Promoting Healthy Relationships for Healthy Development and Resilience

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York University &
The Hospital for Sick Children
PREVNet, Scientific Co-Director
Resilience refers to the capacity for adapting successfully in the context of adversity, typically inferred from evidence of successful adaptation following significant challenges or system disturbances.

The resilience of children and their families are intertwined and also linked to supports and systems beyond the family in community, culture, and the physical environment.

- Masten & Monn, 2015
What Fosters Development?
Nature and Nurture

Children experience their world as an environment of relationships.

• Relationships are important throughout development

• Relationships affect all aspects of development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral.

Adults are responsible for the quality of children’s relationships
What is Developing under the Skin?
Relationships Matter for Gene Expression

The “operating system” for genes is built over time through:

• Positive experiences, such as exposure to rich learning opportunities.. or

• Negative experiences, such as stressful life circumstances

• Experiences leave a chemical “signature” on genes, which can be temporary or permanent

• Affect how easily the genes are switched on or off.
The brain adapts to the experiences that a child has:

If the child has positive experiences, the brain adapts positively for learning, memory, and regulation.

If the child has stressful experiences, the brain adapts negatively, with too much or too little response to any stress.

As the brain develops, the gene expression adapts as well, leading to further positive or negative brain development.
Genes x Environment and Antisocial Behaviours

Michael Meaney et al. (McGill)

- Cross fostered rats bred to be highly aggressive. If raised by nurturing mothers, the aggressive gene was not expressed, even into the next generation.
- If rat pup placed back into a chaotic environment, aggressive gene changed back.
Children’s Experiences of Violence Impact their Genes

Exposure to violence: domestic violence, frequent bullying victimization, and physical maltreatment by an adult

Compared with those not exposed, children who experienced 2+ kinds of violence exposure showed significantly more telomere erosion between ages 5 and 10 (Shalev et al., 2012)
Children’s Experiences of Victimization Affect Their Brains

• Peer victimization linked to depressive symptoms
• Peer victimization, depressive symptoms and higher cortisol levels uniquely predicted memory deficits.

Relationships are the “active ingredients” of the environment’s influence on healthy human development.

Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child
Working paper #1. Young children develop in the environment of relationships
The Capacity of Relationships

• From a developmental perspective, it is important to consider whether the critical relationships in children’s lives have the capacity to promote their healthy development.

• Family Relationships

• Peer Relationships

• Relationships with teachers and others in the community
Canada on the World Stage
How do Canadian youth fare in terms of:
Reading
Arithmetic
Relationships?
Figure 3.2 Educational achievement by age 15
Average score in PISA tests of reading, maths and science literacy

Finland
Canada
Netherlands
Switzerland
Estonia
Germany
Belgium
Poland
Iceland
Norway
United Kingdom
Denmark
Slovenia
Ireland
France
United States
Hungary
Sweden
Czech Republic
Portugal
Slovakia
Austria
Latvia
Italy
Spain
Luxembourg
Lithuania
Greece
Romania

UNICEF, 2013
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Average of the three relationships scores</th>
<th>% of children who find classmates kind and helpful</th>
<th>% of children who find it easy to talk to mothers</th>
<th>% of children who find it easy to talk to fathers</th>
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UNICEF, 2013
Figure 4.3b Being bullied
% of children aged 11, 13 and 15 who report “being bullied at school at least once in the past couple of months”
Developmental Relationships

Shift from focus on assets/characteristics of an individual child to:

Developmental relationships – “help young people attain the psychological and social skills that are essential for success in education and in life” (Search Institute, 2015).

• Express care
• Challenge growth
• Provide support
• Share power
• Expand possibilities
What Do Halton Youths Report?

In general students’ assets measured in Halton increased from 2009/10 to 2012/13.

There are developmental trends in both the Halton and national data – with age, the connection and engagement of students tends to decrease.
Which assets drop the most during the transition from grade 7 to 10?

- School Engagement (↓11%)
- Family Support (↓12%)
- Caring Neighbourhood (↓12%)
- Caring School Climate (↓13%)
- Family Boundaries (↓18%)
- Positive Peer Influence (↓18%)
How can we promote and maintain healthy relationships for healthy development?
Promoting Healthy Relationships for Children and Youth


1. Self Awareness
2. Building Caring Connections
3. Coaching/Scaffolding
4. Social Architecture
5. Systems Change
Who Helps Families in this Critical Role?

Families need support too!

- Supports and resources from extended family and friends
- Economic security from employment or government support
- Safe and secure homes and community
- Health care, education, and social systems
- Cultural traditions
Breaking the Cycle: Early Intervention to Support Struggling Mothers and Children
Critical Elements

We came to fully understand that:

• BTC mothers have not experienced nurturing relationships, themselves.
• Trauma impacts on their capacity to mother
• BTC mothers have difficulty forming nurturing relationships, especially with their children
• As a result, we ensured that BTC is an organization-wide attachment-based program
What support do parents need?

Family therapy and education programs including family life education and parenting programs to help parents:

• establish routines,
• regulate their own emotions and behavior,
• monitor and discipline their children,
• reinforce positive behaviors in their children, etc.

