

Early enrichment

Making sure the care-giving environment is as equipped as it can be



“You and I all had a beginning and we’ll all have an end. We are finite biological creatures. And during that time, the function of our organs is mediated by our brain. Our brain controls our hearts, lungs, our guts and all the wonderful things we do all day: thinking, walking, talking, feeling.

“And your brain, when it is exposed to chaos, to pervasive threat, to mal-organizational experiences during development—i.e.,

abuse and neglect—it doesn’t develop normally and doesn’t function normally. And all of the body’s systems that are controlled by the brain and influenced by the brain are vulnerable. There’s more heart disease, there’s more cancer, more gastrointestinal disease. There’s more asthma in people who had childhood trauma.

“This is a tremendous public health problem independent of the impact it has on the emotional and behavioral functioning of children. Each child is born with tremendous potential that is either expressed or not expressed. And, there is something that is very important about our life span that gives us a clue why Healthy Families America is important.

“The brain is an amazingly fantastic, complex organ. Your brain is continually sensing information out there and creating your internal image of the world. That’s important because if your external world is chaos, your external world is threat, your external world is devoid of language, your external world is unpredictable, then your internal representations will reflect that.

“The first three years of life are absolutely essential for providing the experiences that are structured, predictable, nurturing and enriched in ways that allow the brain to organize in a healthy way. Absent those experiences, you can miss critical opportunities for healthy organization, and this is extremely difficult to reverse in some cases.

“If you miss those first three years and have extreme deprivation in the first three years, you have tremendous deficits to overcome and sometimes you can never do that. It’s because the brain develops in what we call a use-dependent way. These parts of the brain as they’re organizing in the first three years respond to pattern repetitive use.

“In the absence of vision, they don’t develop a normal visual system. In the absence of sound, they don’t develop a normal hearing capability. In the absence of spoken language, they will not develop

the capacity for complex symbolic representational language. In the absence of love, they will not develop the neuro-biological capacity to be empathic and attached.

“The child with a depressed mother, or a mother who is a victim of domestic violence, who is so preoccupied with her own existence ... will have a child who has an underdeveloped attachment capability. This child will be much less likely to volunteer, much less likely to vote, much less likely to share, much less likely to take money out of her own pocket to give to somebody else, much less likely to meet her potential in emotional and behavioral arenas.

“Our children are being raised in environments where they have far fewer social, emotional experiences than is optimal. The number of interactions that our children are growing up with from adults and from caring adults is diminishing. You have an isolated single mother who’s got three kids. HFA helps breakdown that social isolation. It helps increase the number of positive, nurturing, care-giving interactions the child will have, which is going to help build a healthier populace.

“This goes without saying, it’s a lot easier to put in the effort up front than to put it in at the back end. If you take care of children and help them have consistent, predictable, nurturing and enriched experiences early in their lives, they will become inoculated to future stresses. They will become resilient. You make children resilient by caring for them the first several years of their lives.

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“This of course is in sharp contrast to how our society allocates its resources. The capacity to modify and change the brain never goes away, but it diminishes the older you get. In contrast, the amount of resources that we dedicate as a society to try to change the brain, because that’s what mental health is, public education is changing the brain, juvenile justice is changing the brain. All of these programs, these billions and billions of dollars that we spend are mismatched to when the brain and the child are most easily influenced.

“If you want the biggest bang for your buck, you’ll focus on childhood and you’ll focus on things in childhood that are going to allow a child to have the best chance that they can have. And that means ... making sure that the care-giving environment, including their parents, is as equipped as it can be.”