

Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools



The following excerpts are reprinted with permission from Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools (Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education 2017, 14–18), https://education.alberta.ca/media/3576206/working_together_to_support_mental_health.pdf. Minor changes have been made to fit ATA style.

Understanding Mental Health and Brain Development

Early experiences are built into our brains and our bodies and positively or negatively affect lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes. Brain research shows that experiencing nurturing, responsive and stable relationships is essential for healthy brain development. By providing these supportive

relationships, family members, caregivers, school staff, coaches and other significant adults in students' lives play an important role in building a strong foundation for learning, memory, behaviour, health and the ability to form healthy relationships.

Recent progress in neuroscience highlights the importance of welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that nurture well-being, and a positive sense of self and belonging. Healthy interactions and experiences shape the developing brain in positive ways; negative experiences interrupt brain development.

On the other hand, interactions that are repeatedly negative or unresponsive can negatively impact learning, behaviour and well-being.

Students who experience poor mental health may have been exposed to frequent or prolonged adverse childhood experiences that put them at risk.

Fear and Anxiety Affect the Brain Architecture of Learning and Memory

PREFRONTAL CORTEX

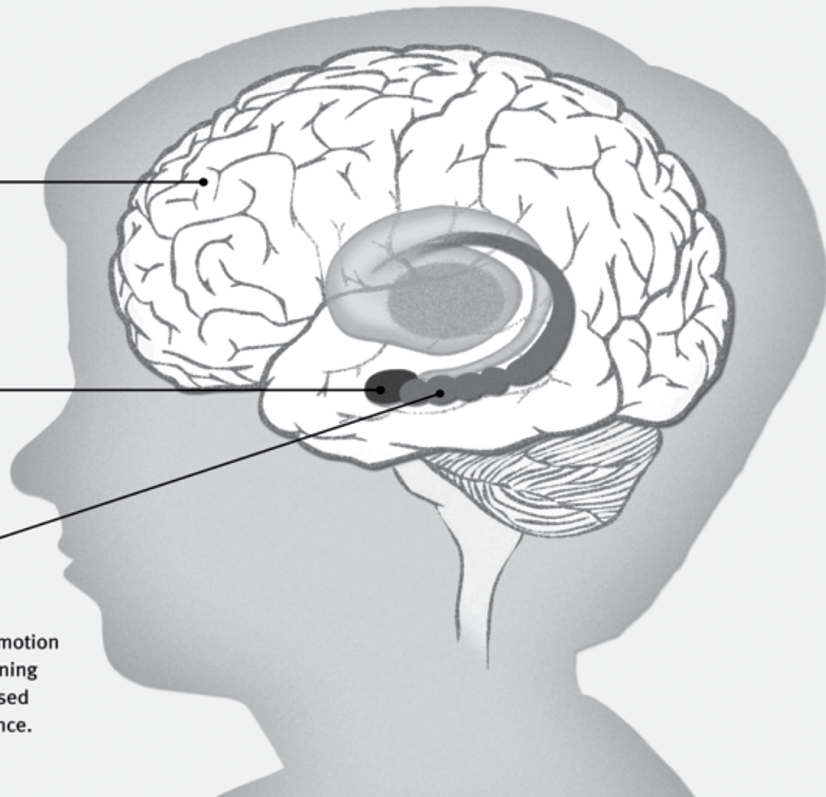
Center of executive functions; regulates thought, emotions, and actions. Especially vulnerable to elevation of brain chemicals caused by stress. Matures later in childhood.

AMYGDALA

Triggers emotional responses; detects whether a stimulus is threatening. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect activity. Matures in early years of life.

HIPPOCAMPUS

Center of short-term memory; connects emotion of fear to the context in which the threatening event occurs. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect growth and performance. Matures in early years of life.



Illustrated by Betsy Hayes. Reprinted with permission from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu>).

When students experience frequent or prolonged adversity — such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse; chronic neglect or abandonment; exposure to violence; or substance abuse of a family member — the stress experience can become intolerable and toxic. Toxic stress derails healthy development and can result in trauma. This is especially true when a student has no caring adult to act as a buffer.

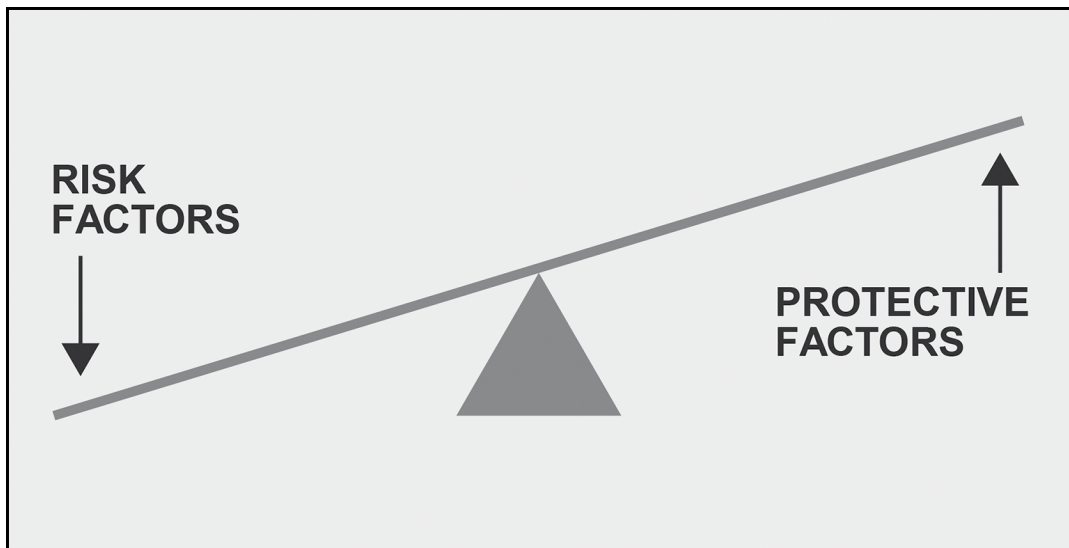
For further information on how the architecture of the brain is foundational for learning and mental health, see the video “How Brains Are Built.”¹

