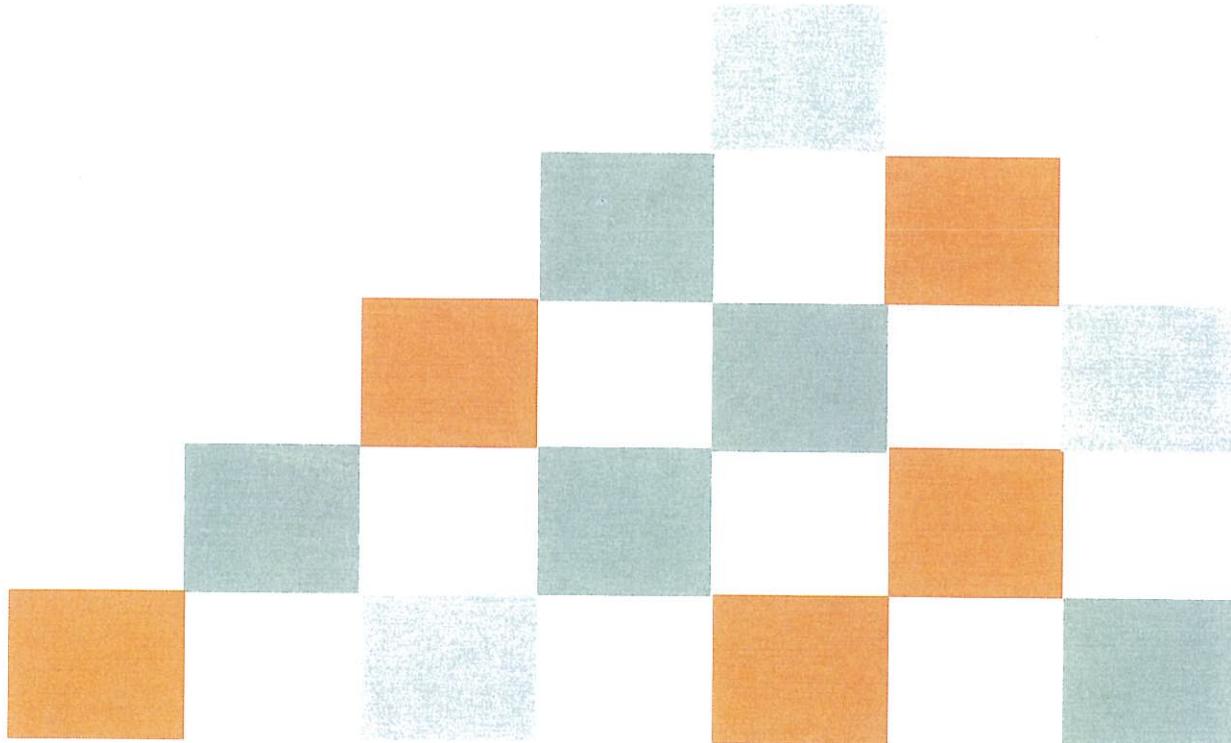


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**Applying the  
Science of Child Development  
in Child Welfare Systems**

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Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Full study can be provided. Contact Rep. Gara's office.

have moved on from foster care to successful young adulthood) can help build hope; having a capable attorney can reassure people that someone with authority is on their side and the system is not "rigged" against them.

**Child welfare systems can attend to supports needed by their front-line staff and supervisors**, who themselves are subject to extraordinary stresses on a daily basis. These staff members are asked to be highly observant and attentive and to do the complex, high-stakes thinking required for planning and risk assessment, often in an atmosphere of crisis. This creates two sets of risks. First, because the cognitive resources needed to carry out these tasks are easily depleted, the quality of important decisions (for example, about whether to remove a child from her family) may be compromised. Child welfare systems can build in supports (for example, empirically validated approaches to risk assessment, and the participation of supervisors or staff who are not so highly stressed) to mitigate this risk. Second, some front-line staff members who are continually exposed to the trauma experienced by their clients will experience secondary trauma, which can challenge both their health and their ability to perform job responsibilities

health and safety of the children and families within it.

