



Removing the barriers to effective abuse therapy

Dr Delphine Collin-Vézina is a licensed clinical psychologist who is an expert in child welfare and maltreatment. Below, she explains her motivations, current projects and some important achievements resulting from her work



Improving trauma-related service provision for youth

Researchers at **McGill University**, Canada are developing preventive and social interventions for children who have been subjected to child sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment. By understanding epidemiological trends, these researchers intend to put in place measures to stem incidences of this heinous phenomenon and positively impact upon vulnerable populations

What attracted you to a career researching topics related to social work?

As a licensed clinical psychologist, I knew very little about social work when I started my academic career in the McGill School of Social Work in 2007. My previous doctoral and postdoctoral work was focused on the mental health outcomes of child sexual abuse – an area of research that is undoubtedly of utmost importance. I was, however, not very aware of the societal, structural, legal and political factors that influence the ways in which sexual abuse cases are responded to, and the barriers to disclosing abusive experiences and accessing services. Thus, I have centred my work on discovering more about these aspects.

Can you describe your key research endeavours and explain what you are hoping to achieve?

As the Tier II Canada Research Chair in Child Welfare and the Director of the McGill Centre for Research on Children and Families, I am pursuing research that pays attention to a spectrum of influential factors in order to create significant impacts at the individual and societal levels. My colleagues and I want to better understand the intrapsychic trauma

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (CSA) is a major global problem with devastating consequences. In 2011, a study of publications related to CSA between 1982 and 2008 found that of the almost 10 million participants, there was a worldwide prevalence of some 13 per cent. Remarkably, this accounts for one in every eight individuals.

However, despite this reported prevalence, the CSA incidence rate was found to be only 0.4 per cent. Thus, solely relying on official records of CSA cases is not only misleading, it impedes the development of understanding the short- and long-term impacts of CSA. Without this understanding, preventative and social interventions are far more difficult to implement; it is difficult to remedy a problem without fully understanding what is being solved.

REMOVING THE CLOAK OF INVISIBILITY

The prevalence of this invisibility of the victims means that there is a broad range of demographics that are underrepresented in official records of CSA cases, and that there is a distinct lack of knowledge on the CSA experiences of youth in residential treatment care (RTC). With that in mind, a group of researchers from McGill University has conducted several investigations into the different trauma experiences of Canadian youth in residential care facilities.

Led by Dr Delphine Collin-Vézina, one of the group's studies sampled 53 youth, aged 14-17, who were recruited from six different child protection RTC units. The results showed a high

experiences of victims as well as the broader health and social services systems' responses.

Your work is informed by theoretical concepts in attachment and resiliency. What has this resulted in up to now?

My research is influenced by well-accepted theories, including attachment (the importance for human kinds to establish meaningful relationships with caregivers and other significant adults in order to navigate the social world and succeed in life) and resilience (the capacity to use individual, familial and societal strengths to bounce back from adversity). Almost 10 years into my academic career, I believe that my scholarship is now firmly influenced by both the fields of clinical psychology and of social work, resulting in a more comprehensive perspective on the concerning issue of child sexual abuse.

Can you discuss some of your proudest achievements?

One that really stands out for me is the implementation of a trauma-informed training of foster parents and of out-of-home care workers. To date, we have provided intensive training to about 100 individuals from five

rate of abusive and neglectful experiences in the lives of those questioned, revealed that girls were more likely to report sexual abuse and, importantly, demonstrated subsequent problems associated with the traumas experienced. These included depression, anger, stress and dissociation.

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Ultimately, the findings have signalled the pressing need for therapeutic measures that can be tailored to the specific needs of each individual. In raising awareness of the challenges presented to the youth who have been traumatised, an increased resilience can be encouraged in them through effective therapeutic services.

IMPORTANT MULTI-INFORMANT PERSPECTIVES

Another of the group's studies documented and contrasted the accounts of CSA experiences of youth from different perspectives. The particular originality of the study lay in its use of multiple informants, namely, the youth in Child

youth protection agencies in Quebec. Ongoing research is suggesting that – following training – adults perceive the functioning of the children and youth under their care to be less problematic. They also perceive themselves as being more competent and efficacious.

I believe that trauma-informed services designed to not only address the current (mal) functioning of children and youth in care, but also to bring awareness on how traumatic events shape children and youth's whole development, should be a priority in child protection systems. I am glad to participate in this shift in culture.

Looking ahead, what are your key goals?

In 10 years from now, I hope to have collaborated with all 16 child protection agencies in Quebec so trauma-informed training becomes part of the regular staff training schedule, to have joined forces with my fellow Canadian colleagues to influence child protection services nationally and to have had continuous discussions with international scholars that share similar interests and goals in promoting a client-sensitive response to child abuse.

Protective Services RTC, their RTC workers and the CPS information systems record. While the majority of reports from youth were in agreement with that of the RTC workers, there was relatively low agreement between the youth's reports and the CPS' records.

The lack of comprehensive studies into CSA experiences of youth from multiple perspectives highlights research gaps it is important to fill. While CPS information systems are comprehensive, they often do not include the perspectives of either youth or their workers. Given the particular nature of their trauma, it is vital that these youth are provided a voice to ensure that their lived experiences are acknowledged. In addition, the proximity of RTC workers to the lives of CSA youth emphasises the need to recognise and acknowledge their unique perspectives by including them in CPS reports.

RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Collin-Vézina and her PhD student, Lise Milne, are planning to conduct further research in the future in which children and teenagers in group counselling will be followed for an 18-month period. In particular, over the course of the investigation the pair will examine three areas relevant to youth in RCT and other placement settings (eg. group homes): their experience of traumatic events, reactions to trauma and resilience in the face of adversity.

The proposed programme involves a process of continuous analysis. The profiles of the individuals – with regard to their traumatic

TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS AND TRAINING

OBJECTIVE

To create a world where minors and vulnerable persons are safer via:

- Collaborative research
- Educational and professional training opportunities
- Participation in and organisation of international conferences)

KEY COLLABORATORS

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Welfare, and Associate Professor in the McGill School of Social Work, Collin-Vézina has developed a strong interest in research and clinical topics related to child maltreatment, child sexual abuse, and trauma. She has led and collaborated on significant projects on mental health, family violence and service provision funded through substantial provincial and federal grants.



experiences, mental health-related trauma symptoms, age, gender and length of time in care – will be documented at the outset, and after six months this will be followed by detailed analysis of how their mental health profiles have evolved. The project will culminate in a consideration of their strengths and resilience capacities after 18 months.

In determining individual youth's perspective of their abuse – as well as how their traumas manifest and what resilience mechanisms they develop – Collin-Vézina and her team are giving voice to victims of CSA, enabling the development of better therapeutic treatments for them and for other victims in the future.