

Spread the Word



When you need ...

... an explanation of what the child development process is and how mental health relates.

Try this frame:

The *Brain Architecture* metaphor: Use the *Architecture* comparison to explain how the brain, and by extension, children’s mental health, develops: in a step-by-step process that relies on a sturdy foundation.

Example: Like a house, children’s brains get built in a process that begins before birth and continues into early adulthood. The earliest years are a critical construction phase, and it’s important to lay a strong foundation then for everything that comes after.

How to use it:

- Incorporate the language of “construction” – building, support, foundation, blueprint, quality materials – to describe what happens during the development process.
- Explain that experiences build brains and shape children’s wellbeing and mental health.

When you need ...

... to define early attachment.

... to explain the importance of supportive interactions with a caregiver.

... to talk about the role of family-centred policies in supporting brain development.

Try this frame:

The *Serve and Return* metaphor: Compare early attachment to a game of tennis or soccer to explain how responsive, back-and-forth interactions support the brain-building process and the development of children’s neural pathways.

Example: “Serve-and-return” interactions between adults and young children build strong brains: when a baby “serves” by cooing or babbling and adults “return” the serve, that supports baby’s neural development. Parental stress can interrupt this bonding process, so policies that support parents’ mental health are great for babies’ mental health, too!



How to use it:

- Stress that this game takes two players: parents need to be available, physically and emotionally, to participate.
- Offer concrete examples of how parents and other caregivers assist children’s brain development through “serve-and-return” interactions, e.g., by playing with children or looking at books together.
- Explain how structural factors – a lack of parental leave or flexible work schedules, inadequate access to mental health care, poverty, etc. – can disrupt healthy serve-and-return interactions, in order to show how family policies influence children’s mental health.

When you need ...

... a strategy for connecting the interaction of genes, environments and experiences to mental health outcomes.

Try this frame:

The *Outcomes Scale* metaphor: Compare child development to a scale that can tip towards negative or positive outcomes, depending on what kinds of weights (environments and experiences) are stacked or offloaded.

Example: Child development is like tipping a scale in one direction. We can influence children’s ability to withstand adversity and stress by *loading up their development scale with positive environments and experiences* and offloading negative ones.

How to use it:

- Emphasise that promoting positive mental health can tip children’s development in a positive direction.
- Explain negative or positive experiences and environments as the weights that change a scale’s direction. Describe how those weights can be added or removed from the scale through policies and practices.
- Point out that a heavy load of positive environmental factors and experiences will make it harder to change a scale’s direction – stacking these positive factors builds children’s resiliency against negative experiences.

When you need ...

... a strategy for emphasising the role that chronic stress, trauma, or adversity have on children’s wellbeing.

Try this frame:

The *Toxic Stress* metaphor: Explain that different kinds of stress – positive, tolerable, or toxic – have different effects on children’s brains and bodies, and toxic stress can cause long-term harm to children’s health and wellbeing.

Example: Chronic trauma, like hunger, poverty, abuse or neglect, can harm children’s brain development. *The effects of toxic stress can be lifelong*, increasing the risk of chronic illness like heart disease and depression.

How to use it:

- Explain that not all stressors have the same impact on young children's wellbeing: some can be positive, like learning to walk; others, like the death of a loved one, can be tolerable, if a child is supported by responsive, caring adults. But unmitigated, chronic stress is toxic.
 - Connect systemic issues like racial discrimination or financial insecurity to children's experience of stress and adversity. Without buffering supports, these stressors can be detrimental to development.
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