

Creating Innovative Programs for Early Childhood

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Barely a year off the ground and the team at the Centre's new Institute of Childhood Trauma and Attachment is already transforming how children affected by traumatic stress are treated. Two recent initiatives in early childhood education are already enriching the lives of our youngest citizens.

This past November, a specialized trauma-informed training program, developed by the Institute, was delivered to 130 childcare professionals in Toronto. As evidence builds that traumatic stress can have a profound lifetime impact on the developing brains and bodies of children and youth, the need for trauma-informed training of child and youth-serving professionals is paramount.

Many children in childcare have experienced significant traumatic events in their lives; however, childcare providers do not currently have the skills required to manage it. This new training program was so successful, the Toronto Child and Family Network, which supports Early Childhood Educators in childcare centres, libraries, EarlyON Centres, and autism services, has asked us to train their frontline staff directly. In doing so, we will be supporting those childcare providers with more ways to help children and youth cope with traumatic stress.

The second initiative is our new Feeling Explorers Program. The Institute and the Toronto Catholic District School Board's psychology department partnered to develop this distinctive socioemotional and skills-based program specifically for Canadian classrooms and childcare settings. The aim of the program is to enhance children's social interaction and the development of social skills.

Feeling Explorers is the first program of its kind to reflect Canadian culture and population, using images, language, and ideas that resonate with a wide variety of ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse Canadian children. In doing so, the program cultivates a sense of inclusiveness and belonging, and creates connections that are meaningful and protective.

From a clinical standpoint, what makes Feeling Explorers stand apart is the incorporation of attachment theory principles and the latest advances in neuroscience. Feeling Explorers places emphasis on the teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships, creating a sense of community and belonging where all feelings are accepted. Children are taught how their bodies and brains respond when they feel big emotions so that they can make sense of stressful events and confusing thoughts. They learn about the natural consequences of their behaviour and how they can make decisions that are good for them and others. Finally, teachers and children are taught the value of empathy and how to repair relationships whenever conflict causes stress to these relationships. We have already had childcare providers and Special Needs Resource Consultants express their interest in receiving training to deliver Feeling Explorers.

Both these innovative programs developed by the George Hull Institute fill gaps in the early childhood educational system to ensure that our youngest Canadians – our future leaders, decision makers and influencers – are resilient, adaptable, self-supporting and courageous.

