

Chapter Three — We Do Need To Save Each Child

Every child we save is a child we save.

Each child has his or her own life path and that path begins for each and every child with those first three years of life. Every single child who has a better and more reinforcing first three years is a child who has a much better chance of having a better life.

Each child who does not get that needed support in those key years is a child who is highly likely to face major challenges and significant difficulties at multiple levels — through absolutely no fault or blame for the child.

To use a card game analogy for our brain functions, we each need to play the cards we are dealt for our brain capacity — but the dealing process for the brain capacity for each of us doesn't happen at birth. The dealing process for each of us happens in those first years of life when hundreds of millions of neuron connections either happen or do not happen in each brain.

Those first key years of life are the years where the neuron connections in our brains are either used and retained or when neuron

connections are not used, and are doomed to be pruned from each child's brain.^{1,2,6,34,40,44}

Those first three years are key years for each and every child for brain development and growth. We need to help every child in every group and every setting build a strong brain in that period of time.

We can't abandon the children who do not get full brain exercise and support in those first key years. We also need to assist, protect, care for, and help the children who don't get the neuron connectivity support and reinforcement that was needed by each child in their first years of life.

We Can't Give Up On The Children Who Didn't Get Enough

Early Support

We very much need to do what we can to help those children who don't get enough early support for their brain building process to succeed in their lives. We should not give up on those children. Improvement is still possible and that should be our goal.

We need to help those children who fall behind in those years catch up to the extent that catching up can be done after those first key years. We

^{1,2,6,}
^{34,40,44}

also need to help those children who fall behind find pathways and approaches to life that can create good lives for each child.

We may need, for example, to find some ways of employing people who don't have the capacity to learn to read.

Some progress on brain issues can be made after those first key years. That progress should happen for each child when it can be done. At least 10 percent of the children who fall far behind in their third grade reading skills can, with support, catch up with other readers. We need to provide the right levels of support for those children who have fallen behind.

The truth is that we cannot and should not abandon those children who fall behind. But, the truth also is that we should work very hard to have as few children in the status of falling behind as we possibly can.

We need a future where very few children find themselves in that sad situation of falling behind so badly that reading is an unattainable achievement.

Major portions of our intellectual development happen after those first years. Our brains develop their self-regulatory functionalities and competencies. Logical and abstract thinking are both learned after that time. Memory skills and memory capacity building happens after that time.

We develop both judgment and wisdom after that time, and that is true for all of us regardless of what our brain strengthening experiences were in those first years.

We Need A Public Health Campaign To Build Strong Brains

Those first years are, however, extremely important.

Those consequences from those first years of brain exercise and activity for each child — both positive and negative impacts — last for entire lives. We all should be aware of that reality and we all should support doing what needs to be done to keep the negative impacts from happening for each child.

We need a public health campaign for us all that helps create both universal awareness and shared support from all of us for all children in those first three years.

We need to make sure that every new mother and every new father in America knows this basic biological science about the impact of those key months and years for their child.

We need to look at what we can do collectively to help all children and we need to focus our public policy thinking on improving both parenting

support and parenting education processes for those first key years in the context of helping every child succeed for life.

This is the right time for all of us to recognize the extremely important reality that we can make a huge difference for our children and that we can make that huge difference one child at a time.

We Can Help Each Child One At A Time

In addition to the public health approach that helps all children, we also should be making specific commitments to those goals of helping children in those first key years as parents, as families, and as community groups. We need groups of people to set goals to help children in their groups and communities one at a time. Every group and community should be part of that process. We need to help children from all groups collectively and individually, in each setting where we have children.

We need people in various groups to understand that even though it can be challenging to help all children in society or even in a setting simultaneously, we actually can help individual children in each family and we can help individual children in each group with focused efforts today.

The reality of functional brain development in each brain means that we can do that extremely important support process for children one child at a time.

This process of early brain development clearly happens individually for each child — one child at a time. Groups of people can, therefore, also help children now, one at a time, in a wide variety of ways that make sense and create real benefits for each child who is being helped and who can be logistically supported by each group.

Families in various settings can decide to make a family-based commitment to that process and those objectives.

A family might not be able to change the lives of all children in a community, but a family can decide to focus on children in each family and can succeed in changing the life of one child at a time in the context of each family by making sure each child in their family gets those key levels of support in those key years.

