

Applying *Developmental Science*



to the Child Welfare System

Part 1 of 2

3 Key Concepts from Harvard's Center for the Developing Child



"Serve-and-Return" Interactions

Back-and-forth interaction between young children and adults.

Vital for the development of strong brain architecture in young children.



Toxic Stress

"Fight, flight or freeze" physiological responses triggered by adverse experiences.

If long-lasting, results in an overdeveloped stress-response system and underdeveloped core capabilities.



Core Capabilities

Self-regulation, and executive function (goal-setting and problem-solving)

Low stress levels and active skill-building are needed to develop and use these capabilities.

Impact on Children and Adults

A Triple Burden for Adult Caregivers



Constant supply of stressful situations repeatedly activate stress response system.



Easily triggered stress-response system that takes a toll on cognitive resources and health.



Needing help from the child welfare system ingrains belief that they are failures incapable of escaping their situation.

Impact on Young Children



Neglected children do not receive enough of the serve-and-return interactions that help build brain architecture.



Stressful early-life experiences may lead to long-term mental & physical health issues.



Positive early-life experiences and "serve-and-return" relationships with adults can help build resilience to adversity.

A Vicious Cycle

1

Child experiences prolonged toxic stress due to lack of supportive and responsive adult relationships.

2

Does not develop appropriate levels of core capabilities while growing up.

3

Less equipped to care for own children.

Did you know?

"Serve-and-return" interactions are so important that scientists define "neglect" as the prolonged absence of responsive caregiving.



Look out for Part 2 on strategies to improve outcomes!