



Child Abuse Prevention Toolkit: Talking Points

The following are talking points to use as a reminder during media interviews or when writing. Specific policy proposals can be introduced after the value and appropriate model.

The future prosperity of our community/state/nation depends on our ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. Innovative states and communities have been able to design high-quality programs to reduce and prevent child abuse and neglect. These programs have created significant long-term improvements for children, and are the kind of innovations we need. [Value: *INGENUITY*]

We now know that the basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. When you are building a house, you go step by step, beginning with a strong foundation. Just like a house, a strong foundation in children's early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. [*BRAIN ARCHITECTURE*]

We also know that all parts of a child need attention – cognitive, emotional and social capacities affect each other in the developing brain. Interventions and supports for children and families must attend to the development of all three of these domains. [*CAN'T DO ONE WITHOUT THE OTHERS*]

We know how to create stronger foundations for children's development. One active ingredient is the "serve and return" relationships that children have with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction. When adults respond by mirroring back those interactions in a consistent way, the child's learning process is complete. When children are in environments where this process is disrupted, their brain development is harmed. [*SERVE AND RETURN*]

Some stress is inevitable in life. Children experience *positive* stress, such as successfully meeting the challenge of learning a new skill. Children may also experience difficult situations such as a family move, death of a loved one, or other challenging circumstances. When this stress is buffered through an environment of supportive relationships, this stress becomes *tolerable* and less damaging to children's development.

Experiencing a chronic stressful condition such as neglect or abuse is what scientists call *toxic* stress, and can disrupt developing brain architecture. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in

learning, memory and self-regulation. Children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression. *[TOXIC STRESS]*

When we don't attend to these important aspects of development now, there are serious consequences later. Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. This means we need to invest in the kinds of programs that prevent child abuse and neglect. Foster care, clinical treatment and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate experiences earlier in life. *[PAY NOW OR PAY LATER]*

We can evaluate the efficiency of child abuse and neglect prevention programs by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don't improve child development and those that show real results. When we invest in the kinds of programs that actually support healthy brain development in children, we will see the results in a more prosperous future. When we make investments in children and families, the next generation will pay it back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. *[RETURN ON INVESTMENT]*