



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.

Valley Community Services Society

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Tania Wiklund, Program Manager, Valley Community Services Society

Location

- Creston, British Columbia

Introduction and Project Goals

Valley Community Services Society (VCSS) in Creston, British Columbia, is a non-profit agency consisting of approximately 30 programs that provide trauma-informed services from pregnancy to older adulthood. Tania Wiklund heard about the Brain Builders Lab through her involvement with a community committee for youth mental health and substance use disorders. She saw the lab as a perfect opportunity to integrate Brain Story science into her own organization as well as in the broader community.

Specifically, her goals were:

- To orient the staff at VCSS to this foundational evidence base and its relevance to individual practice and programs;
- To create a common language and understanding in the community to help break down traditionally siloed systems; and
- To create opportunities for cross-sector collaboration and strengthen the continuum of services to improve child and family outcomes in her region.

Select services provided by VCSS

- Adult community counselling
- Stopping the violence counselling for women
- Youth counselling
- Child protection supports
- Sexual abuse intervention services
- Child and family drop-in programs

Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Recruitment of agency champions: Tania shared information within VCSS about Brain Story science through regular staff and team meetings, including playing the Brain Architecture Game. She was able to recruit several supervisors as additional champions who took the information back to direct



service providers and encouraged them to enroll in the Brain Story Certification Course from Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. The information was well-received and viewed as a good fit since it helped staff understand why and how a trauma-informed approach could benefit their clients.

Development of resources and digital communications: Early on in her process, Tania developed a toolkit of resources related to the Brain Story that she pushed out through email to external partners and stakeholders and her own network. She also included a link to the Brain Story Certification Course in her email signature as a passive strategy to promote the Brain Story to anyone she contacted electronically. She continued to add resources to the toolkit as awareness spread and requests for more information came in.

Targeted awareness raising among networks: Tania focused her community awareness efforts on the education system as it tends to provide a receptive audience and she had good relationships with a few local schools. To gain support for the work, she gave a presentation on Brain Story science to staff at a school she knew was interested in becoming more trauma informed. She also screened the documentary “[Paper Tigers](#)” at three area schools, as well as the area high school, where knowledge about the impact of adverse childhood experiences was recognized but siloed within the healthcare team. The information in the film, which focuses on a new trauma-sensitive high school program, resonated deeply with teaching staff and there was significant interest in how to apply the science in the classroom. The local Indigenous school also expressed interest in using the Brain Story after Tania shared the knowledge from it at a staff meeting.

Outcomes and Impact

Organizational change: The Brain Story Certification Course is now a requirement for VCSS staff in some programs and recommended training for all agency staff. It is a preferred qualification for all new hires in the outreach and counselling positions. Brain Story language has been included on VCSS’ website and communications resources to better explain their work to clients, partners and stakeholders. The science has helped clarify the agency’s philosophy to staff by providing clear evidence for the importance of being trauma-informed. It has also helped raise the profile and reputation of VCSS as a trusted source of evidence-based information and advice in the community and has helped strengthen the relationships VCSS has within the education system.

Shifting mental models: At VCSS, staff attitudes and beliefs about clients are changing and there is reduced stigma around clients with substance use disorders. At the local schools, teacher attitudes and beliefs about students have also started to shift, which will ultimately help them to better support students in the classroom.

Program and practice change: One VCSS program now uses the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire with clients. Several more share the information with clients to help them understand their past and motivate and empower them to address their issues. Within schools, there is more focus on building relationships with students and understanding the motivation behind student behaviours rather than immediately referring students for disciplinary action.

New partnerships and relationships: A new partnership has emerged between VCSS and the Indigenous school that will provide additional supports for their student body. By linking with a school that already had a youth medical hub, Tania has been able to create new relationships within the healthcare sector that she plans to leverage in future work.



Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Aligning with trauma-informed organizational goals helps quickly gain traction. The Brain Story was seen by VCSS staff as a value-add that could deepen their understanding of trauma-informed practice rather than something new or extra that they had to pay attention to. This existing connection helped spur significant organizational, programmatic and practice shifts in the agency.

Recruit new (and the right) champions for the work. Apart from finding new champions within VCSS, Tania was able to find strong champions in the education system who helped drive adoption of brain science within schools. Having a young and progressive staff who were open to new ideas and eager to engage with and apply the knowledge in the classroom was also a factor in her success. However, Tania had difficulty getting administration buy-in from two schools, and in retrospect would have brought all administrators together first to discuss the project and how best to engage staff.

Capitalize on your relationships. Tania leveraged her strongest relationships within the school system to help catalyze interest and engagement from the education sector. As word about her activities spread, other schools came on board. She built new relationships within health care that she plans to capitalize on in future work. Her biggest challenge was engaging interest from the justice sector, including child protection services, where she did not have strong relationships to draw on and was unable to build these over the course of the project.

Prioritize evaluation to better understand your impact. In hindsight, Tania would have liked to have had a better measure of baseline knowledge before she started her awareness-raising efforts. The surveys she sent out after her presentations had poor response rates, in part due to workload amid the COVID 19 pandemic. In future, she plans to have paper and pencil versions available at the start of each session to allow participants to provide feedback during instead of after the event.

Tania plans to continue and expand her work in schools by providing more documentary screenings, bringing the information to parent advisory councils and providing additional training at individual schools. She has begun reaching out to healthcare providers and is also developing a plan to engage the RCMP with the hope of developing a champion for the science within law enforcement.

