



The Brain Builders Lab was a joint initiative of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Its aim was to move Brain Story science, which links childhood trauma to later health outcomes, into action. Between 2019 and 2021, participants in the Brain Builders Lab undertook projects to spread and embed Brain Story science in their communities. This case study along with the others in the series provides practical advice on how to develop and implement projects, along with project impacts and lessons learned.

IWK Health

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Tonya Grant, Provincial Clinical Lead for Trauma-informed Care (within Nova Scotia Health), IWK Health
- Holly Murphy, Advanced Practice Leader for Trauma-informed Care, IWK Health

Location

- Halifax, Nova Scotia

Introduction and Project Goals

Based in Halifax, IWK Health provides primary and tertiary health care in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island through three programs: Children's Health; Mental Health and Addictions; and Women's and Newborn Health. In 2014, IWK received funds to develop and implement a trauma-informed care approach and trauma treatment services as part of their child and youth mental health and addictions services. IWK has since scaled up this commitment to become trauma-informed and is in the process of implementing it across all of IWK's programs and across all of the Nova Scotia Health (NSH) child and youth, and some adult, mental health and addiction services.

Both Tonya Grant and Holly Murphy joined the Brain Builders Lab because it aligned well with the recognition within IWK and the province's Department of Health and Wellness that trauma-informed care can improve patient, family and staff experiences and outcomes. The team wanted to use Brain Story science:

- To accelerate the adoption of trauma-informed principles across IWK/NSH staff and community partners;
- To align organizational and government policies with the science;
- To reduce the stigma associated with substance use and mental illness; and
- To create more support for broader cross-sectoral prevention efforts.



Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Broad awareness-raising: Given that both team members routinely provide training on trauma-informed care for IWK/NSH staff, they wove Brain Story science concepts into these regular sessions and encouraged participants to deepen their knowledge by enrolling in the Brain Story Certification Course provided by Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. To date, they have delivered these sessions to over 1,500 practitioners from across IWK and NSH, and to community partners. Tonya also guest lectures in Dalhousie University’s social work program and has shared key Brain Story science concepts and encouraged the students to enroll in the Brain Story Certification Course.

Tailored approach for the target audience: The team also created a new 60-minute session called, “Connections Between the Story of Brain Development, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resiliency.” The session outlines the intersecting relationships between brain science, childhood adversity and resilience, advocating that these interrelated concepts should play a key role in policy development in Nova Scotia. They facilitated this session for the education sector in November 2019 at a conference hosted by the Department of Education. They had planned to pilot a lunch-and-learn style presentation for IWK staff and community partners in the second year of their project, but this was postponed because of the pandemic. The session will be presented to the IWK trauma-informed care community partners in March 2022.

Outcomes and Impact

Shifting mental models: There has been significant interest and uptake of Brain Story science from IWK staff, physicians and community partners. The metaphors used to explain the science resonated deeply and this language is starting to permeate staff conversations about patients and practices. It is helping to create a common understanding of what trauma is, the impacts of trauma at the personal, interpersonal and societal levels, and the importance of using a trauma-informed approach in everyday practices, clinical programs and policy. Staff are still in the early stages of exploring how to apply the science within their services but these conversations are helping to increase compassion and reduce the stigma surrounding trauma and its outcomes such as substance use, mental health and other chronic health issues.

New partnerships: One unexpected result of engaging with the Brain Builders Lab is that a new partnership with Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services (NSECDIS) is emerging. The team had the opportunity to connect with fellow Brain Builder Camille Magsambol at NSECDIS and they are planning to work collaboratively to provide training and supports to the early childhood development sector and share strategies on further application of Brain Story science in different contexts going forward. NSECDIS staff have been invited to attend the IWK training “Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care and Well Being.”

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Aligning with existing goals and work increases buy-in. As Tonya and Holly already delivered staff training in trauma-informed care, they were able to quickly incorporate Brain Story science into their sessions. Since Brain Story science explains why trauma-informed care can help improve outcomes, the staff viewed it as a value-add rather than something new they had to attend to and implement. The addition of Brain Story science to the IWK’s efforts to become trauma-informed has helped to pave the way for staff to understand and buy in to the organization’s goals.



Capitalize on relationships. Tonya and Holly reflect that the most useful part of the Brain Builders Lab was being able to network with and learn from other projects in the Atlantic provinces. There are many shared strategies, initiatives and sometimes services across Atlantic Canada, and being able to connect with these individuals holds promise for supporting a regional approach as the work continues to unfold.

Create parallel strategies to tackle easy wins and more challenging work. The team’s strategy was to pursue low-hanging fruit in the first year of the project, such as adopting Brain Story science in their existing training sessions. The more challenging organizational and policy-related work targeting community partners, senior leaders and policy makers was intended for the second year of their project. However, the pandemic shifted organizational priorities. They reflected that holding their leadership meetings earlier on may have been beneficial.

Holly and Tonya remain committed to using Brain Story science to support trauma-informed care at IWK and NSH, and continue to offer their training in IWK/NSH and to community partners. They plan to follow their awareness-raising efforts by creating communities of practice for clinics and service delivery units to help staff explore and pilot ways of using Brain Story science in practice. They also plan to bring the knowledge to senior leadership at IWK and in the provincial government to spur interest in policy-based work in this area.

Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Trauma-Informed Care in the Maritimes](#)