Mothers also need functional support for housing, food, clothing, education or employment, transportation, health care, etc.
Family Relationships have the Potential to Mediate the Effects of Stress on Children

Children often experience stress within their families related to unemployment, chronic poverty, family violence, and other adverse circumstances.

Parents’ mood, marital interaction, and parenting capacity can mediate the effects of these stresses.
Protective processes moderate or buffer the effects of stressors within families. Many of these relate to the quality of relationships within the family including:

- family closeness and cohesion
- Open communication
- Family rituals and routines
- Hope conveyed through family beliefs and identity (Masten and Morr, 2015).
How do Families Contribute to Children’s Development?

Initial process is attachment and bonding which provide children with a sense of safety, security, being valued, and belonging.

When children are secure in their family relationships, they can begin to trust and explore, learn, socialize, and develop a sense of self.

Within secure attachment relationships, children learn to regulate their reactions to stress.
How do Families and Caregivers Support Children’s Regulation?

Children learn to regulate emotions and behaviours (and develop the connections in their brains) through expected patterns and routines.

- Expectations of please and thank you elicit regulation frequently in a day
- Meal and bedtime routines regulate physiological cycles of arousal, soothing, wake and sleep, and hunger, as well as health behaviours (teeth)
- Routines provide predictability, which is essential for children to develop a sense of security, safety and trust.
PREVNet: What can be enhanced to change Canada?

- Practice of all adults working with Canadian children and youth in all the places that they live, learn, play, and work.
- What’s missing – project with three NGOs.
- Baumrind’s model of parenting
Partnerships for Healthy Development of Children and Youth through Relationships

- Community of Practice – Researchers and graduate students with Canadian Red Cross, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and Scouts Canada
- Identified gap leader training
- Co-developed Healthy Relationships Training Module with facilitators guide, participants’ handout, & evaluation tool
- Integrated into training for leaders in partner organizations with immense reach
Good News!
Huge Potential for Change Through Relationships

Breaking the Cycle
• Program for substance using women and their children

SNAP (Stop Now and Plan)
• Program for aggressive children and their parents

Pine River Institute
• Program for addicted youth with mental health problems
Brain Changes Associated with Treatment Outcomes in Children with Externalizing Problems

Marc D. Lewis Ph.D.
Jim Stieben Ph.D.
HYPOTHESIS:

With treatment, we should see a decrease in activity in the ventral brain regions and an increase in activity in the dorsal brain regions implicated in emotional self-regulation and deliberate cognitive control!
Conclusions

Successful treatment with SNAP and parent management training (Stop Now And Plan Parenting) produce discernable changes in brain systems responsible for cognitive control and self-regulation.
Strategies to Promote Healthy Relationships

• Self-Awareness
• Building rapport
• Scaffolding
• Social Architecture
• Systems Change
Bullying:
A Serious Relationship Problem that Undermines Healthy Development
Bullying is a Relationship Problem that Requires Relationship Solutions

Child or youth’s needs, strengths, challenges

Child’s or youth’s relationships with family, peers, adults, & community

© Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network, 2007
Self Awareness is Key ...
Because Adults are “On Stage” in Children’s Lives
Self Awareness

- Adults who interact with youth where they live, learn, play and work have a critical role as models and coaches in their development.
- We need to be aware of our behaviours, intents, tone, and attitudes, as youth pick up on all of these.
- Challenge: to reflect on our use of power in relationships to ensure we are not using it aggressively.
- To reflect on how our behaviours are being received by youth in moment-to-moment interactions and to repair when we make mistakes.
Building Caring Connections

• We need caring connections with the children and youth we’re involved with
  – Being nonjudgmental
  – Building trust
  – Positive regard, acknowledging positives
  – Assessing the readiness, noting the next step – forming the opportunities
  – Assessing the relationship, building in appreciation for the good in everyone
## Characteristics of Healthy Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Respect</strong></th>
<th><strong>Trust</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Demonstrating that all people of all ages have intrinsic dignity and human rights  
• Appreciating differences | • Caring for one another  
• Following through on promises  
• Believing in one another |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Independence</strong></th>
<th><strong>Safety</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Being able to have time with yourself  
• Being able to spend time with friends & family  
• Having interests & activities that you do on your own | • No physical or emotional abuse  
• Feeling comfortable to talk about your thoughts and feelings |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Communication</strong></th>
<th><strong>Fun</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Being able to talk and listen to one another  
• Talking about problems and working on them together | • Having some of the same interests  
• Enjoying time you spend together  
• Sharing affection and admiration for each other |
Power in healthy relationships

- Healthy relationships are ones where a balance of power exists to support and guide the child or youth.
- Theory is easy to understand, practice is harder:
  - Be child-focused
  - Power vs. empowerment
  - Open communication lines
Coaching or Scaffolding
Scaffolding:
Individualized Supports for Students’ Social-Emotional Development

