



As Children Head Back Into Classrooms, Teachers Will Need To Focus On Emotions, Not Academics.

Written by Hannah Beach (August 27, 2020)

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As schools begin welcoming students back to classrooms, their teachers will be tasked with not only getting them back on-track academically—but also helping them manage the psychological impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. And that emotional support must take precedence over any focus on grades. Schools are going to need to change the focus right now to concentrating on the emotional basics before academic basics.

Teachers teach people, not subjects. And when they can focus on supporting well-being first, the learning may then have an opportunity to land. For our teachers, on top of what they will be emotionally experiencing themselves, they are being called to be front-line workers on the emotions of our young people. Students heading back to their classrooms will have many emotions stirred up in them: Alarm. Frustration. Worry. Excitement. And this will be mirrored by what we, as adults, may also be experiencing.

When emotions like alarm and frustration are whirling around inside children, challenging behaviours will surface. And these challenging behaviours will make it even harder for teachers to cope and support children. This is going to be a challenging dance and this period in history is going to shine a light on the vital role of teachers in our children's emotional health.

So, how can we support them to support our children's learning? As parents and school administrators, we can relax about academic learning, and trust that it will come in time. More than anything, we need to help kids to feel safe right now, and we need to help them to release some of the anxiety and frustration they may be experiencing in healthy ways. To do this, education authorities, teachers, and parents must shift to a new version of the 3 Rs: Relationship, Rhythm and Release, instead of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Here's what this should look like:

Relationship: Students need to know that teachers are there for them, and that they matter. Kids need to feel invited, accepted, and seen. This might mean special greeting rituals at the beginning of each day and more playful activities. These attachment practices can help students to feel connected to their teachers as trusted, caring leaders, which may also lower their anxiety.

Rhythm: Children crave rhythm. Consistent routines, rituals, and structures help children feel safe, yet most children are experiencing the exact opposite right now. As they prepare to return to school, they may have little to no sense of what the "new normal" will be. Educators can create a sense of safety by quickly establishing new routines that our students can count on and orient around. This will help to produce a rhythm to their days and can offer a sense of predictability in these unpredictable times.

Release: When emotions get stirred up, they need somewhere to go. Finding healthy ways to pre-emptively channel this emotional energy, whether through music, physical movement, stories or storytelling, writing, poetry, drama, art, or even simply being outdoors, can help to

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alleviate dangerous or disruptive eruptions. Integrating daily outlets for release can be especially helpful for supporting students to get out frustration before it leads to outbursts of aggression.

Going back to school during this time will not be easy. This is not a time to focus on outcome and performance, getting ahead—or even catching up. Shifting our attention to matters of the heart will help our students feel safe. This is what will set the stage for learning to happen—when children are ready.

In the meantime, let's be patient with our students, teachers, and ourselves. We are all in this together.

Warmly,

Hannah Beach and Tamara Strijack



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