



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.

Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Karen Moore, Clinical Director, Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth (at the time of the Brain Builders Lab)

Location

- Lanark County, Ontario

Introduction and Project Goals

Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth is an accredited child and youth mental health centre providing a range of services, including group and individual counselling, psychiatric consultations, in-school programming and advocacy throughout Lanark County in eastern Ontario. The agency already operates using an attachment-based, trauma-informed approach, but Karen Moore recognized that the Brain Story added evidence about why those approaches are important. In addition, the metaphors used in the Brain Story to explain key concepts are accessible to the lay public and help to explain how parenting practices build skills and abilities in children.

In joining the Brain Builders Lab, Karen wanted:

- To orient Open Doors staff to the Brain Story to deepen their understanding of attachment-based, trauma-informed approaches;
- To integrate Brain Story science into the agency's policies, programs and practices; and
- To share the information across partner agencies to create a common understanding that would support common messaging to families.

Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Securing leadership buy-in: Karen first shared the brain science knowledge with the Open Doors board of directors to gain support for her project. Before engaging with schools, she met with the vice-president of Special Education Services to ensure the school board was aware of the work and



to have a broader conversation about how the science could be useful in classrooms. In both cases, she quickly got the support she needed to continue.

Engaging new champions: Karen shared information about the Brain Story and its potential to create a unifying language across programs and partner agencies with a small group of clinical staff and managers. The group was interested in piloting clinical applications of the knowledge and collectively got the rest of the staff onboard with taking the Brain Story Certification Course (BSCC) from the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative as a starting point.

Hands-on learning and discussion with staff (“sense-making”): To ensure that staff had the opportunity to collectively explore how the knowledge could be applied clinically, they broke into smaller groups and took the course together. As each group went through the modules, they were encouraged to ask questions. This shared learning approach helped bring forward ideas for applying the science in different ways.

Broad awareness-raising: Within Lanark County, Karen presented on the Brain Story and its potential to support a unified approach to several regional committees with representation from a range of agencies, including the Best Start Network. There was significant interest in using a collective framework that could align and reinforce common themes so that families would hear common messaging no matter where they went. She used the agency newsletter to raise awareness of the Brain Story among Open Doors’ broader network and brought it forward whenever possible during her regular work. She also introduced Brain Story concepts to Open Doors’ youth engagement group, which supports youth to become mental health champions in their schools and community.

Strengthening collaborations: The school board’s mental health classrooms are supported by Open Doors clinical staff and Karen wanted to ensure alignment between the knowledge of clinicians, teachers and support staff so that these teams could work more collaboratively to support students. She presented to these schools to help build a common framework of understanding around the Brain Story and its relevance to mental health outcomes in students.

Outcomes and Impact

Organizational change: All clinical staff at Open Doors have completed the BSCC and the course is now part of orientation training for all new staff. The Brain Story has helped foster a common language across staff and programs, which is improving internal relationships and communication. While Open Doors was already a trauma-informed, attachment-based agency, the language and knowledge are helping staff better understand and articulate how their work produces results.

Program change: The staff were highly engaged and adapted all curricula in their programs with Brain Story concepts and language. To accommodate such a large body of work in a short time, they shared the work by breaking into smaller teams responsible for adapting particular pieces.

Practice change: Staff have started sharing Brain Story concepts with clients, which has helped parents better understand and respond to their child’s behaviour. Staff have also encouraged parents to enroll in the BSCC. Overall, parents have reported that the Brain Story concepts have provided hopeful messages that allow them to view their children through a growth mindset.

Increased presence of champions: Many partner and other community agencies have encouraged their own staff to enroll in the BSCC and Brain Story concepts and language are becoming more common in committee and community discussions. The strong relationships Karen and Open Doors had with many agencies helped spur outside interest and she has heard from many individuals that they are starting to apply the knowledge in key ways.



Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Align with organizational culture and goals. Open Doors is a learning organization whose staff operate from a self-management perspective rather than a hierarchical approach to practice, so there is a culture of openness to new ideas. The fact that the Brain Story aligned with their organizational approach created buy-in, and the culture of continuous learning helped spark staff interest. Now that their curricula have been revised and new staff are required to take the BSCC as part of onboarding, there is clear sustainability for the work.

Sense-making is an active and deliberate process. Karen's approach of inviting Open Doors staff into a co-creation process about how to apply the knowledge helped generate new and innovative ways to apply the knowledge in practice.

Brain Story language helps support engagement. The Brain Story metaphors have proven useful in helping parents understand their role in their child's development and why attachment-based relationships are important. Both the knowledge and the way it is conveyed has helped increase parental understanding of how to support resilience in themselves and their children.

The Brain Story is now firmly entrenched within Open Doors and Karen is confident that it will continue to guide regular programming and practice in the future. However, she plans to keep the knowledge top of mind for staff and other agency partners so that a common language, approach and messaging can be used to support all families in Lanark County.