### Develop Responsive Relationships

For children, healthy relationships confer a double benefit, both stimulating brain development and providing the buffering protection that can keep even very challenging experiences from producing toxic stress effects. Healthy relationships are also essential for adults who need to make substantial changes in their own lives, as is typically the case for adults involved with the child welfare system. These relationships are a source of emotional and practical support for adults, and knowing that another person cares about them helps build hope and the possibility of change.

Helping to build and support strong relationships should therefore be an essential element of all child welfare work. The ideas below suggest opportunities to apply this concept in policy and practice.

**Child welfare systems can, in selecting and training caseworkers, emphasize the skills needed to build relationships** with the adults and children they will work with. Practice models can specify these necessary skills and attributes, including the ability to treat clients respectfully and navigate both the power imbalance involved and, in many instances, differences in race and class. Hiring mechanisms can screen for these skills; professional development offerings can help staff build them; and ongoing supervision can provide coaching to support their use. Building relationships also takes time, including time spent listening, away from forms and required tasks. In relating to their clients, workers can model the kinds of interactions that promote healthy development, and can provide positive reinforcement when they see parents having such interactions with their children.

**Child welfare systems can provide opportunities for birth, foster, kin, and adoptive parents to build their capacity to provide responsive caregiving** for the children in their care. Keeping a child safe

**"Secondary trauma is real, it is pervasive, and it affects not only individuals but entire organizations and systems, if left unchecked."**

— Ann Leinfelder Grove, SaintA (human services agency in Milwaukee, WI)

well. Accordingly, a work environment that includes supervision that is supportive and attentive to secondary trauma; manageable caseloads; easy access to needed equipment; and regular opportunities for staff to attend to their own well-being and relieve stress, is particularly important. Elected officials with responsibility for resource allocation should regard these supports not as luxuries, but as essential to the effective functioning of the child welfare system and ultimately to the

and meeting requirements for participation in activities related to the child's service plan are surely necessary, but these basic skills alone are insufficient to support healthy development and to support children facing adversity. Moreover, children experiencing toxic stress pose challenges that go beyond those of ordinary parenting, including challenges to the self-regulation of those who care for them. Caregivers need to be prepared for these challenges and supported to develop strategies for dealing with them. In recruiting foster and adoptive parents, systems can prioritize finding people committed to providing responsive caregiving and willing to work to develop the skills needed to do so.

**Child welfare systems can, as they engage with adults and children and assess their strengths and needs, identify existing important relationships and ways to strengthen them.** Family members and friends (and others such as clergy, mentors in the community, and child care providers) are not just potential placement resources for children who enter foster care. They are also people with whom children have relationships that can be essential to their healthy development, wherever the child lives. These are also people whom adults depend upon for support, both material and emotional. Moreover, in many cultures, reliance upon a network of kin to help raise children is expected. Child welfare systems can support these connections, rather than basing policy and practice on the assumption that a single parent or set of parents will meet all of the child's needs. Attending to key relationships also entails strengthening parent-child relationships, for example through frequent visiting supported by coaching on how to make visits successful, and evidence-based interventions that specifically target parent-child interactions.

**Child welfare systems can strive to minimize the number of placements experienced by children and youth in foster care.** Abundant evidence shows that placement disruptions are a potent source

of stress and are associated with negative outcomes. Models that monitor developing problems in care and provide early alerts of the risk of placement disruption have shown considerable success in reducing such transitions.

**"Tell us you want us to succeed. If you don't say it, we will assume you want us to fail."**

— A parent in the foster care system

**Child welfare systems can, whenever feasible, promote positive relationships between birth and foster parents in the service of children's healthy development.**

Such relationships are sometimes presumed to be mostly adversarial and neutral at best, and there are surely challenges involved in building collaborative relationships and a sense of shared parenting. Nevertheless, achieving the best feasible partnership between birth and foster parents promotes the stable and consistent caregiving needed to help children manage short-term transitions, such as visits with birth parents while a child is in foster care, as well as durable changes in caregiving brought about by reunification or adoption.

