



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.

## York Region Public Health

### Brain Builders Lab Case Study

#### Project Team (all from York Region Public Health)

- Valerie D'Paiva, Manager, Child and Family Health Division
- Nilusha Jiwani-Ebrahim, Manager, Child and Family Health Division
- Julia Roitenberg, Director, Chief Nursing Officer
- Nadine Bell, Supervisor, Child and Family Health Division

#### Location

- York Region, Ontario

### Introduction and Project Goals

York Region Public Health delivers a range of programs and services to prevent disease, protect health and safety, and promote healthy lifestyles and environments. When the team became aware of the Brain Story, they realized that this knowledge was a key missing piece across many sectors and service providers. It provides a foundational evidence base showing why public health and prevention efforts are critical to individual and community health and well-being, and can potentially help all human serving sectors align and organize around their common goals. The added focus on building resilience at any stage of life also helps engage those working with adults with the hopeful message that it is never too late to heal past trauma and improve outcomes.

The goals of the York Region Public Health team in joining the Brain Builders Lab were:

- To build the knowledge and capacity of Child and Family Health (CFH) staff to apply Brain Story concepts in their interactions with clients;
- To increase awareness of the knowledge among internal and external partners across the continuum of care to support cross-sector approaches to social issues; and
- To help York Region residents understand the science so that they could become active participants in supporting their own health and that of their families.



## Knowledge Mobilization Activities

**Securing leadership buy-in:** To create buy-in to use Brain Story science as a foundation for programming within CFH, they oriented management to the knowledge and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative Brain Story Certification Course (BSCC) as a potential staff development tool that could help move the concepts into practice. There was considerable interest and the team began sharing the information with other committees and groups within CFH.

**Staff awareness-raising:** The team engaged the groups that would most likely see the fit first, such as the Mental Health Treatment and Resilience Committees and the school team. In addition, Valerie is a trainer in CFH for resilience skills and trauma-informed care and she was able to weave Brain Story science into her regular training materials. The team also secured buy-in to launch the knowledge at an internal professional development day for all CFH staff.

**Hands-on learning and discussion:** To support knowledge application, Valerie launched a community of practice for CFH staff who had completed the BSCC. Those who attended demonstrated a high degree of motivation for brainstorming new ideas for service delivery.

**Community awareness raising:** To solicit interest in applying the knowledge more broadly, the team knew they needed to engage their community partners. They secured a grant from the Ontario Brain Institute to help them improve their presentation materials and to support a community event and the CFH staff professional development day. The community event attracted participants from more than 20 community agencies and generated considerable excitement, but the pandemic has limited the team's ability to follow up with participants.

**Targeted awareness raising:** One of the key groups the team wanted to influence was early childhood educators. Many individuals who work in this sector do not receive extensive training, and likely no formal training on brain science. The team developed a training session that included Brain Story concepts and group discussion about how these concepts could be applied in childcare.

## Outcomes and Impact

**Organizational change:** Many teams within CFH are either mandating or strongly encouraging staff to take the BSCC. Managers are helping to create accountability by asking staff to include at least one goal related to Brain Story science in their performance evaluations. The housing team developed new recommendations to prioritize individuals and families with children for housing. York Region Public Health has now approved the roll out of trauma-informed care training to all staff, not just those in the CFH division.

### Participants at events:

- Over 150 CHF staff
- 120 staff from community agencies, including school boards, mental health and addiction treatment, policing and physicians

**Program and practice change:** CFH reallocated some funds to support revising its screening and trauma-informed practice guidelines to align more closely with Brain Story concepts. To accelerate practice change, the team created an internal Brain Story strategy logic model that illustrates how applying Brain Story science can influence child and family outcomes. They also created a new referral pathway for perinatal mental health that included additional screening. While many staff are exploring how to apply the Brain Story in practice, some have started sharing the concepts with clients.

**Shifting mental models:** Overall, the broad uptake within CFH is starting to create shifts in staff attitudes, beliefs and understanding of their clients. Brain Story concepts are becoming part of regular conversations as the metaphors have given staff a new, common language to support interprofessional work. Many staff have shifted to more of a prevention mindset and a different



understanding of their own role in supporting clients. There is a stronger focus on providing ongoing supports that build client coping skills rather than short-term, in-the-moment, crisis management that results in clients returning every time they face a challenge.

**Cross-sectoral engagement:** The community event resulted in a number of requests for additional presentations on Brain Story science, and for CFH's resilience and trauma-informed care training. Valerie was invited to speak about the work in York Region at Health Nexus' Best Start Conference in Toronto in March 2020. This conference was intended to help launch an Ontario-wide strategy to mobilize Brain Story science across sectors, but the work has been disrupted due to the pandemic.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

**Aligning with organizational culture and goals makes for swift uptake and buy-in.** CFH already had an interest in becoming more trauma-informed, so Brain Story science was seen as a way of facilitating this goal. However, the knowledge also resonated with leadership and staff on both a personal and professional level and helped to elevate and prioritize the need for this work, for example, through reallocation of resources.

**Institutionalizing the knowledge and providing sense-making opportunities creates sustainability.** One of the biggest drivers of sustainability for the work will be the mandated staff training and tying the knowledge to staff performance appraisals. The additional staff resources and community of practice will help accelerate integration of the knowledge into day-to-day practice.

**Create new champions to support community spread.** The number of community organizations that followed up with requests for more training indicates that appetite for the knowledge in the community is high. Even though the pandemic limited the team's work, there is great potential to strengthen partnerships and align service delivery across agencies and sectors in York Region.

Once pandemic restrictions ease, the team plans to create additional training, tools and communities of practice. They would like CFH to achieve a Best Practice Spotlight Organization designation from the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario and integrate a variety of best practice guidelines including the best practice guideline for person- and family-centred care. Within the community, they plan to continue delivering Brain Story science presentations and resilience and trauma-informed care training to build awareness of the knowledge across sectors and advocate that this becomes a priority at all levels of government and across the tables they engage in.

### Follow up presentation requests from community partners:

- York Public Health teams
- Public Health Ontario's Healthy Growth and Development Provincial Network
- EarlyON centres
- Catholic and French school boards
- Childcare agencies
- Early intervention and children's mental health agencies
- University of Ontario Institute of Technology
- General public

## Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Regional Strategies for Promotion, Prevention and Resilience-Building](#)



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