



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.

## The Salvation Army's Bethany Hope Centre

### Brain Builders Lab Case Study

#### Project Team

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#### Location

- Ottawa, Ontario

### Introduction and Project Goals

The Salvation Army's Bethany Hope Centre provides a broad range of child and family services to pregnant youth and young parent families in Ottawa, Ontario. Services at Bethany Hope were already focused on supporting healthy attachment as a result of knowledge gained through an online training course offered by SickKids Hospital in Toronto focused on early childhood and brain development. However, when the team members came across the Brain Story Certification Course (BSCC) from the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, it provided a key missing piece: the link between brain development and long-term outcomes, most notably substance use and domestic violence, as these two issues are of great concern for clientele. By joining the Brain Builders Lab, the team wanted:

- To share additional knowledge about the long-term impacts of adverse childhood experiences with staff; and
- To find ways to integrate these missing pieces into their programs and organization.

### Knowledge Mobilization Activities

**Obtaining leadership buy-in:** The team's first step was to give a presentation to the Centre's leadership team to get organizational buy-in for using the BSCC as a staff training tool. The presentation focused specifically on the opportunity to target executive function skills as a critical area of intervention for the young parents they serve, given the typical age range of their



participants. Executive function includes our ability to plan, organize and prioritize our actions; monitor our performance and progress towards a goal; and control our thoughts, emotions and behaviours and adjust them to changing situations. They made sure the presentation emphasized the clear alignment between the Brain Story and the needs of the Bethany Hope Centre's clients.

**Obtaining staff buy-in:** The team then began presenting information about the Brain Story and its relevance to staff and practicum students in smaller team meetings and at the Centre's annual all-staff training day. Their goal was to encourage all staff to enroll in and complete the BSCC. While there was definite interest and enthusiasm for the knowledge, the length of the BSCC initially proved challenging for many. However, the pandemic provided an unexpected opportunity to overcome this hurdle: the temporary suspension of some services meant that staff had more time to complete the training. The Centre's leadership encouraged this approach and all staff have completed the course.

**New agency resources:** As staff engaged with the Brain Story, they were eager to get this knowledge into the hands of parents in an engaging way. They designed a day for parents to learn more about brain development that included screening the Pixar film "Inside Out" and sharing information about the Brain Story. To support the parent workshop, the team also developed a flyer on the importance of serve and return interactions that the participants could take away from the event. The feedback from the event was incredibly positive and sparked many requests for more information and additional flyers so that participants could share them with friends.

## Outcomes and Impact

**Organizational change:** The BSCC is now used as a training resource for all staff. Within the Centre itself, information on key concepts from the Brain Story is now prominently displayed on their bulletin board for all to see to ensure the knowledge stays top of mind and is continually reinforced.

**Program change:** In light of participant interest in the Brain Story, the team hosted a "brain science week" during the pandemic where information on brain development and suggestions for brain-based activities were included with food share kits for 40 families with about 60 children. They also plan to continue providing the day-long workshop for parents once the pandemic allows.

**Practice change:** Staff are introducing concepts like toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences and their impact on parenting capacities with their participants, using a strengths-based approach that will not retraumatize or produce feelings of shame or self-blame. They have not yet introduced the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire with parents, but are exploring ways to do so.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

**Using both top-down and bottom-up strategies can help facilitate change.** One of the key conditions for success was having dual strategies to engage both leadership and staff in their project. Obtaining leadership approval to engage in the Brain Builders Lab helped green-light the work and secure early buy-in to apply Brain Story knowledge in programming, and provided staff with organizational direction to complete the BSCC. However, the program changes were dependent on having staff engagement and buy-in for applying the knowledge. Without these conditions, it is unlikely that any significant program changes would have occurred in such a short period of time.

**Align with organizational culture and goals.** The Brain Story was already well-aligned with Bethany Hope Centre's philosophy, programming and training so it was seen as adding value to their work rather than taking people in a different direction. The Centre is a learning organization with a culture of continuous improvement so there was a clear expectation that the knowledge would influence



programming in positive ways. As a result, staff were ready to engage in discussions about how to apply the knowledge in practice.

**Create a culture of continuous evaluation.** The team's biggest challenge was getting feedback from staff and families on the difference the Brain Story has made in their professional or parenting practices. It takes commitment to both seeking and providing regular feedback to make continuous evaluation work.

Bethany Hope Centre will continue to encourage staff and practicum students to complete the BSCC. The Centre is revising its strategic plan and is considering how to embed this knowledge more firmly. Once programming returns to normal after the pandemic, the team plans to focus more actively on how to apply the Brain Story, particularly with parents.

## Resources

- CCSA impact video: [Support for Pregnant Youth and Young Parent Families](#)