**Child welfare systems can institute policies and practices aimed at providing continuity in important relationships even after placement or permanency changes.**

In divorce and custody cases, it is now widely understood that in most situations children need the benefit of continuing relationships with both their parents, even if those parents are in conflict with one another. In child welfare law and practice, by contrast, an "all-or-nothing" approach to parenting typically still applies, especially when a child leaves foster care. If she is reunified with her birth parent(s), her foster parents and foster siblings are expected to disappear from her life; if she is adopted, she is expected to no longer have any contact with her birth parents and extended family. Science tells us that this mindset is fraught with problems, and that policies and practices should help to maintain important

relationships unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.

### Strengthen Core Life Skills

As described in Part I, scientists have identified a set of foundational skills that adults need both to parent effectively and to earn a living, and that children need to develop as they move toward adulthood. These capabilities are collectively described as “self-regulation”—that is, the ability to draw upon the right skills at the right time, manage our responses to the world, and resist inappropriate responses. Self-regulation is in turn built upon “executive function,” which consists of three primary components: inhibitory control (the ability to resist impulsive behavior); working memory (the capacity to hold and manipulate information in our heads over short periods of time); and mental flexibility (adjusting to changed demands, priorities, rules, or perspectives).

**“It makes a tremendous difference, particularly for people who have previously experienced trauma, to feel that there is someone capable who believes in you.”**

— Family Court Judge Judith Waksberg

Child welfare systems can focus on helping people develop and practice these skills. This is true both for the children and youth involved with child welfare and for their parents, many of whom have experienced adversity in their own childhood without sufficient support from their primary caregivers. These challenges mean that many people have not developed on a healthy trajectory, and may not have attained age-appropriate levels of self-regulation and executive function. But we know these skills can still be built, even into early adulthood. Foster parents and front-line staff have an important role to play in modeling these skills and in helping adults and children strengthen their own capabilities. Emphasizing skills can

also reorient the emphasis on compliance that sometimes prevails in child welfare, changing the relevant question from, for example, whether a parent has attended a parenting program to how the parent is progressing in building the skills needed to support healthy development.

**Child welfare systems can prioritize approaches that focus on active skill-building**, both in day-to-day interactions and as they choose which formal service programs to offer. They can routinely ask what skills the recipients are expected to develop as a result of their participation in a program; what opportunities they will have to practice those skills during the intervention; and whether there will be follow-up coaching to help them apply the skills in real-world contexts. Programs that are strong on each of these dimensions will be more effective than those that provide only information, or those that aim solely to change attitudes without building capacities.

**Child welfare systems can support skill-building efforts in other systems** (for example, employment training). Self-regulation and executive function skills can be developed and practiced in the context of preparation to be a productive, working adult. This is an important goal for many of the adults and young adults involved with child welfare, and for some parents it may provide a safer, less stigmatizing way to work on these skills than addressing them directly with regard to parenting.

**Child welfare systems can explore approaches specifically designed to target elements of executive function and self-regulation.** These include, for example, interventions that teach people to re-focus attention away from potentially negative and threatening aspects of their environment and toward those that present positive opportunities; to recognize and interrupt automatic responses, allowing more time for planning; and to identify goals that are important to them and make realistic plans, including identification of likely obstacles and

how they would deal with those obstacles. Interventions that help parents build on their existing strengths (for example, by highlighting moments when they effectively engage in serve-and-return interactions) may have the additional benefit of building hope and motivation for additional change.

**Child welfare systems can change the ways in which they develop and record service plans, focusing on incremental steps and frequent opportunities for feedback.** The capacity to make plans, follow them, evaluate progress, and make necessary modifications requires self-regulation and executive function. Experiencing toxic stress in childhood interferes with the development of these skills, and being bombarded with stressors at any time of life interferes with using them effectively. Accordingly, planning that is broken down into component steps and supported by reminders and feedback, especially positive feedback to reinforce progress, can both encourage success in the short run and help to develop skills over the long term.