The effect of these adverse experiences on a child’s developing brain increases the risk of long-term mental and physical health problems. To minimize these long-term health issues and protect students from the effects of toxic stress, we must increase the number of protective factors in a student’s life while decreasing risk factors.

Protective factors are conditions or attributes that promote well-being and reduce risk for negative outcomes (or insulate individuals from harm). These factors strengthen students’ mental health and buffer the effect of risk or adverse factors. Protective factors are built when students have opportunities to develop social-emotional skills and healthy relationships. The more protective factors in a student’s life, the more likely they are to have positive mental health.

Protective factors that promote students’ mental health include experiencing success in school; having support from a wide circle of family, friends, peers and school staff; and learning to understand, express and manage their emotions and behaviour.

Risk or adverse factors are attributes, characteristics or experiences that increase the likelihood of illness or injury. Risk factors for



students' mental health may include events that challenge their social-emotional well-being, such as unsupportive or negative interactions; isolation; learning delays; bullying; loss and grief; maltreatment, including exposure to abuse (substance, physical, psychological, sexual); poverty; abandonment; malnutrition; and transiency. Generally speaking, the more risk factors in a student's life, the higher the chances of them experiencing mental health difficulties. Protective factors lessen the effect or impact of risk or adverse factors.

Moving Toward a Strength-Based Approach

A strength-based approach shifts the focus from the prevention of specific problems to a more positive, holistic view of child and youth development. Interventions include a coordinated sequence of positive experiences and providing key developmental supports and opportunities. A strength-based approach emphasizes a student's existing strengths, capabilities and resources. This approach involves a different way of thinking about students and of interpreting the ways they cope with life challenges. It allows one to see opportunities, hope and solutions, rather than problems and hopelessness.

For more information on using a strength-based approach, see *Creating Strength-Based*

Classrooms and Schools on the Alberta Mentoring Partnership website.²

A strength-based approach focuses on

- building resiliency,
- enhancing social-emotional learning and
- supporting recovery.

Building Resiliency

Students with positive mental health are resilient and better able to learn, achieve success and build healthy relationships.

Resiliency refers to the capacity of individuals to cope successfully with stress-related situations, overcome adversity and adapt positively to change. Resiliency is often compared to a rubber band with the capacity to stretch almost to its breaking point, but still able to spring back into shape.

Just as students come to school with varying skills in reading, they also have differing levels of resiliency. Supporting resiliency means helping students develop the skills and attitudes that will help buffer against negative life experiences. Students who experience mental health issues or mental illness may have been exposed to a number of adverse experiences that put them at risk.

Recent research suggests that resilient individuals have protective factors that help them handle difficult situations without becoming overwhelmed. These protective factors (and the related risk factors) are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Protective and Risk Factors That Affect Mental Health

	Protective factors are conditions or attributes that protect mental health	Risk factors (or adverse factors) that may threaten mental health
Individual attributes	Positive sense of self, confidence Ability to solve problems and manage stress or adversity Communication skills Physical health and fitness	Negative sense of self Emotional immaturity and limited ability to manage stress and solve problems Difficulties communicating Chronic health condition or frequent illness Substance abuse
Social circumstances	Social support of family and friends Healthy family interactions Physical and economic security Scholastic achievement	Loneliness, bereavement Neglect, family conflict Exposure to violence or abuse Low income and/or poverty
Environmental factors	Equality of access to basic services Social justice and tolerance Social and gender equality Physical security and safety	Limited access to basic services Injustice and discrimination Social and gender inequality Exposure to war or disaster

Adapted from www.who.int/mental_health/mhgap/risks_to_mental_health_EN_27_08_12.pdf.

- Research suggests that resilient individuals
- feel appreciated and valued for their individual strengths and contributions,
 - understand how to set realistic expectations for themselves and others,
 - have effective problem-solving skills,
 - use productive coping strategies when they encounter challenges,
 - seek help from others when they need support and
 - experience positive support and interactions with peers and adults.³

Notes

1. See www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-of-brain-development (accessed January 5, 2018).
2. See https://albertamentors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/SB_for_Schools_and_Classrooms.pdf (accessed January 5, 2018).
3. See www.jcsh-cces.ca/index.php/resources (accessed January 5, 2018).