we re-open:

- Many parents felt overwhelmed as they were working from home while parenting full time.
- Children have spent several weeks at home where expectations are different.
- Some children, especially those without siblings have spent several weeks not sharing materials or engaging in cooperative play.
- Some families experienced the stresses associated with job loss or loss of income.
- Some children may have had important people in their lives who resided in long term care homes or contracted covid-19.
- Some children may have heard or witnessed family members argue or had experiences with family violence.
- Children may have feared for the safety of family members who continued to work outside of the home such as frontline workers.
- Children may have seen or heard things that were frightening on the news or in the conversations of adults around them.

The children in our programs are going to return with behaviours that are the result of their unique experience. This is not going to be a regular transition back to school with social distancing, masks and increased sanitation. The stresses that they experienced while isolating at home may be compounded when they return to a program that isn't going to look or feel like the one that they left a few months ago.

Some of the behaviours that we can expect:

- Difficulty separating from parents or caregivers at drop off.
- Withdrawal and lack of participation in programming.
- Regressions in children's ability to self-regulate. Melt down behaviours and strong reactions to seemingly small things in children who did not previously exhibit these behaviours.
- Toileting accidents.
- Difficulty interacting with peers.
- Difficulty accepting comfort from caregivers even if familiar with them.

In order to respond appropriately to children who have experienced trauma caregivers will need to look beyond the behaviour. We need to be ready to respond with calm, patience and flexibility.

Some of the strategies that can help us respond appropriately:

- Allow for special drop off routines and transitional toys.
- Keep the environment calm and avoid over stimulation. Ensure there are quiet areas available to children when they need some space and time on their own.
- Provide a caring classroom. There is no need to focus on academics as children adapt to the new normal. Focus needs to be on supporting children to feel safe, supporting their ability to self regulate and supporting social skills.
- Keep routines predictable and consistent! This is not a good time to plan for novel experiences or surprises.
- Read books about being afraid.
- Practice mindfulness.
- Listen to children and help them to label feelings.

Recovery will be a process and it is going to take time. Be sure to take care of yourself and be honest about how you're feeling. Talk to your colleagues and support network about your stresses and experiences to ensure that you are looking after your mental health and wellbeing. Reach out to your local mental health agency if you feel that you need further support.

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-support-people#mental-health>

Children cannot regulate with dis-regulated adults!