

The Core Story of Early Child Development

Prevent Child Abuse America sought to reframe its messaging to be more engaging based on research we commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute. With this research we established a “Core Story of Early Child Development” as the foundation of all organizational communication.

Using this story, we can create common messages that focus on the need to understand brain structure and the idea that supporting healthy child development cannot be on one person’s shoulders – it takes a community of engaged members to support the healthy development of children. Below are the key concepts to this core story as well as examples from *Resilience* to help flesh them out further.

The seven concepts to the core story

(1) Frameworks Concept: Prosperity

Healthy child development is important for both community and economic development. According to this view, society’s ability to build capacities that are developed during childhood becomes the basis of a prosperous and sustainable society.

Example from *Resilience*: Since training all teachers and students about ACEs and toxic stress, youth arrests for violent crime are down 66% in Washington, saving the state more than \$1.4 billion over a ten year period.

(2) Frameworks Concept: Brain Architecture

Much like the construction of a home, the architecture of the developing brain begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system. It continues with the incorporation of distinctive features that reflect increasing individuality over time. As it emerges, the quality of that “brain architecture” establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows.

Example from *Resilience*: Places like the Center for Youth Wellness focus on building resiliency skills at a young age so children have the sturdy brain architecture that leads to healthy development and a prosperous future.

(3) Frameworks Concept: Skill Begets Skill

Children’s brains are built “from the bottom up,” with simple circuits and skills providing the scaffolding for more advanced circuits and skills over time. According to this view, the circuits that underly the ability to put words together to speak phrases forms a foundation for the subsequent mastery of reading a written sentence in a book.

Example from *Resilience*: Children are not born fully formed, so we have the opportunity to build their brains through love and stable, nurturing relationships and environments. The presence of a stable, caring adult is one of the keys to building resiliency, according to Dr. Jack Shonkoff.

(4) Frameworks Concept: Serve and Return

Interactive influences of genes and experiences shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships with their parents and other caregivers in the community. Like the process of serve and return in games like tennis, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them, the child’s learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

Example from Resilience: Kids learn from people they trust, but more than that, kids learn - and grow - when connections are made between them and adults they can trust. With these connections, ideas and support can be shared back and forth between them, such as seen at Strong Elementary.

(5) Frameworks Concept: Can’t Do One Without the Other

Paying attention to young children’s emotional and social needs, as well as to their mastery of literacy and cognitive skills, has the maximum impact on child development. According to this view, because the brain is a highly integrated organ and its multiple functions operate in a richly coordinated fashion, you cannot focus on developing just one part of the child without paying equal attention to the other capacities.

Example from Resilience: At Strong Elementary School, the teachers and support staff not only teach children skills like arithmetic and language, but also focus on their mental health and development. This two-fold approach allows them to ensure their lessons about math and English are having the biggest impact without being impaired by issues like toxic stress.

(6) Frameworks Concept: Toxic Stress

Toxic Stress is the repeated over-exposure of a developing brain to stress hormones in early childhood and is associated with such things as extreme poverty or maltreatment. While positive stress is short-lived and tolerable stress is alleviated by the presence of stable relationships, toxic stress lasts longer. Without consistent, supportive relationships it can lead to lifelong problems with learning, behavior and physical and mental health.

Example from Resilience: Many of the children who Dr. Nadine Burke Harris saw before starting her Center for Youth Wellness were experiencing the affects of toxic stress due to various conditions in their lives. Dr. Burke Harris is trying to prevent that with her practice, but this task isn’t up to doctors alone.

(7) Frameworks Concept: Pay Now or Pay Later

Trying to change behavior or build new skills on the foundation of brain circuits that were not formed properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. It is better to focus on forming safe, stable nurturing relationships and environments early and preventing the effects of toxic stress because it is less costly and more effective than late-stage interventions.

Example from Resilience: Dr. David Johnson talks about the need to “be where the children are,” instead of waiting until later in life to confront physical and mental health problems. With this view, we **can either prevent toxic stress and intervene early**, or wait until it is much more costly and less effective to intervene when the children have become adults.

Excerpted: Facilitator’s Guide to Resilience - A discussion guide to accompany screenings of Resilience.