Healthy Brains and Stronger Communities: One Connection at a Time

Let’s say the young couple living next door to you had a new baby three weeks ago. Generally happy, they are now showing signs of physical and financial stress. While you think about bringing them a meal to provide some relief and show your support, you doubt you have the time. And besides, you wonder, “Does it really matter anyway?”

Science tells us it does.

Connections to Resilience

Recent research shows that our brains are highly sensitive to stress, and that prolonged stress or trauma can dramatically change the brain’s structure and increase the risk of health and social problems throughout a lifetime. This is especially true for babies and young children, whose brains are developing at warp speed.

It’s also been proven that caring relationships can prevent or mitigate these effects, and that compassionate connections are key to developing resiliency in individuals and communities.

“Making connections with other people – even small connections – can make a big impact,” says Sarah Welch, communications director at Prevent Child Abuse Iowa.

Welch and her organization coordinate Connections Matter, a community initiative aimed at bringing this message to the public and inspiring Iowans to build more caring relationships. The project is a collaborative effort among three stakeholder groups focused on brain development, trauma and resilience: Central Iowa ACEs 360 Steering Committee; Trauma Informed Care Project, organized by Orchard Place; and Developing Brain Group, organized by Blank Children’s Hospital.

“We all had the same problem: How do we talk about the research that brought us together and get it out into the community?” says Welch.
Advocating for Connections

An initial funder for Connections Matter, Mid-Iowa Health Foundation aided the development of a train-the-trainer curriculum by Dr. Linda Chamberlain, a nationally recognized epidemiologist.

In September 2015, Chamberlain trained more than 200 advocates to deliver the message that caring connections build healthy brains, supportive relationships and stronger communities.

Today the number of trained advocates exceeds 400.

Dena Owens, a psychotherapist at Providence Place in Grimes, attended the training led by Chamberlain. She uses the information in a variety of settings including private therapy, team meetings with the Iowa Department of Human Services and in community presentations through her work with Generation Wellness. She’s also trained administrators in two school districts.

“I talk about this wherever I go,” says Owens. “I really believe in the message. We need to take care of our brains just like we do our physical health. If we don’t have healthy brains and relationships, our schools and communities suffer.”

Taking Action

One of the greatest things about Connections Matter, says Owens, is that it isn’t just compelling information. It enables people to take action. For instance, at the end of each training session, participants share their own ideas for making connections. Sharing coffee with a new friend, visiting with an elderly neighbor and spending some electronics-free time with a child are just a few of the countless ideas generated.

“We often take for granted the little things we can do to make a difference,” says Monica Lee Parker, case monitor at Youth Justice Initiative in West Des Moines. “We don’t always have to do big things to make an impact.”

Parker incorporates Connections Matter into her work helping to reintegrate young offenders into the community and moving victims forward in the healing process. She recently presented the concepts to more than 40 people, including youth offenders and community representatives.

“The message struck home with everybody,” she says. “People have told me they are now more mindful of their interactions, and community representatives understand there are small things they can do to help our youth such as talking over coffee or sending an encouraging text.”

But what really resonates for Parker is the correlation between personal connections and healthy brain development.

“The youth we work with all have some sort of stressor at home,” says Parker. “Building connections helps them develop healthier brains, making them better equipped to move forward. That’s really positive.”

Reaching Further

Connections Matter is currently gearing up for phase two: targeting pilot sites where they’ll measure behavioral outcomes and working with a marketing firm to help expand the project’s reach. Welch says a recent grant from Mid-Iowa Health Foundation will be instrumental to moving the initiative forward.

“Our philosophy at Mid-Iowa Health Foundation is that knowledge is power,” says Suzanne Mineck, president. “Families and communities have a right to understand that stress and trauma have a tremendous impact on lifelong health – especially for children. This curriculum shares that knowledge and empowers our entire community to support the health and wellbeing of children and adults. It shows us that individually we can make a big difference.”