

Metaphors that Increase Understanding of Social-emotional Development and Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health

Telling the science-based story of how the brain develops – rather than focusing on early life adversity and sympathy for “vulnerable” children – is a more effective mechanism to build public support for policy and systems change. These research-tested metaphors are shown to increase understanding of early childhood brain development and the importance of positive experiences and relationships in the first years of life.

Metaphor – Brain Architecture

- The architecture of a human brain is constructed over time in a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood.
- Brain development is similar to the construction of a building. The process begins by pouring the foundation, framing the walls, followed by the plumbing, electrical wiring and dry wall – all in a particular sequence.
- Early experiences and relationships shape how a child’s brain gets built. Creating a strong foundation – with secure and loving relationships -- leads to greater health, learning and well-being later on. A poor foundation – weakened by negative experiences and unstable relationships -- increases the odds that a child will face challenges later in life.
- Depending on the quality of a child’s experiences and relationships in the early years, their brains will establish either a sturdy or a fragile foundation, which impacts all the development and behavior that follows.

Metaphor – Serve and Return

- Early brain development occurs through a process called “serve and return,” which can be thought of like the back-and-forth play of games like tennis, volleyball and ping pong.
- The back-and-forth interaction between babies and adults – including language, eye contact, gestures and facial expressions -- is essential to children’s healthy brain development.

- The “serve-and-return” interactions between children and adults shapes a child’s developing brain. These interactions – or a lack of these interactions – in the early years will have a lasting and significant effect on all the learning and development that follows.

Metaphor – Levelness

- A child’s mental health can be thought of like a table that is either level and functional or uneven and wobbly. Just as the levelness of a table is what makes it functional, the strong mental health of children enables them to function well in all aspects of their life.
 - Prolonged negative experiences or relationships during the early years have a destabilizing effect on children’s mental health. Conversely, consistently positive relationships and experiences in early childhood support social-emotional development and good mental health, which has a stabilizing effect on children and their overall development and functioning.
- Just as tables can’t level themselves – it may require simply a sugar packet under a leg or a skilled carpenter – mental health concerns in young children need early intervention, including identification of the causes and appropriate treatment.

Metaphor – Resilience Scale

- The experiences a child has during the early years – both positive and negative – can be thought of as two sides of a scale. If the negative experiences outweigh the positive, or vice versa, the scale will tip one way or the other.
 - On the positive side there may be supportive relationships, learning opportunities, family economic prosperity and good health, while on the other side negative factors like stress, violence, substance abuse and poverty may weigh down the scale.
- Resilience is when a child’s outcomes are tipped toward the positive. For children to thrive and grow into healthy, productive members of society, the scale must be tipped toward the positive -- even though there might be negative things loaded on the other side.
 - Family support programs seek to mitigate the negative weight on the scale while adding additional positive factors to tip the balance in the right direction.

- People, particularly children, have a remarkable capacity for resilience and overcoming adversity. The key is that the positive side of the scale outweighs the negative.
 - Yet there are limits to the ability of young children to recover from persistent maltreatment, trauma or emotional harm. This highlights the importance of prevention and timely identification and intervention in situations that put children at risk.

Metaphor – Toxic Stress

- Everyone, including very young children and babies, experience stress. Short periods of minor stress are healthy and normal. But when that stress is frequent or prolonged and young children lack supportive adult relationships that act as a protective buffer, that stress can be toxic to young children’s developing brains.
 - A young child’s biological response to toxic stress has long-lasting effects on the brain’s development, which can negatively impact school readiness, academic success and physical and mental health over a lifetime.
 - Experiencing toxic stress increases the likelihood of significant mental health problems that may present in early childhood or many years later.
- Challenging life circumstances, including poverty, violence, unsafe communities, or poor quality child care raise the risk of toxic stress and related serious mental health problems.
 - Young children who experience abuse or neglect, domestic violence or parental mental health and substance abuse problems are particularly vulnerable to the harmful impacts of toxic stress.
- Toxic stress helps us understand how adversity and inequality gets “under the skin” and built into an individual’s body, family and community, fueling and perpetuating a host of societal problems including the achievement gap, the dropout crisis, delinquency and poverty.