**Child welfare systems can experiment with coaching models instead of traditional casework approaches** for individuals who will likely benefit from such an approach.

Coaching begins with an exploration of a person's goals and motivation, and seeks to intentionally build the skills and mindsets necessary for sustained behavior change.<sup>11</sup> Coaching is hypothesized to be most likely to benefit individuals who have hope about the future and believe that their actions can lead to changes in their circumstances. Child welfare systems might therefore use existing tools to assess motivation and agency; experiment with a coaching model for those individuals evaluated as having significant motivation and agency; and experiment with alternative approaches designed to help others build that missing sense of hope.

### Attend to the Distinctive Needs of Infants and Young Children

Early childhood is the period during which the brain develops most rapidly and flexibly. In this section, we suggest some of the ways in which child welfare policy and practice might recognize the specific needs of infants and toddlers, and the special opportunities they present to create the foundation for lifelong health and learning. Many of the practices noted below would be beneficial for most or all of the children encountered by child welfare systems, but they are especially important for young children.

## Why Is Infancy So Important?

During the first few years after birth, **700 to 1,000 new neural connections form every second** in the brain.

Early experiences affect the development of **brain architecture**, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health.

Scientists use the term "**plasticity**" to refer to the capacity of the brain to learn from experience, which is **greatest early in life and decreases with age**.



**Child welfare systems can promote frequent contact between birth parents and young children who have been placed in foster care.**

For children who have a significant likelihood of ultimately being reunified with their parent(s), the schedule of visits typical in foster care systems, in which contact is weekly at best and sometimes considerably less frequent, is insufficient to build the bonds that will be a stable base for promoting healthy development when and if reunification occurs.

**Child welfare systems can promote strong, secure, responsive connections between foster parents and babies.**

Many parents of young children involved with the child welfare system can benefit from coaching about the importance of serve-and-return relationships, especially when accompanied by opportunities to practice and get feedback. For children who enter foster care, there are additional challenges. For example, foster parents are sometimes cautioned not to get “too attached” to children, especially babies, because of the possibility that the children will ultimately be removed from their care. Quite the opposite, they should be encouraged and supported to have frequent serve-and-return interactions with children, and to model these interactions for birth parents.

**Child welfare systems can ensure that infants and young children receive high-quality medical care (including developmental screening); early intervention and mental health services when needed; and high-quality early childhood education.**

This is true not only for children entering foster care, but for the larger population of children who come to the attention of child protective services, who are, compared to other children, considerably more likely to experience developmental challenges. Ensuring that those who need intervention are identified early and that they and their caregivers receive appropriate services is one

of the most important steps child welfare systems can take toward their long-term health and educational success.

### Final Thoughts: Toward Responsive Caregiving for All Children

As noted in Part I, scientists define child neglect as the persistent absence of responsive caregiving. This is very different from the legal definition of neglect, which focuses on the absence of sufficient food, clothing, shelter, or supervision. Many children who have not been neglected in a legal sense could nevertheless benefit if their caregivers were better able to provide the kinds of responsive interactions that support healthy development. This is, emphatically, not a call to expand the jurisdiction of child welfare systems, which are not well-positioned to help this larger population of children and their parents. Those systems are already overburdened, and the fact that they exercise a police power makes it exceedingly difficult for families to trust them as helpers.

Instead, we should consider this issue more broadly: How can we build a universal understanding of responsive caregiving, and help parents and other caregivers develop their capacity to provide it? This question directs attention away from the relatively small number of children and families involved with child welfare systems and toward a much broader array of social norms and practices. It also shifts focus away from unhelpful dichotomies (are parents good or bad?) toward a more useful emphasis on learning and improvement. Answering this question is beyond the scope of this paper; we note only that the first principle set out above—advancing an understanding of the science of child development in order to open up new ways of thinking and acting—is surely a piece of the answer. We look forward to robust discussion of this issue, involving a far wider group of actors than just those concerned with child welfare systems.