



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.

Regional Municipality of Durham

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Daniel Sparks, Research Coordinator, Chief Administrator's Office, Regional Municipality of Durham
- Kelly Bradstock, Program Manager, Children's Services Division, Regional Municipality of Durham

Location

- Regional Municipality of Durham, Ontario

Introduction and Project Goals

Kelly Bradstock and Daniel Sparks are both part of Durham's Best Start Network, which brings together representatives from the early learning community and children's services. Adverse childhood experiences are a significant factor for many of the families accessing early learning services in Durham Region, particularly services for children with special needs and developmental disabilities. Daniel and Kelly noticed that early learning and childcare professionals such as registered childhood educators and childcare assistants and aides had limited professional development opportunities focused on brain science, and these competed with other professional development opportunities. As a result, there continued to be a gap between the knowledge base and current practices in this sector.

The team's goal was therefore to make the Brain Story knowledge accessible to professionals in the early learning sector:

- To help educators better understand their role in supporting healthy child development;
- To help practitioners bridge the gap between Brain Story science and current practice so they can make a significant difference for all children, not just those at risk; and
- To eventually help professionalize the field by aligning practice with the evidence.



Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Raising awareness among networks to gain buy-in and community support: The team began by presenting the Brain Story to their colleagues on the research and knowledge translation sub-committee of Durham’s Best Start Network. The subcommittee consists of college and university representatives, early learning and childcare professionals, and partner organizations. They followed this with a similar presentation to the broader Best Start Network, which has representatives from a cross-section of organizations involved in children’s services, to raise awareness about the importance of the science and create broader buy-in for their project. The response was positive and helped open new channels to share the knowledge in the community.

Targeted awareness raising: Key early targets for Kelly and Daniel’s efforts included behaviour consultants, who provide supports for children with special needs and are positioned to reinforce Brain Story concepts in their work with other agencies. This group was encouraged to enrol in the Brain Story Certification Course as a tool for their professional development. The team was also able to reach teachers and staff within the Durham District School Board through a connection with one of the administrators, who facilitated a meeting with the board’s superintendent and a presentation at one of the school board’s professional development days.

Tailoring training to the target audience: The early learning community is already inundated with information, and time for professional development is limited, so Kelly and Daniel put a lot of thought into how to both engage their audience in Brain Story science and gain support for applying it in practice. They designed a workshop that focused on the relevance of the knowledge for the field and the practical realities of the work. Capitalizing on an existing interest in reflective practice, they built in opportunities for participant reflection, discussion and sharing during the workshop, including through the Brain Architecture Game. This approach helps participants see themselves in the work and will help solicit practice-based examples that can inform future resources. The workshop was originally designed to be provided in person, but the onset of the pandemic required the team to pivot to virtual delivery.

Outcomes and Impact

Organizational and practice change: All 22 behaviour consultants in Durham Region completed the Brain Story Certification Course, and all new behaviour consultants are now required to complete it as part of training. Within the team, more conversations and resources now focus on trauma-informed practice, trauma-based therapy, and the brain science of intergenerational trauma and racism. Having an increased understanding of brain science has improved their ability to advocate for more comprehensive services for children and families, even if funding for those services is constrained. The team is also fielding an increased number of requests for education and resources on trauma-informed practice from community organizations.

New resources: Kelly has built brain science concepts into a federally funded simulated learning program for early learning and childcare professionals. The simulations provide educators with experiential learning opportunities as they work through a strategy to resolve a challenging situation with a child or caregiver. While not part of the original project plan,

“[I liked learning] how trauma can affect the brain but more importantly that caregivers can mitigate the long-term effects of trauma with early intervention. It really highlights how key those relationships are in childcare and how they can actually offset some of the impact of the child's homelife.”

- Presentation attendee



including brain science concepts added value to the final products, an outcome that was shared with the funder.

Shifting mental models: Within the broader community, the work has created a common language and understanding around community, family and individual well-being. Attitudes and beliefs about what matters in child development are shifting and there is a greater understanding of the child growing within a context, and that influencing that context can help support better outcomes. In addition, Brain Story language is becoming more prominent across sectors, allowing for better communication and a recognition that different sectors share joint goals.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Favourable policy and organizational environments support change. The Regional Municipality of Durham has a focus on evidence-based decision making and practice, so Kelly and Daniel’s project fit well within the existing framework and was not seen as an add-on. They also had strong and effective leadership support from the municipality, ensuring they had dedicated time to pursue their goals.


“I think the [early learning and childcare] community would benefit from learning about the [adverse childhood experiences] module. I think that would really help to potentially change the way educators look at behaviour.”
- Presentation attendee

There is no “perfect” time to make change. The team’s biggest challenge was keeping the work prioritized in their own regular workloads, and reduced capacity at times set back their timelines. They also hesitated to push out some of their work during the pandemic for fear that it would make some people feel overwhelmed. In hindsight, they reflected that there is never a perfect time to introduce new concepts and a potential new way of doing things. It just requires more careful consideration of people’s context and a mindful approach.

Kelly and Daniel now plan to pilot their virtual workshops and obtain feedback on next steps from the participants. They are strong champions for the science and are committed to looking for new opportunities to embed Brain Story science within the Regional Municipality of Durham. They are also reporting to the Best Start Network, which will keep them focused and accountable in moving forward.

Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Municipal Strategies for the Early Learning Sector](#)



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