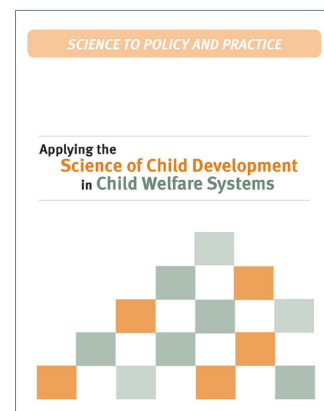


Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems

IN BRIEF

The healthy development of all children is essential for a thriving and prosperous community, and we now know a great deal about how child development works, as well as how to prevent and address problems. So, how can we use insights from cutting-edge science to improve the well-being and long-term life prospects of the most vulnerable children in our society? This is both a critical challenge and a powerful opportunity to affect the trajectories of the children and families served by the child welfare system: the public and private agencies, courts, foster parents, and volunteers who work to restore healthy development for children whose lives have been disrupted by adversity.



For the full *Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems* report, visit: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/child-welfare-systems/>

The Science of Child Development

Responsive relationships and positive experiences build strong brain architecture.

Positive experiences and responsive relationships with adults interact with genes to build the networks of fast, efficient neural connections that comprise sturdy brain architecture.

- Experiences affect the nature and quality of the brain's developing architecture by influencing which neural circuits are strengthened and which are "pruned" due to lack of use.
- Brain development is fueled by back and forth, "serve-and-return" interactions between children and the adults they rely on—parents and other caregivers, child care providers, educators, and more.

Adversity can disrupt children's development.

Learning to deal with stress is an important part of healthy development. But extreme, ongoing stress can have serious, damaging effects across the lifespan, resulting in significant costs to communities and nations for medical care, social programs, and more.

- When a child experiences extreme, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity (e.g., abuse, neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, family economic hardship) without adequate adult support, a toxic stress response can be triggered in the body and impair the child's development, with lifelong effects on learning, behavior, and health.
- Any child who experiences prolonged adversity is at risk for physical and mental health problems, and individuals who are more vulnerable to stress are even more likely to experience long-term impacts.

To provide a stable and supportive environment for children, adults need a set of core life skills.

Adults with strong core life skills have the right tools in place for getting and succeeding in a job, managing life's challenges, and providing positive experiences and responsive care to children. Extreme stress can hinder an adult's ability to use their core life skills—and to even develop them in the first place. But it's never too late. These skills can be learned and practiced well into adulthood.

- These core life skills—which work like an air traffic control system in the brain—include self-regulation and executive function, which underlie planning, focus, self-control, awareness, and flexibility.
- Helping adults build and use these core life skills is essential not only to their own success as parents and workers, but also to the development of the same capabilities by the children in their care.

Protective factors build resilience.

Resilience is crucial for children and adults to weather life's challenges, setbacks, and crises successfully. Providing the right conditions for healthy development from the start produces better outcomes (and is less expensive) than trying to fix problems later.

- The most common factor for children who demonstrate resilience is at least one stable, committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.
- Positive early experiences, support from responsive adults, and the early development of adaptive skills can counterbalance the consequences of adversity.

Applying Developmental Science to Child Welfare

An understanding of the science by child welfare system leaders, judges and court staff, caseworkers, kinship and foster parents, birth parents, and older youth involved with the system has the potential to open up new ways of examining and explaining what they encounter in their life and work and create new possibilities for action.

- **For parents and youth** involved with child welfare, understanding the science can help to reduce shame and stigma, as they view their own history in terms of coping with and adapting to toxic stress, rather than as a story of personal failure.
- **For child welfare staff and foster parents**, learning more about the effects of adversity on development commonly produces a mix of validation (e.g., “this helps me understand what I encounter every day”) and a new understanding of the sources of challenging behaviors.
- **For everyone** concerned, this knowledge can lead to fresh thinking about new ways of dealing with enduring problems. The following three principles can be used to apply the science to child welfare program and policy change and design, to improve practices and better serve children and adults.

1. Reduce Sources of Stress

Involvement with the child welfare system, with the risk that children will be separated from their family, is itself a source of extraordinary stress. Functioning well under these circumstances would challenge anyone, but the challenge is even greater for parents and children who have also experienced toxic stress, with its implications for affecting executive function and self-regulation. To ease the burden and ensure that interactions with the child welfare system do not add further stress to families, system leaders can:

- Work with other systems to help meet basic needs—safe housing, assistance for urgent unpaid bills, food, or crucial supplies like diapers.
- Make forms and processes simpler.
- Provide well-regulated environments—such as quiet, chaos-free visiting rooms and checklists for successful parent-child visits.
- Adequately support staff and supervisors who experience second-hand trauma through their work and who may be experiencing toxic stress in their own lives.

2. Support Responsive Relationships

Responsive relationships confer a double benefit: stimulating children’s brain development and providing buffering protection against toxic stress effects. Healthy relationships

are also essential for adults who need to make substantial changes in their own lives, as is typically the case for adults involved with the child welfare system.

- Hire and train for relationship-building skills.
- Give birth, foster, kin, and adoptive parents opportunities to build their responsive caregiving skills.
- Identify and strengthen important relationships in children’s and adults’ lives.
- Minimize the number of placements.
- Promote positive relationships between birth and foster parents.
- Provide children with continuity in important relationships even after placement or permanency changes.

3. Strengthen Core Life Skills

Core life skills can still be built, even into early adulthood. Foster parents and front-line staff have an important role to play in modeling these skills for children and in helping adults and children strengthen their own capabilities.

- Prioritize approaches that focus on active skill-building.
- Support skill-building in other systems—like employment training.
- Explore approaches that target executive function and self-regulation skills.
- Change how service plans are developed and recorded, focusing on steps and lots of opportunities for feedback.
- Experiment with coaching models instead of traditional casework approaches.

About the Distinctive Needs of Infants and Young Children

Science tells us that early childhood is the period during which the brain develops most rapidly and flexibly. This time presents critical opportunities to create a foundation for lifelong health and learning. In addition to the three principles above, child welfare policy and practice should:

- Promote frequent contact between birth parents and children in foster care.
- Promote strong connections between foster parents and babies.
- Ensure that infants and young children receive high-quality medical and mental health care, early intervention services, and early childhood education.