



**Prevent Child Abuse
Minnesota**

Child Abuse Prevention Month Editorial/Letter to the Editor

Creating Peaceful and Prosperous Communities: Building Brain Architecture in Children

For any community to thrive it must have creative, capable, contributing members. As we work toward a prosperous future economy for Minnesota communities, where do we look to find those citizens who will contribute to the creation of this prosperity? We will look to today's children.

Child development is a foundation for community and economic development. As children grow, the basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Brains are built from the bottom up, one skill builds upon another.

The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows. Just like when building a house, getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later.

Experts are learning more and more about how interactions with other people effect the development of babies' brains. As it turns out, the healthy development of brain architecture depends a lot on a kind of interaction experts call "Serve and Return," which is based on an analogy from games like tennis and volleyball. "Serve and Return" happens when young children instinctively reach out for interaction, through babbling, facial expressions, words, gestures, cries, etc., and adults respond by doing the same kind of babbling, gesturing and so forth. Young children need many of these interactions per day, since they are so critical to development, and have effects on everything from the chemicals in the brain to physical structures and connections there.

When experiences are disruptive, neglectful, abusive, unstable, or otherwise stressful they increase the probability of poor outcomes. Toxic stress releases harmful chemicals in the brain that impair growth and make it harder for the brain to form healthy connections.

Minnesota's future prosperity depends on our ability to produce strong caring children who can lead tomorrow's communities. If we expect solid outputs we have to invest in solid inputs. The latest science says that nurturing relationships early in life literally build the architecture of maturing brains and establish the foundation for all future development. Unfortunately, for many kids, exposure to "toxic stress" can undermine that development.

Research has shown that certain key protective factors can reduce and eliminate "toxic stress." They include nurturing and attachment for children, knowledge of child development, parental resilience, social connections (friends!) and concrete supports in times of need. When we support policies that promote these protective factors, we as communities are a better prepared to nurture our children into contributing adults. Contact Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota at 1-800-CHILDREN or pcamn@pcamn.org for more information. [or substitute your local contact information here]

Source Material:

- Frameworks Institute www.frameworksinstitute.org
- Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina www.preventchildabusenc.org