We Need To Help One Child At A Time With Direct, One-To-One Support

One child at a time is a key point and a key opportunity for us all to understand.

Brain growth is a very personal and very direct experience. Each brain has its own growth experience.

Each child needs the support of adults in those first three years to build strong levels of neuron connectivity in their brains. If we do not provide support to each child, then those very best and most effective developmental opportunities are lost forever for the child who doesn't get the support. Forever is a long time. That is a painful reality we all need to understand.

We also all need to understand that the support given to each child in those golden years doesn't need to be complicated. That basic package of support doesn't need to be high tech or complex. It doesn't need to involve multiple people and it doesn't need to trigger extensive external processes. That direct support for child brain development for each child can exist for each child at a very basic and direct level for each child. In fact, because each brain has its own path to growth and development, that support can and must exist and happen one child at a time.

The key to that brain strengthening process for each child isn't positive wishes, good intentions, and either wishful thinking or magical thinking. The key to building strong brains for each child is to figure out

how to create and achieve basic one-on-one interactions by one or more adults with each child we help, one at a time.

The key to success for a child is for each child to have someone who talks to the child and to have someone who interacts directly with the child in those basic ways that lead to building better-connected brains for each child.

Interactions are the key. People need to figure out how to be sure that basic and direct interactions happen for each child. A wide range of interactions by an adult with the child can all be positive interactions that have a beneficial input for the child. Each child needs consistent access to those direct interactions with adults in order to strengthen the child's brain.

Talking, reading, and interacting in positive ways with each baby all work to help children in those years build strong brains.

Simple talking — and very basic reading — and simply asking questions to each child and setting up even the most basic verbal interactions directly and consistently with each child can all build the brain strength in our children that our children need to succeed.

Talk/Read/Sing And Interact Directly With Each Child

Knowledge is power.

We need the people who are responsible for raising each child in each setting to understand which interactions with children fill the role and perform the function of building strong brains.

A number of programs are being created in various settings to encourage parents and families to do the right set of things for each child.

Those programs all tend to focus on the specific sets of interactions that can be used to create the best outcomes for each child.

Read/Talk/Sing is a label for one set of interactions that is being used in several settings to help make brains strong for children. Some settings label the child support approach “Talk, Read, Play, and Sing.”

The basic package of interactions that is being set up in each of those settings is basically the same for all of those kinds of programs. The people who advocate for those approaches and who are implementing them in various settings, all know that children need and benefit from direct adult interaction. The advocates know that the interaction with each child can be done in several basic ways that can all add benefit for the child.

Talk, Read, Sing and Play kinds of programs are all intended to teach parents how to interact with their children in useful and easy to do ways. Those programs encourage very basic interactions with each child and aim

to set those basic interactions up in ways that can be pleasant and reinforcing for both children and the adults involved.

The Interactions Can Be Beneficial For Adults And Children

Those direct and basic interactions can have a huge positive impact on children. Children in those first years who have adults talking to them, reading to them, and singing to them in a context of adults interacting directly with each child, benefit significantly and immediately from those encounters.

It seems too simple to be true, but those basic and simple interactions with a child can change the child's life. That entire interaction experience can be pleasant and enriching for both the children and for the adults who are doing the interactions.

All of those interactions can be fun and entertaining for both adults and children as well as enriching. They are essential for the child — because the consequences of not having those interactions is so negative and dire — and they can be very pleasant for the child because children find both comfort and joy from having those interactions with adults the children care for and trust.

All Children Need Basic Interactions

The key point for us all to remember is that all of our children need those basic levels of interactive stimulation with a caring and trusted adult in those first years. Children need basic levels of interaction with an adult — with a caring and trusted adult — in those first years in order to strengthen brains and to avoid toxic stress levels.²⁶

Children very much need the sense of protection, the security, and a sense of safety in their lives that prevents toxic stress syndrome. That sense of safety for a child can only come for a child from direct interaction with another safe, loving, and caring human being.

We need at least one trusted adult for each child for those first years of life in order to give our children both growth opportunities and a sense of security and safety.

Each Child Needs At Least One Trusted Adult

That trusted adult in most settings for most children tends to be the mother. Mothers are naturally and functionally in that role for most children. Mothers tend to love and be bonded with their children and mothers tend to have both attachment and loyalty to each child. Children, of course, tend to love and be bonded to their mothers.

