



Child Abuse Prevention Toolkit: Elements of the Core Story

FrameWorks has engaged in research to translate for lay publics the core scientific story about Early Childhood Development, as developed by our collaborators on the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. The following is an outline of the key elements of the “core story” of child development drawn from the framing research that we found were most effective in elevating support for child abuse and neglect prevention policies.

- **VALUE: PROSPERITY** The future prosperity of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. When a society invests wisely in children and families, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.
- **VALUE: INGENUITY** Innovative states and communities have been able to design high-quality programs for children. These programs have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children – but many places still don’t have access to these innovations.
- **WHAT DEVELOPS: BRAIN ARCHITECTURE** The basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.
- **HOW IT GETS BUILT: SERVE AND RETURN** The interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, 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.
- **HOW IT’S DISRUPTED: TOXIC STRESS** Chronic stressful conditions such as extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression – what scientists now call “toxic stress”

- can also disrupt the architecture of the developing brain. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation.
- **WIDENING THE LENS ON WHAT GETS BUILT: CAN'T DO ONE WITHOUT THE OTHERS** You can't focus on developing just one part of the child without paying equal attention to the other capacities. Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are tightly connected throughout the life course. Being an interactive organ, the brain utilizes some functions to enrich others. Language acquisition, for example, relies on hearing, the ability to differentiate sounds, and the ability to pay attention and engage in social interaction.
 - **WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES: PAY NOW or PAY LATER** Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. Later interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate experiences earlier in life. We know that children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression.
 - **WHAT ASSISTS WITH OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT: RETURN ON INVESTMENT** We can evaluate the efficiency of programs for young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don't improve child development and those that show real results.