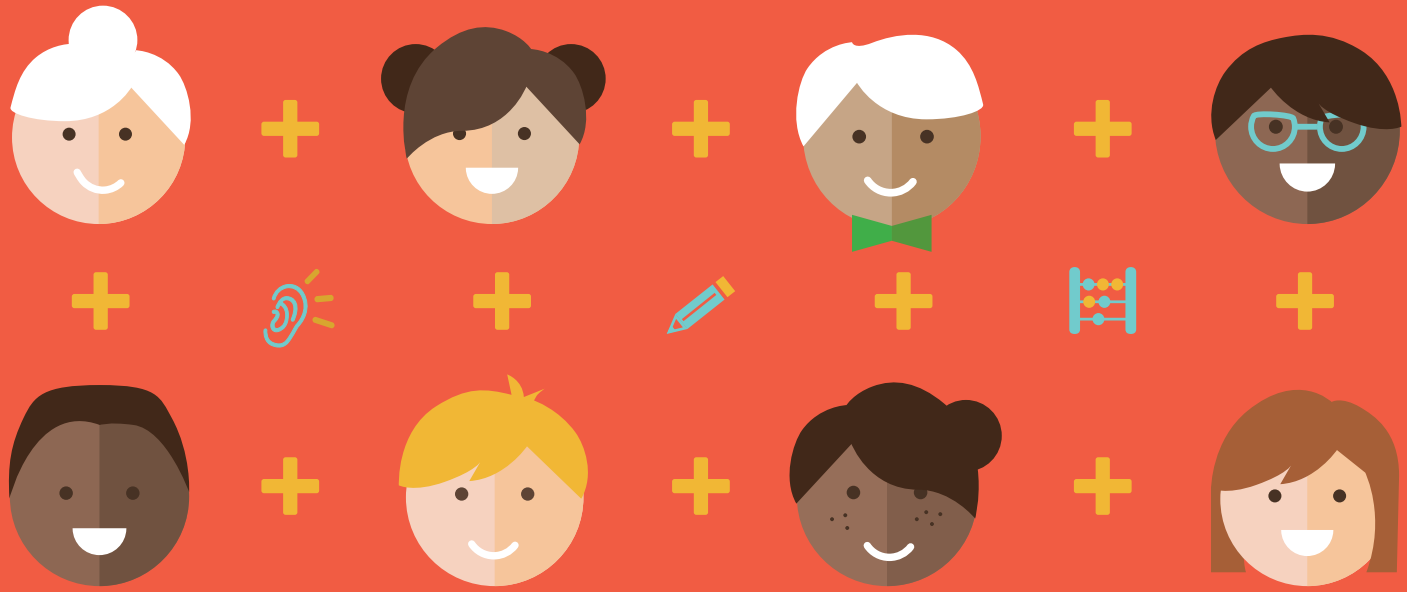


CONNECTIONS MATTER™

developing brain • relationships • community

NORTH CAROLINA

By Linda Chamberlain, PhD, MPH
For the Connections Matter community initiative www.connectionsmatternc.org

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT BRAIN BUILDER?

RELATIONSHIPS! That's why Connections Matter, whether we are thinking about our children or grandchildren, friends and family, our community or our own well-being.

In this booklet, you will learn how caring, supportive relationships are the key to developing healthy brains, getting through tough times and building a thriving community.

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS HAVING A TOUGH TIME?

We know more than ever before about what helps children and adults overcome tough times. It's all about the healing power of relationships. Science reveals that relationships help build healthy brains and communities.

Reaching out and showing a child or adult that you care can be a life-changer. And, that's how we make our communities stronger, one relationship at a time!

TO DO LIST:

- Share a meal with a parent or neighbor.
- Help someone with their bags at the grocery store.

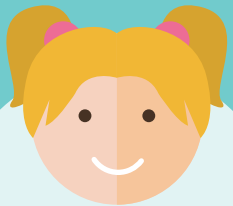
THE THING IS... IT'S ALL CONNECTED

TO DO LIST:

- [ ] Ask a coworker to grab coffee and talk.
- [ ] Connect with youth to ask their opinions about an issue in your community.

Whether you spend time with family or introduce yourself to someone you haven't met before, connecting with others leads to better health and outcomes for all of us.

Positive social connections help us cope and even thrive through tough times. In this booklet, you will find more examples of ways to connect—simple actions that are supported by lots of science!



700+ NEW brain connections are formed every second during early childhood

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OUR CHILDHOOD BRAIN IS THE FOUNDATION FOR OUR ADULT BRAIN

\+

Adult brains can add new connections

OUR AMAZING BRAIN

Environment and experience shape our brain.
Spending focused time with a child builds healthy brain connections. Positive relationships and new experiences create new brain connections at any age. These connections boost our health and happiness.

