

# Promoting and Applying the Brain Story across Canada

## Summary

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) is looking for champions, innovators and agents-of-change across Canada who:

- Want to gain in-depth knowledge about the relationship between childhood adversity, brain development, and substance use and addiction; and
- Have ideas about spreading and embedding this knowledge in their work in order to change perceptions around addiction and improve associated policy and practice.

## The Project

**The Brain Story** is a story about how early childhood experiences shape our brains to influence lifetime health. Part of that story describes how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can influence risk for later physical and mental illness, including addiction. The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative has developed an online resource that presents Brain Story science to non-experts, including an in-depth certification course eligible for professional accreditation and continuing medical education.

**CCSA aims over the next three years** to promote awareness and understanding of Brain Story science across Canada, and to facilitate its application to policy, practice and public awareness through two ongoing activities:

1. **Promoting Brain Story certification** to spread foundational knowledge and advance professional development across sectors linked with child and family welfare and substance use; and
2. **Hosting the Brain Builders Lab**, a pair of national events that bring together champions, innovators and agents-of-change to develop initiatives in their communities that incorporate Brain Story learning. Attendees will be required to complete the Brain Story certification ahead of the event.

Event attendees will:

- **Access expertise**, including scientific expertise from leading researchers, as well as practical expertise from Brain Story course alumni successfully implementing projects that apply the science;
- **Engage and exchange ideas** with like-minded individuals from across the country and sectors;
- **Develop project plans** for their ideas through facilitated group work, and obtain feedback from national leaders and people with lived experience; and
- **Receive implementation support** from CCSA over the following two years.

The Brain Builders Lab is planned for March 2019 and will take place over two days in Ottawa. CCSA will provide room and board, but attendees will be responsible for their own travel. A follow-up event will reunite attendees after two years to assess the success and impact of their projects.

**Brain Story certification** is a prerequisite for attending the Brain Builders Lab. Certification entails 30 hours of self-paced online coursework, accessible at [www.albertafamilywellness.org/training](http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training). You **must** register using the following link (rather than through the course website) to be eligible for the Brain Builders Lab: <https://training.albertafamilywellness.org?KeyName=CCSAEnroll>.



**Target audiences** for this project span service providers and policy advisors in the health, education, social work, housing, justice, corrections, children and youth, and Indigenous sectors, including:

- Physicians, nurses, pre- and perinatal care providers
- Early childhood educators
- Social workers
- Mental health and addictions service providers
- Law enforcement and criminal justice professionals
- Families, parents and primary caretakers
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit community leaders and Elders
- Staff in child welfare organizations
- Staff in community and housing organizations
- Workplace health and wellness program administrators
- Media professionals
- People with lived and living experience

**We are looking for** innovative individuals who are interested in gaining in-depth scientific knowledge on the connections between adverse childhood experiences and addictions, and who are positioned to spread and apply this knowledge in their sphere of influence. If this sounds like you or someone you know, please contact Doris Payer by emailing [brainstory@ccsa.ca](mailto:brainstory@ccsa.ca).

## Background

Early childhood experiences are important contributors to health outcomes across the lifespan, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can contribute to substance use later in life. ACEs include abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, and they are surprisingly common. To understand the complexities of this relationship and to identify appropriate points for intervention, we need to understand how adverse childhood experiences can influence brain development and shape health outcomes. This foundational information is a key knowledge competency for anyone working with families, youth and people who use substances, yet it is not widely understood and few resources present this information in a form easily digestible by the public.

The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative addressed this gap by developing a suite of online educational resources, synthesizing decades of research that experts agree is useful for professionals, policy makers and citizens to understand. The resources include an online course providing free, in-depth training by more than 30 leading experts in neurobiology and mental health. Taking the course results in certification in Brain Story science and eligibility for professional and continuing education credits.

The present project aims to bring the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative resources to a national scale, allowing stakeholders across the country to access the science and apply it in their own communities. Completing the Brain Story certification will prepare Brain Builders Lab attendees to fully participate in the event's workshop sessions by ensuring a foundational knowledge base, while event activities will support the development of community-based initiatives that incorporate Brain Story learning.

The ultimate goal of this project is to build capacity to address childhood adversity and risk for substance use and addiction, and to increase awareness of substance use as a public health issue, reduce stigma, and change policy and practice accordingly.

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CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted counsel, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.

CCSA activities and products are made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views of CCSA do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada.