Attachment-Based Strategies

What's In Your Backpack?

What does a child need to bring to school in order to learn? At the simplest level, a child needs something to write with, paper, notebooks, etc.

What about "internal" attributes? Perhaps a child needs to have a sense of curiosity, the need for exploration, a sense of excitement about the world, etc.

What about "physical" requirements such as food and sleep? Can a malnourished, sleep deprived child be "productive" at school? Probably not.

What about "emotional" needs? Can a child be ready for learning without having his/her attachment needs met? For many therapists, the answer is no. Just like the hungry, sleep deprived child, a child who has not had his/her attachment needs met cannot be as productive in the classroom as a child who feels a healthy attachment toward his/her parents and teacher.

When a teacher senses that a child's backpack is "empty", what can he/she do? The teacher can provide writing equipment such as pens and paper, perhaps even breakfast or a snack. The teacher could suggest that the child take a nap in the nurse's room. But how can the teacher address the child's attachment needs? This is a much trickier and time consuming task. Below are a few points that may help to facilitate this process.

1) It's all about the relationship:

In order to meet a child's attachment needs, one must build a strong relationship with a child. The message a teacher wants to send is "our relationship is unconditional. No matter what happens, we'll be fine. Our relationship will survive this [behaviour, problem, issue, etc]." This is a similar to the concept of "unconditional love" that parents have for their children. The teacher is providing the child with an unconditional relationship between teacher and student.

2) "Collect before you direct"

One of the first steps toward building this relationship is the concept of "collecting" the child. The teacher wants to collect the child first thing in the morning and before any problematic behaviour is likely to occur (e.g. re-directing, transitions, etc). For example, as the child walks into the classroom, the teacher might say "I'm so happy you're here. How was your ride to school today?" Before re-directing the child, the teacher might say "I see you're reading a book. What is it about? Would I like it? Perhaps I could take a look while you begin your math assignment."

3) "Invite the child to be in your presence"

In order to build a strong relationship with a child, the teacher wants to make sure the child knows that he/she is invited to be in their presence. The message is "I want you to be in this class. I like having you in this class. You bring something unique and special to this class that we cannot be

without". A teacher can accomplish this by spending small amounts of one on one time with a child ("how is your day going? Tell me what you had for lunch"), pointing out similarities between them ("I also love dogs") and letting the child know that they are looking forward to seeing them tomorrow.