
Dr. Jean Clinton Explains the Pivotal Role of RECEs in **Supporting Children’s Mental Health**

By Sharon Ho

Registered early childhood educators should aim to have a child’s eyes light up when they come into the room. That was one message from Dr. Jean Clinton’s keynote address at the College of Early Childhood Educators’ Annual Meeting this past January.

The renowned clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University spoke about the importance of a strong relationship between a child and their RECE for the child’s mental health.

“The relationships children have with RECEs is absolutely pivotal if we think of mental health as developing the capacity to build relationships with peers and adults to be able to express, manage and experience emotions,” said Dr. Clinton.

According to Dr. Clinton, the quality of the relationship is what builds the brain connections between multiple areas of the organ. A child can be set up for success well beyond the early years through such connections.

Close, nurturing relationships can also help children identify sources of stress in their lives and help them manage stress. Stress can negatively impact a child’s mental health, well-being and how they approach their daily lives. While stress can be a normal part of life, Dr. Clinton knows that one type, toxic stress, can have a detrimental effect on a child.

“Toxic stress occurs when children are feeling lots and lots of pressure that turns on the alarm system in their body and brain,” said Dr. Clinton. “It becomes a threat when the system is turned on and there isn’t any buffering relationship to help children turn it off or help them learn how to deal with stress. It’s problematic when children experience toxic stress because we know the consequences affect brain and health development along with the immune system.”



Dr. Jean Clinton / Photo Credit: Boys and Girls Club of Kingston and area

Children who tend to be more exposed to toxic stress include those living in poverty without supportive relationships, children who are maltreated or neglected and children with families experiencing high levels of conflict or debilitating parental mental illness.

What does toxic stress look like? It may be a child thinking that someone accidentally toppling over the blocks they are working on was an intentional attack, not an accident.

“They are not able to be soothed by the educator because they haven’t developed the pathways in their brain to know an adult can help,” said Dr. Clinton. “The RECE should not judge or punish them but rather say ‘You’re really upset. I’m here to help you calm down’”.

RECEs can help children deal with toxic stress by building relationships of trust with them. Dr. Clinton encourages RECEs to do the following:

- Become knowledgeable about the child by documenting lots of observations about them.
- Sit down with the child, be present for them and give them space.

Building a relationship of trust can take a long time if a child is experiencing toxic stress and can depend on their natural temperament, according to Dr. Clinton.

How can an RECE tell if they are making progress in building such a relationship?

- When the child smiles more spontaneously at the RECE.
- When the child wants to share their enjoyments.
- When the child points things out to the RECE during their activities together.

“They’ll start to use you as a resource to their learning rather than avoiding you and not being engaged,” said Dr. Clinton.

Visit [youtube.com/collegeofece](https://www.youtube.com/collegeofece) to watch Dr. Clinton’s presentation from the College’s Annual Meeting. Highlights include:

- The important role of RECEs as “neuroplasticians”.
- How a child’s mental health can also be affected by any stress their RECE is experiencing. ■

The College’s new *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, to be published in June 2017, outlines the importance of relationships between RECEs and children.

Code of Ethics A. Responsibilities to Children states:

- RECEs make the well-being, learning and care of children their foremost responsibility.

Standard I: Caring and Responsive Relationships

B.1. states:

- RECEs are knowledgeable about the research and theories related to the impact of caring and responsive relationships on children’s development, learning, self-regulation, identity and well-being.

Standard I: Caring and Responsive Relationships

B.2. states:

- RECEs are knowledgeable about a range of strategies that support ongoing positive interactions with children and families.

Standard III: Safety, Health and Well-being in the Learning Environment

B.7. states:

- RECEs are familiar with a variety of strategies to promote and support children’s well-being and safety in the learning environment including, but not limited to, nutrition and physical, mental and emotional health.

📖 Visit college-ecce.ca/resources to read *Practice Guideline: Supporting Positive Interactions with Children* to learn more about how RECEs can support children.