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GTA

Kids are learning about dementia and Alzheimer's in the classroom. This is why

Research shows 40 per cent of Alzheimer's cases are preventable with healthy lifestyle choices. The key is to start young.

By **Nadine Yousif** Mental Health Reporter

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Speaking virtually to a Grade 7 and 8 class at Bakersfield Public School in Thornhill, Jade Crystal asked students if they know what dementia or Alzheimer's is. A few put up their hands.

"People think dementia only affects older people," Crystal told the class. "But that's not the case."

Cognitive decline and Alzheimer's are typically associated with aging, with one in four seniors over the age of 85 in Canada being diagnosed with some form of dementia. But a new program called [Brainable](#), and led by [Women's Brain Health Initiative](#), is getting young students to think about their brain health much earlier, and equipping them with the tools to protect their brains for the long run.

"I think a lot of people are surprised to hear that we're talking about brain health and Alzheimer's and dementia with children," said Crystal, program director for Brainable. "But what people don't realize is that the brain peaks at 25 years old."

Both dementia and Alzheimer's disease are incredibly common, with more than 400,000 people living with dementia in Canada, according to national data, and that number is growing. By 2031, it's projected the annual health-care costs for people with dementia in Canada will double from \$8.3 billion to \$16.6 billion.

But research shows that the younger a person engages in healthy lifestyle habits, the more likely they'll be able to offset symptoms of dementia later in life, said Lynn Posluns, founder of Women's Brain Health. It's why her initiative began developing a curriculum specifically for younger people more than a year ago.

"By the time symptoms of diseases like Alzheimer's occur, it's too late," Posluns said, adding the damage to the brain typically happens 20 to 25 years prior to symptoms appearing. "By then, you're already along the path of cognitive decline — you can slow it down — but you won't be able to stop it."

About [40 per cent of Alzheimer's cases can be avoided](#) through lifestyle choices made earlier in life, said Posluns, calling that a "huge amount."

To teach younger students how they can protect their brains, Crystal has been virtually popping into Grade 5 to Grade 8 classrooms across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area to deliver 75-minute sessions on brain health. In those presentations, she

emphasizes the importance of good sleep, healthy eating, physical exercise and maintaining good friendships as important tools to help fight brain decline down the road.

The program also includes conversations about the harms of substance use and the importance of taking care of one's mental health and seeking help early.

"We focus on all the healthy lifestyle choices we want to make," Crystal said, adding the program pairs well with things students in that age group are already learning in their health and physical education curriculum. As of February, Crystal has already presented to more than 1,000 students.

"We're teaching kids what they can do to protect their brains now and get the most out of their brains."

The program, which is funded by private donations and Ontario's Ministry of Education, began rolling on a pilot basis in mid-December. Students at Bakersfield Public School were among the first to learn from Crystal. They engaged with interactive slide shows and activities like memory exercises and running in place, all to demonstrate how games and simple exercise can be powerful tools to protect the brain.

For Gavin Shapiro, 12, and Kaylee Veltman, 13, it was the first time topics like dementia and Alzheimer's were ever mentioned in a classroom.

"Before this presentation, I've actually never heard those words before," Shapiro said. Veltman has, but never really got the chance to understand brain decline in-depth.

What was most surprising for Shapiro was that staying active could be incredibly beneficial in helping strengthen his brain, while Veltman said the presentation has inspired her to have a set routine in place and get enough sleep every day.

"I found the session very, very informative," Veltman said. After the session, kids are given a booklet to take home summarizing the presentation, with additional activities to engage their families as well.

The program is currently available for GTHA schools and will continue through the 2022-23 school year, but Posluns said Women's Brain Health is working on expanding it across Ontario. She hopes it can one day be offered nationwide.

Ultimately, Posluns said the goal is to get people to think about making healthy life choices as early as possible to avoid a disease that is common, but, in many cases, preventable.



Nadine Yousif is a Toronto-based reporter for the Star covering mental health. Follow her on Twitter: [@nadineyousif_](https://twitter.com/nadineyousif_)

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