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For a wide range of logistical, functional, and emotional reasons, the bulk of the most successful developmental and security-inducing situations for babies throughout human history have involved children and their mothers. We need to encourage and support mothers in those interactions with each child whenever we can help and support mothers in those functions and those roles.

We should not, however, assume that only mothers can meet those needs for our children.

Fathers Can Fill That Key Need As Well

Having the mother in that key role isn't functionally essential as the only interaction agent that can meet those needs for each child, however. Fathers can do that work as well and fathers can do all of those functions extremely well.

Many fathers read, talk, interact, sing, and care for their children and many children benefit in major ways when their fathers are in their lives in those key and direct ways.

Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relevant adults in the family or the community can also do those functions for children. All of those adult interactions support levels are good for children. The children benefit in

each case from that support given to the child by one or more caring adults in their world.

Some experts believe that children have even higher levels of personal security and development when there are clearly two or three supportive adults in each child's life.

Day Cares Can Be Key To The Process

High percentages of children spend major parts of their day in various day care centers and baby-sitting situations. Cities and communities make various levels of day care available to parents for their children.

We need those day care sites to all be helping each child with those key sets of issues.

We need day care settings where the caregivers read to each child and interact in ways that strengthen brain development for each child. Our homes and families are the first teachers for most children and our day care settings are the second set of teachers.

We need to make those resources part of the support process for each child.

We need the institutional group day cares, the family-centered in-home day cares, and the family and community based babysitting

approaches to each understand those basic sets of child development issues and to be part of the process.

What our children each need in those first key years is someone who cares about them who is performing all of the key brain exercise functions directly in a trusted way for each child.

Isolation Can Be Poison

A worst-case situation for a child can be for the child to be abused or even isolated. Isolation creates its own negative consequences.

A number of horror stories have resulted from orphanages in other countries that put their very young children in isolated white cribs and in confined and sterile settings in some very resource poor environments.³¹ The goal and intent of those orphanages was not to damage those children, but the damage that was done by those levels of isolation for each child lasted for the entire lives of those children.

We need to do the exact opposite of those isolated orphan experiences. We need loving, direct, interactive experiences for each child and we need those loving, interactive experiences to start at birth.

Those first years are key.

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Once those neuron connections happen — and once that sense of stress relevant security and functional stability is created for each child — then the future pathway for each child can be channeled to be the right path for each child and there is a high likelihood that the path that is created will last a lifetime.

The key for us as a society — and as parents, family members, and caregivers — is to focus on creating that path in a functional way for each child in those prime biological critical years. The key is to figure out for each child a “just-in-time” set of interactions and a set of situation-relevant support approaches that meets each child’s needs for that level of security and the needed levels of growth in those key years of each child’s life.

Children Who Miss That Opportunity Often Do Not Do Well

We need to be very honest with ourselves about that point and that process.

Children who miss that high leverage opportunity generally do not do well. There are scans of baby brains that show significantly smaller brains by age three for the children who are in isolated situations and whose brains do not get the exercise that is needed to have their brains grow.

Those smaller brains for those children are not smaller because of ethnicity, culture, or race. They are smaller because there was a direct and personal brain exercise deficit and a clear interaction deficit for each of those children that did not cause their brains to grow as well as the brains grew for the children who had more support in those key years.

We need each child to get the support each child needs. That can come from family, community, or even our official educational system extended to its farthest and most enlightened ends. The key point we need to focus on is how to be sure that someone on the relevant continuum of family and community that exists for each child meets the needs that exist for each child.

We Can Succeed Because We Know How To Succeed

We can succeed in doing this work because the basic needs for each child are not complex and because we know with some level of expertise exactly what those basic needs are.

We have that wisdom and we have that science. We have that skill set. We are capable of doing that work. We can do those specific functions. We can create those interactions. Each child needs those basic and simple direct interactions. Each child needs to have someone talking, asking questions,

explaining things, and having a shared interaction with the child about the world.

We need each child born in this country to have someone who can have those basic interactions with the child. The consequences of our failure to provide that support to each child who is not supported are both painful and real. The children with no interactions do not do well.

We need to address those issues for each child. The experience that is absolutely relevant to each child is the experience that happens directly for each child.

Each child we save is a child we save. Let's save each child.