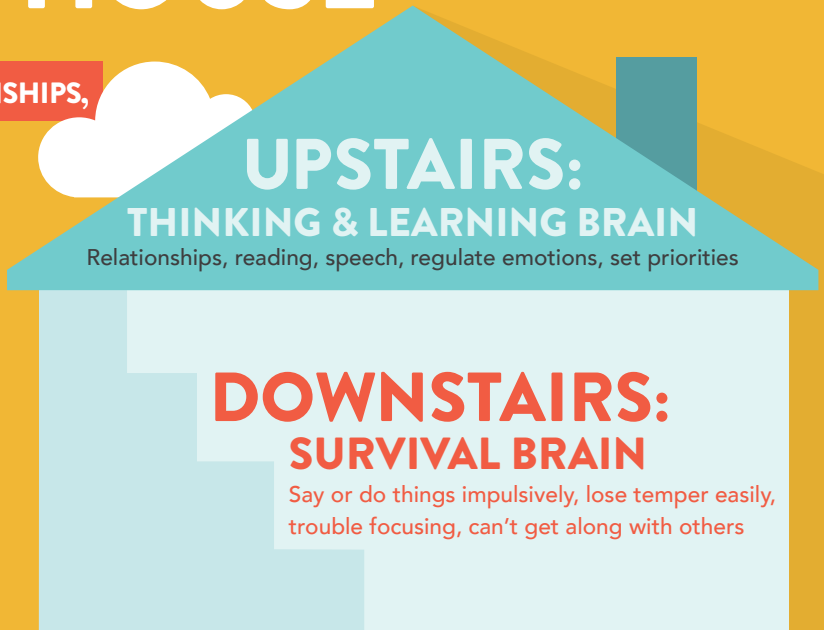
TO DO LIST:
Take a tech break to spend some face-to-face time with a child or adult. In-person, quality time is the best brain builder we know of!

THINK OF YOUR BRAIN AS A TWO-STORY HOUSE

THE UPSTAIRS BRAIN IS WHERE WE BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, solve problems, and think things through. Having caring relationships helps us move Upstairs.

The Downstairs brain focuses on survival with basic functions like breathing, heart rate and threat response. This more primitive part of the brain is quick to react on strong emotions.

We need to feel safe to think and learn. But stress can push us Downstairs where we are more likely to act impulsively without the help of the Upstairs brain.



See how "Brains are Built" at
www.albertafamilywellness.org

STRESS AND THE BRAIN

Learning to deal with stress is part of a child's normal development. However, daily stressors can pile up and, in the absence of supportive relationships, overwhelm us. Too much stress for too long can become "toxic" to a child's developing brain and reduce the number of new brain connections being made.

Everyone needs simple strategies to calm the brain and cope with stress. Taking slow, deep breaths and moving—even just standing up, stretching and sitting down again—help your brain reset and get back Upstairs!

TO DO LIST:

- Identify three people who are your "cheerleaders." These people are there to lift you up when you feel overwhelmed and to celebrate good times.

MAKE UP A GAME WITH A CHILD SUCH AS PRETENDING THAT YOU ARE BOTH BALLOONS.

Take a big, long breath in, puffing up your cheeks like a balloon, and then make funny noises as you let the air out slowly as if you are a balloon deflating.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma can be any experience that is overwhelming or feels threatening. Experiences such as serious illness or injury can cause trauma, as well as experiencing violence in the home, at school, or in the community.

What might be experienced as trauma is different for each person. Positive relationships and supportive community influence whether something will be experienced as trauma. Connecting with a child who is overwhelmed by stress and helping a struggling parent can prevent trauma from being passed on to the next generation.

TO DO LIST:

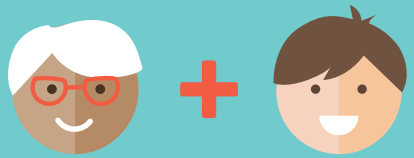
- Reach out to someone you trust to share what's happening when you feel stressed. Identify services that can provide support in your community by calling 211 for a helpline.
- Invite an upset child or teen to share their story and feelings. You will help them become more connected in their brain so they understand their emotions and make better decisions.

To learn more about how Iowa is addressing childhood trauma go to **www.iowaaces360.org**

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

The effects of trauma can linger or happen long after the traumatic event. A teacher, parent, coworker or friend may not understand why someone is reacting in a way that doesn't make sense. Without support, prolonged stress can lead to physical and mental health problems, and unhealthy ways of coping such as using alcohol and drugs.

Good news! Science shows that healthy relationships help us get through tough times and can prevent the effects of trauma.



RESILIENCE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Resilience is the ability to adapt, cope and thrive despite tough times. Relationships build resilience. Even one brief interaction at a place of worship, school, work, and in our neighborhood can make a difference.

