

Helping Caregivers Promote Healthy Brain Development

Most scientists agree that children need positive relationships, rich learning opportunities, and safe environments to support their healthy brain development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). As a professional working with children and youth affected by maltreatment and with their parents or caregivers, you can help to improve children's chances for these positive experiences. Those opportunities exist at many points in the child welfare continuum, including prevention, family strengthening, and treatment.

Preventing Trauma

Professionals who work with families can help parents create safe and loving environments for their children to prevent abuse or neglect before it occurs. Efforts to support optimal brain development should start as early as pregnancy, when mother and child form their first attachments. The baby's prenatal development is more than simple maturation; it involves complex interactions among the mother, baby, prenatal environment, and early experiences. Because babies begin to develop all five senses before birth, even experiences in the womb can affect their development (Klein, Gilkerson, & Davis, 2008). You can help parents focus on their child's development before birth by teaching the mother to be aware of baby's movements and to embrace a positive lifestyle by avoiding alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes, eating nutritious meals, and

practicing good hygiene. You may also want to link families to services such as home visiting or Early Head Start programs designed for at-risk expectant families.²

After the baby is born, parents can continue to receive help as needed through family support programs such as parent education and home visiting. Recent prevention resource guides from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau (Child Welfare Information Gateway et al., 2011) encourage professionals to promote five protective factors that strengthen families and help prevent abuse and neglect, which serve to promote healthy brain development:

- Nurturing and attachment
- Knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development
- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Concrete supports for parents

Parents can also support their baby's brain development by understanding and practicing the strategies to promote healthy brain development described below.

Building Relationships

One of the most important factors in a child's development is the support of a parent or caregiver who gives consistent love and support. This importance is underscored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) effort to promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between

² Read about Early Head Start services and locate programs on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website: <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start>.

children and parents. Because young children experience the world through their relationships with parents and caregivers, those relationships are fundamental to the healthy development of the brain and of physical, emotional, social, behavioral, and intellectual capabilities (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009).

Researchers use the idea of “serve and return,” as in a game of tennis, to describe parent-child interactions. If a child attempts to interact with a parent (for instance, by babbling or making faces), but the parent does not respond appropriately, then the child’s learning process is incomplete (FrameWorks Institute, 2009). You can help the parent or caregiver recognize cues when the child wants to eat, sleep, play, or engage in other activities. Over time, the caregiver’s awareness of and response to the child’s needs will lead to easier interactions between the two and, ultimately, a stronger relationship.

Whether a child is at home or has been placed with a relative caregiver or foster parent, you should focus on ensuring the child has a secure relationship with at least one important person in his or her life. Training relative caregivers and foster parents on meeting the child’s emotional and behavioral needs can help them form a healthy relationship that supports the child’s growth. If the child must be placed in out-of-home care, strive to make the first placement the last. The importance of stable attachment relationships for young children’s healthy development cannot be overstated. In addition, if the child has been placed in out-of-home care, you can support parent-child attachment, when appropriate, by coordinating a visit soon after placement

and helping the parent maintain a schedule of frequent and extensive visits (Dicker, 2009).

Child Welfare Information Gateway partnered with the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, a service of the Children’s Bureau, to develop an online training on parent-child visits that may help workers enhance efforts toward family reunification. View the free training on the Information Gateway website: <http://training.childwelfare.gov>

Establishing Nurturing Routines

The predictability of a daily routine helps children understand the world is a safe place where they can learn and grow without fear. Routines also help establish and maintain an attachment between the child and caregiver (Hammond, 2010). You can help caregivers understand the importance of routines and create a plan that meets the child’s needs.

Children need to feel that their caregiver is in control. The caregiver should discuss any changes to the routine with the child before they occur and give the child age-appropriate opportunities to make decisions about daily activities (Perry, 2002). Routines can also help the caregiver establish clear and logical limits for inappropriate behavior and develop disciplinary strategies that take the child’s past experiences into consideration. When caring for a traumatized child, these rules should be applied consistently but fairly (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008).

Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth, Child Welfare Information Gateway August 2011, pp 2.