



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.

YMCA of Three Rivers

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Wanda Kampijan, Community Connector, First 2000 Days Strategy, YMCA of Three Rivers

Location

- Waterloo Region, Ontario

Introduction and Project Goals

The First 2000 Days Strategy at the YMCA Of Three Rivers advocates for the importance of the early years in lifelong well-being. However, Wanda Kampijan recognized that lifelong well-being required involvement from all the sectors that touch children and families, not just those focused on the early years. These sectors include health (both child and adult services, addiction and mental health, primary care), education and early education, non-profits, justice, housing, employment and business. Many of these sectors and services are siloed, leaving gaps in or barriers to more seamless service delivery. Wanda's goals in joining the Brain Builders Lab were:

- To spread and embed Brain Story science across sectors in the region;
- To encourage previously siloed systems to recognize their role in supporting health and well-being across the lifespan; and
- To find common ground and work toward developing a community action framework for improving outcomes in Waterloo Region.

Knowledge mobilization Activities

Tailored awareness-raising: Wanda recognized that a large system change effort would require a significant amount of awareness raising to allow systems to align around a shared knowledge base and start to find common ground. By chance, she found common purpose and partnership early in this process with Kathilee Porter from the Early Literacy Alliance of Waterloo Region. Together, they hosted three community-based workshops designed to raise awareness about the importance of brain development to lifelong health and well-being. The workshops involved scientific presentations,



playing the Brain Architecture Game, and group discussion about the relevance of the knowledge for participants' workplaces. Each workshop was targeted to different audiences: one to the early learning and child development sector, one to individuals working with older children and adults (including school boards, health care, addiction and mental health services, emergency medical services and policing), and a separate community leadership group.

Broad, virtual awareness-raising: Given the interest generated by the workshops (all had waiting lists), and the advantage of virtual formats to reach more people than in-person events, Wanda collaborated with community partners to offer a five-part webinar series on building resilience in children and families. The series culminated with an online discussion with regional stakeholders about how to move the work forward in Waterloo Region. Wanda also developed a social media campaign aimed at raising awareness of the Brain Story that was promoted during National Addictions Awareness Week.

Partnerships

- Child and Youth Planning Table
- Early Literacy Alliance of Waterloo Region
- Waterloo Region Integrated Drug Strategy
- ACEs Coalition of Guelph-Wellington
- Guelph-Wellington Drug Strategy

Outcomes and Impact

Cross-sectoral engagement: The webinar series and discussion helped gain buy-in for creating a Brain Story science-based community action plan for the region. Through the activities, Wanda also developed new regional partnerships with organizations that have adopted Brain Story science into their work, which will help ensure these initiatives continue to align and will also provide the foundation for additional collective, cross-sectoral action as the work matures.

Increased presence of champions: There has also been more pull from the community to learn more about Brain Story science and its application. Brain Story language and concepts have permeated routine conversations around various tables in the region, supporting the community action plan for system and organizational change. Wanda was able to engage 10 passionate community members in a team to help guide and support these efforts. The team now strategizes on next steps and can share the work involved in knowledge mobilization.

Organizational change: The Child and Youth Planning Table, which is funded and supported in part by the regional government, has adopted the science into their work. At least one business, an engineering firm, has incorporated some brain science information into their human resource materials.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Engaging early adopters to create additional change agents and influencers pays off. Wanda's biggest success was the interest and momentum the work gained across sectors. This momentum has persisted even after people had to re-focus on pandemic response work, which indicates the level of importance this work holds in the eyes of many.

Align with existing initiatives to support sustainability. Wanda was careful to look for opportunities to partner with initiatives that were already underway, rather than creating something that could be perceived as new and disconnected from existing work. Introducing Brain Story science into these initiatives and plans has helped increase alignment across generally siloed pieces of work and will support sustainability moving forward.

Capitalize on relationships. Early on in the process, Wanda found a partner in Kathilee Porter who brought her own networks and expertise to the table to help advance the work. In addition, Wanda



connected with other Ontario-based Brain Builders to share learnings and ideas, and plans to continue to do so in the future.

Wanda and the task team are now focusing on developing a community action framework for the Waterloo Region to ensure sustainability and guide further work.

Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Community Connections Supporting Lifetime Wellbeing](#)

