

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Early Experiences Shape Our Future Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **This Brain Boost looks at protecting the brain health of our children.***

Our future brain and physical health are shaped in large part by our genetics and our early life experiences. Research suggests that the foundation for sound brain and physical health is built early in life, when our relationships with parents, caregivers, relatives, teachers, and peers interact with our genes and environment to shape the architecture of our developing brain.

Research from [Harvard's Center on the Developing Child](#) shows that disruptions in the developmental process can impair our children's health and capacity for learning and relating to others, with lifelong implications. Adverse childhood events (ACEs), are childhood experiences that may result in trauma and chronic stress responses.

- Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.
- Physical and emotional neglect.
- Living in a household with mental illness, domestic violence, parental divorce or separation, substance abuse, or incarceration.

In its recent brief, [Early Childhood Mental Health](#), the Center makes the following points:

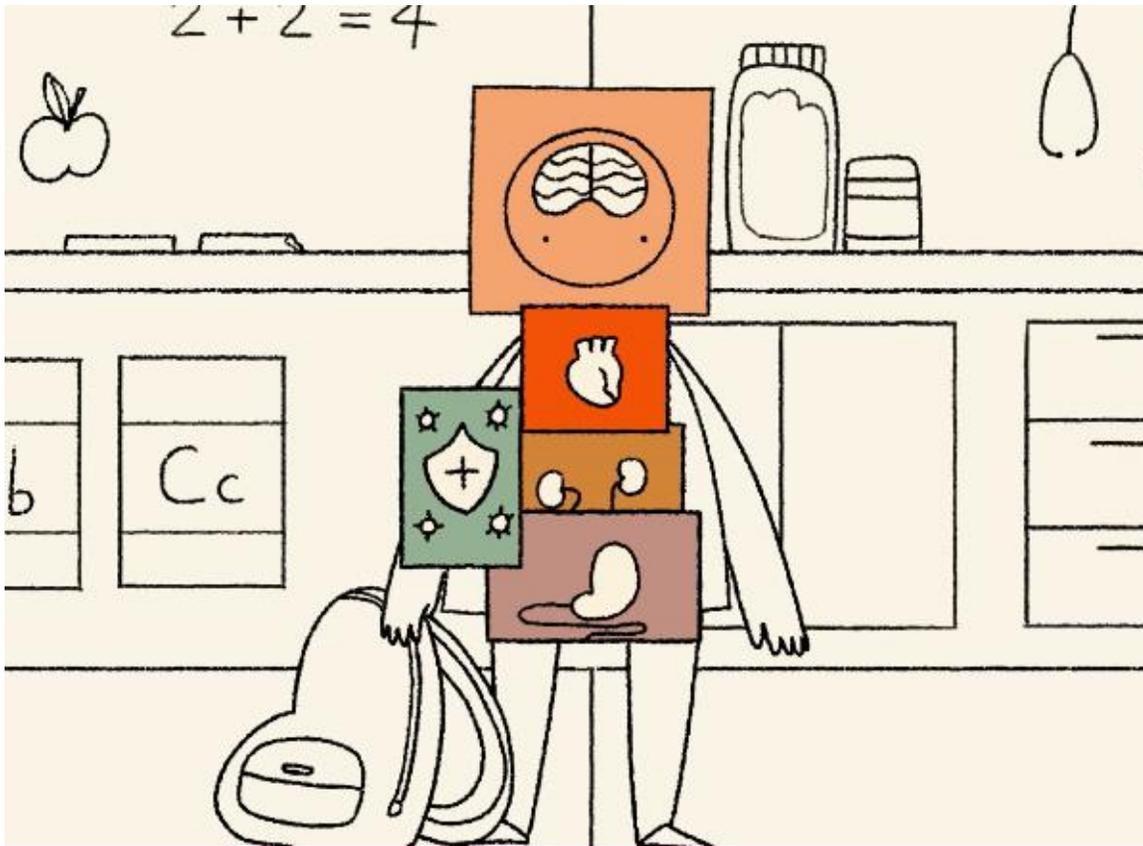
- Significant brain health problems can and do occur in young children. Young children respond to and process emotional experiences and traumatic events differently than older children and adults, but children can show clear characteristics of anxiety disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder at an early age. In some children, these disruptions to brain health can impact early learning, social competence, and lifelong physical health. The interaction between genetic predispositions and exposure to environmental adversity can lay the groundwork for brain and physical health that endures well into the adult years.

- Toxic stress may lead to future brain health issues. The BHI has discussed in the past how frequent, and/or prolonged biological responses to adversity, can damage the architecture of the developing brain. Toxic stress can impair school readiness, academic achievement, and physical and mental health. Persistent poverty, threatening neighborhoods, and poor child-care conditions elevate the risk of serious brain health problems now and in the future. Children who experience recurrent abuse or chronic neglect, domestic violence, or parental mental health or substance use problems are particularly vulnerable.
- Early trauma may have lasting effects. Many children have the capacity to overcome the severe challenges of early, persistent maltreatment, trauma, and emotional harm, but there are limits to their psychological recovery from such adversity. Even if they have been removed from traumatizing circumstances and placed in nurturing homes, they may still experience problems in self-regulation, emotional adaptability, relating to others, and self-understanding. Children who overcome these obstacles often have tremendous support from the adults around them. According to the Center, these findings underscore the importance of prevention, early identification, and timely intervention in circumstances that put young children at serious physical and psychological risk.
- Brain health problems in children need to be treated within the context of their families, homes, and communities. The emotional well-being of young children is related to the circumstances in which they live. If they live in an environment that is abusive, threatening, chronically neglectful, or otherwise psychologically harmful, they are at higher risk for developing early mental health problems. Environments in which the relationships are responsive and supportive can protect young children from the adverse effects of other stressors.

Focusing on improving the environment, relationships, and experiences of our children may help reduce the incidence of brain and physical illness, as well as costly problems in our society, such as failure to complete high school, incarceration, and homelessness.

The Center concludes that the emotional and behavioral needs of young children are best met through coordinated services that focus on their full environment — relationships, including parents, extended family members, home visitors, providers of early care and education, and/or mental health professionals. The Center also recommends better coordination of mental health resources for young children and their parents can assure better access to effective prevention and treatment programs.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH



A [video](#) from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child points out that brain health issues in children don't look like brain health issues in adults. Developing issues may be labeled as "behavioral problems" or "difficulty controlling emotions." It is just as important to be able to recognize good brain health behaviors in your children.

- Curiosity.
- Interest in the world around them.
- Desire to learn.
- Able to reflect on what's happening in their world.
- Able to express love, affection, and emotions.
- Getting upset when things are upsetting.
- Calming down on their own after getting upset.

- And don't forget to encourage your child to **BE BRAIN HEALTHY** and adopt a **lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
 - Stress resilience

- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).