• Adults can scaffold for all children and youth by coaching and providing ever-changing supports to enable them to function a bit above their normal levels.
• Relationship scaffolding: supports child to behave and interact in socially advanced ways
• Can be both programmatic and moment-to-moment.
• Provided by all adults who interact with children and youth
Scaffolding for Children who are Victimized

Step 1: Determine Needs
- Protection
- Social skills
- Coping skills (fighting back not effective)
  - Peer skills
  - Domains of competence

Step 2: Search for Strategies
- Individual intervention, teacher mentor, peer mentors, parent support, join clubs or activities, opportunities to develop confidence, referral for professional help
Scaffolding for Children Who Bully

Step 1 - Determine Needs:
- **Empathy**
- Controlling emotions and behaviours
- Attitudes and moral understanding
- Social skills
- Positive leadership
- Alternative problem solving
- Withstanding peer pressure.

Step 2 – Search for Strategies:
- Individual intervention, teacher mentor, peer mentors, parent support, opportunities to develop positive leadership, referral for professional help.
Scaffolding for Peers: Discussions about a Disability or Difference

- Discuss plans with the child with a disability or difference and parents

Educate peers about the disability or difference:
- Highlight commonalities among all the students
- Explain the disability
- Include positive statements about the strengths and talents of the child with the exceptionality
- Discuss support strategies
Social Architecture
Social design – Creating dynamic health promoting social contexts for children and youth

Requires attention to social dynamics in peer relationships in all contexts

Adults can organize children’s social experiences to:

- Enhance positive peer interactions and opportunities
- Reduce probability of risky interactions and opportunities
Social Architecture to Promote Positive Relationships forVictimized Students

Social architecture can promote positive relationships by:

• Finding prosocial peers for them to work and play with
• Creating circles of support for vulnerable students
• Creating “buddy” systems
• Providing opportunities for these students to help out with younger students for whom they will be stars!
Social Architecture to Promote Positive Relationships for Students who Bully

Social architecture can promote positive relationships by:

• Reducing peer attention and reinforcement for bullying
• Creating circles of support for vulnerable students
• Creating “buddy” systems
• Help youths find ways to use power positively rather than negatively
  – Leadership opportunities, music, arts, sports, other talents, community service
Systems Change

Climate within a school or other setting is the sum of the relationships.
When self awareness, caring connections, scaffolding and social architecture are in place, they support positive relationships.
Code of behaviour and guiding policies set the tone and expectations for behaviour and relationships for all individuals within a setting.
Adolescence: A Challenge and Opportunity

Adolescence is a time of transition and the changes need to be considered in the context of relationships (environment). Thriving may differ by context. Tasks involve identity, autonomy, and interdependence.
Adolescence: Changing Brains

• Changing brains – pruning of neurons and connections that are not being used
• Changing period for sensitivity to rewards, risks, and threats (girls)

Individual differences –

• Children exposed to prolonged victimization had higher cortisol levels, which interfered with memory formation (Vaillancourt et al., 2011).
• Frequent substance use during this sensitive period linked to delayed or abnormal neurological maturation (Squeglia, et al., 2009).
Models of Interventions to Support Adolescents

How has an adolescent’s development has stalled in key areas, such as empathy and relationship skills?

McKinnon (2008) proposed a model of developmental immaturity for substance using youth with co-occurring mental health problems. Montana Academy promotes developmental maturity by providing a safe and healthy environment with supportive relationships and clear expectations for youth.
Pine River Institute

PRI aims to accelerate youths’ development in personal and relationship competencies. Works with troubled youth in wilderness and therapeutic residential school. Works with youths families to accelerate development and provide safe, caring, and supportive home environment.

• Relationships with staff, therapists, peers are cited as a critical mechanism of change.
Change is Possible ...

- I was on anti depressants for umm. Really close to three years, the highest dose. I thought I was going to be severely depressed my whole life... I just had all these medications and now I'm not on any medication. I'm actually genuinely happy. I enjoy living, I enjoy my life, I enjoy my relationships with my friends and my family. I have goals set for the future. And I'm usually in a calm, good mood. I enjoy life.
PREVNet
Why Promoting Relationships to Eliminate Violence?

Healthy Development Depends on Healthy Relationships
Strategies for Building Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships programs require:

• Awareness of potential problems
• Catch problem EARLY; ongoing support
• Communication among adults, between students and adults, between home and school, etc.
• Support for the most vulnerable children and youth.
• Self-Awareness, Building Caring Connections, Scaffolding, Social Architecture, and Systems Change,
“Bullying Prevention: What Parents Need to Know”

Dr. Wendy Craig, Dr. Debra Pepler and Dr. Joanne Cummings

An authoritative research-based look at bullying

Tells parents what they can do to prevent bullying at all age and school levels

Explores key myths such as:
- children grow out of bullying
- only a small number of children have problems with bullying
- reporting bullying will only make the problem worse

Available as an ebook and a paper book

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will go directly to PREVNet to help fund our bullying prevention activities

www.bullyingpreventionanswers.com
THANK YOU!

For Helping Bridge Research and Practice
to Promote Healthy Relationships for All Children and Youth

www.prevnet.ca