TO DO LIST:

- Think about something you like to do and could share with others. Maybe you love gardening, are good at a sport or have a skill such as working with computers. Find an organization you could volunteer with that lets you share these skills with others.
- Mentoring is beneficial to the mentor as well as the person being mentored—that's how relationships work! Make some calls to find out how you can mentor a child, youth or parent in your community.

EVERYONE NEEDS CARING ADULTS IN THEIR LIFE. WHEN PARENTS CAN'T BE THERE, TEACHERS, COACHES, NEIGHBORS AND MENTORS CAN MAKE A **BIG DIFFERENCE.**

For more information about why relationships are important go to **www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu**

IT'S A PACKAGE DEAL: HELPING PARENTS HELPS KIDS

To help children, we need to reach out to the whole family and meet them where they are. When we connect with a parent or other caregiver, we are helping children too! For example, helping a parent pursue their education not only helps them increase the family income, it also increases their children's future income. The simple truth is that when we don't support caregivers and children together, someone gets left behind.

- [ ] Make a date with a caregiver and child to play at the park.

HEALING POWER

Relationships affect all aspects of a child's development. Research has found that the activities shown here, such as reading a story at bedtime and playing imaginary games, prevented asthma among children growing up in homes with domestic violence. This is significant since children in homes with violence are more likely to be diagnosed with asthma and other physical health problems.

SINGING SONGS

LOTS OF HUGS AND AFFECTION

HELPING CHILD AT MEALTIME AND BEDTIME

PLAYING IMAGINARY GAMES

OF RELATIONSHIPS

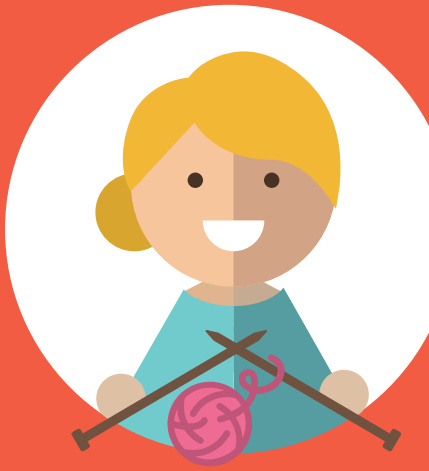
Relationships improve our quality of life in many ways—better physical and mental health, sharper minds and even feeling richer!

LESS DEPRESSION

FEEL RICHER

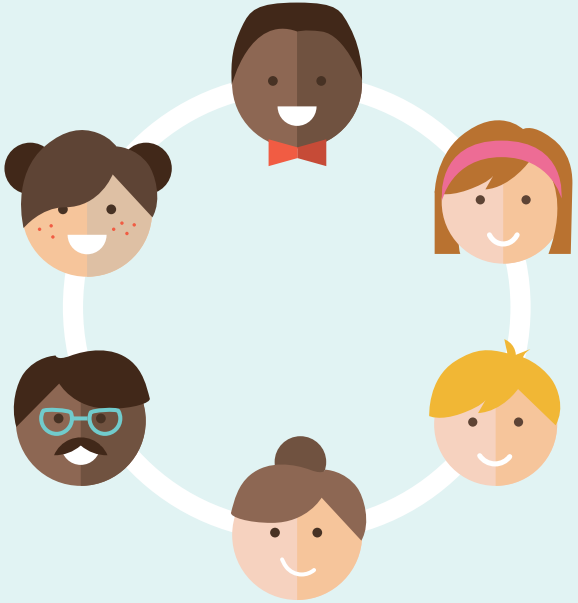
LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE

LESS LIKELY TO GET SICK



TO DO LIST:

- Imaginary play is food for the brain. Play dress-up with a child, or cover the dinner table with a sheet to create a fort or a castle.
- Positive imagery is healthy for adult brains too! Brainstorm with a friend or coworker about something you'd both like to do six months from now.



RELATIONSHIPS BUILD COMMUNITY

Communities built on caring relationships have:

- Less crime, violence, substance abuse and homelessness
- Better school success
- Better physical and mental health for everyone

In Washington State, communities have taken key steps, including community education and developing a common language, to understand the effects of trauma and the potential for healing. Leaders are working together to promote policies and practices that build relationships and resilience in their communities. These communities have demonstrated significant reductions in trauma and its consequences in the next generation.

WHAT'S YOUR CONNECTION?

Every day, we have new opportunities to make positive, supportive connections with people around us. Reaching out to family, friends and our community, we can build a healthier future for everyone.

Start today by writing your own "To Do List" with three ways you can make new connections!

TO DO LIST:

- Go to **www.connectionsmatternc.org** to set up a presentation at your school, business, a place of worship, club or any setting in your community.

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Learn more about your connection at
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