

Why We Need to Pay Attention to Stress in Kids

We are born with a brain, but it's our experiences that shape how our brains develop and what our future abilities might be. Toxic stress actually alters the brain, especially if it occurs in the first 5 years of life.

Thanks to the [Alberta Family Wellness Initiative](#) (AFWI) we know a lot more about how the experiences in the first 5 years of life actually shape the brain. Extensive research has shown that *young children whose brain development has been disrupted by toxic stress are at a much higher risk for later physical and mental health problems, including developing a mental illness such as depression, anxiety, or addiction.*

What is toxic stress? *Things that cause toxic stress may include abuse, neglect, parental addiction or mental illness, violence in or outside the home, and chaotic environments (AFWI).*

I'm sure most of us can't imagine how this happens. Our new [Brain Architecture Game](#) can give us an inside glimpse as to how this happens by simulating how the brain develops. Participants get materials to build their brains from Life Experience Cards. Positive life experiences help to build a stronger brain that can withstand stressors. Negative experiences disrupt brain development which can affect resiliency and have lifelong impact.



United Way Board and Cabinet volunteers "build a brain" during the Brain Architecture Game on Saturday, May 13.

At United Way Central Alberta we invest in a diverse range of programs that help to prevent stressors and others that support children and families that may be experiencing stress.

- Association of Communities Against Abuse – Child Abuse Treatment and Preventative Education
- Bashaw & District Support Services – Family Wellness Program
- Big Brothers Big Sisters – Mentoring programs in Blackfalds, Lacombe, Ponoka, Red Deer & area, Rimbey and Stettler
- Boys and Girls Club – Camp Alexo and Out of school programs in Ponoka, Red Deer & Area, Rimbey and Rocky Mountain House
- Central Alberta Women's Outreach – Julietta's Place
- Domestic Relationship Violence Initiative Committee – partner organization working on a proactive, coordinated and effective response to domestic violence.
- kcs Association – Early Learning for Young Children

[You can read one family's story here.](#)