



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.

Big Brothers Big Sisters Ottawa

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Louanne Desbiens, Supervisor, Big Brothers Big Sisters Ottawa (at the time of the Brain Builders Lab)

Location

- Ottawa, Ontario

Introduction and Project Goals

Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) is a national charity with local chapters across Canada. It provides supportive mentoring relationships for children and youth and additional supports and referrals for their parents and caregivers. A few years before the Brain Builders Lab, BBBS Calgary took part in the Change in Mind Initiative, an effort funded by the Palix Foundation to help select organizations in Alberta move Brain Story science into community-based work. Through the initiative, BBBS Calgary developed a new, brain science-aligned theory of change, revamped their staff and mentor training, and introduced new tools to measure the impact of their programs. When Louanne Desbiens from BBBS Ottawa had the opportunity to meet with staff from the BBBS Calgary chapter, she was introduced to Brain Story science. Louanne recognized that the Brain Story could offer new ideas and opportunities to better meet their mentees' needs. Her goals in joining the Brain Builders Lab were to improve mentee outcomes by increasing:

- Staff and mentor awareness about Brain Story science to improve their capacity to understand mentees and their families; and
- Support for mentees and their families.

Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Obtaining leadership buy-in: Louanne started by engaging BBBS Ottawa's executive director and board about her project idea. She quickly gained leadership buy-in for the work, likely due to how much alignment there was between Brain Story science and their existing programming.



Obtaining staff buy-in: Louanne then delivered a one-hour presentation to all staff to introduce them to brain science concepts and how these relate to mentoring, and the Brain Story Certification Course as a staff training tool. She took care to present the Brain Story and the related resources as tools that could help enhance practice, and engaged the staff in a collaborative process of co-creation around applying the Brain Story in their work to elicit meaningful engagement from them.

Leading staff in reflection and “sense-making”: As staff moved through the course modules, Louanne convened smaller, regular, lunch-and-learn style discussion groups to talk about how to apply the science in practice and how to change programming to align better with the scientific concepts. These sessions equipped staff to bring Brain Story language to their work and to explain to mentees and their families what they do.

Outcomes and Impact

Shifting mental models: Brain Story language is sinking into ways of thinking for staff and becoming part of the everyday, normal way of speaking. Feedback from staff suggests the knowledge is helping shift their attitudes, beliefs and individual ways of working with mentees and families. They are asking questions and listening more to clients and families to better understand their histories and needs, and as a result are able to approach them with more compassion.

Individual change: For Louanne, learning about brain science has been meaningful both personally and professionally. The Brain Story is valuable to her because it provides the tools to translate complex scientific concepts in ways that are easy to understand and relate to. As a staff supervisor, this helped her improve communication with staff and promote more reflective practice.

Program and practice change: Staff are now sharing Brain Story concepts with mentees and families, and staff have reported that the Brain Story has been deeply impactful for families and is helping them better understand the role of supportive relationships, such as those established through mentoring, in building lifelong resilience.

Organizational change: BBBS Ottawa has made the Brain Story Certification Course mandatory for all new staff as part of the onboarding process. They have also agreed to pilot test a needs registry based on adverse childhood experiences developed by BBBS National to better understand who their mentees are, identify specific needs and enhance supports. If successful, the registry will be pushed out across all chapters in Canada.

National impact: The brain science-based work of the Ottawa, Calgary and Edmonton chapters has helped spur interest from BBBS National to use their influence to embed this knowledge across all chapters in Canada. In addition to the needs registry based on adverse childhood experiences, BBBS National has developed a brain science-aligned theory of change and is rolling this out nationally. They also plan to develop standardized, national, online training for mentors that includes Brain Story language and concepts. As these resources spread, it will help all BBBS chapters use the science as a foundational knowledge base, improving outcomes and impact nation-wide.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Embedding the knowledge at the organizational level promotes sustainability. Louanne’s biggest success was securing support for making the Brain Story Certification Course mandatory and part of onboarding for all new staff. This will help ensure the knowledge is sustained within the agency. The new theory of change, mentor training and client registry from BBBS National will also help ensure Brain Story science continues to guide their work in the future.



Aligning with organizational culture, values and goals is a key condition for success. BBBS Ottawa has a long history of aligning practice with the best available evidence, so staff were ready to engage with and explore new ways of doing things. The Brain Story provides a scientific basis for why mentorship is important, so the knowledge was seen as integral to the agency's work.

Embedding the knowledge into practice is an active and deliberate process: it takes time and resources, but helps accelerate change. Louanne reflected that providing her colleagues with the opportunity to question, reflect and problem-solve helped them integrate the knowledge into practice more effectively. She also indicated that hands-on activities like the Brain Architecture Game helped staff deepen their understanding of how the knowledge applied across different settings and she would have offered more of those sessions if she had had the opportunity.

Louanne left BBBS Ottawa in the fall of 2020 but feels that now that she knows this information it is her responsibility to share and use it. She plans to continue using the knowledge in her current role in private practice and school settings, sharing it wherever possible.

