

Abstract

Pathways to a More Peaceful and Sustainable World: Early Childhood

Matters

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In the 1st year of life, the brain grows at the pace of 700-1,000 new neural connections per second, a pace that is never achieved again. By age 3 years, a child's brain is twice as active as an adult brain. It is early life experiences that determine the capacity of the brain – its structure and function.

Nurturing care that is provided by the family and the child's community comprises all essential elements for a child to grow physically, mentally and socially. These elements include love and responsive care taking, adequate nutrition, education and health care, as well as protection from danger. While our genetic blueprint provides the broad strokes of the development of our bodies and brains, the child's environment modifies this blueprint during critical periods of development – from pre-conception onwards. Prospective longitudinal studies clearly demonstrate that patterns of early caregiving matter. But sadly, many children do not receive adequate nurturing care. This reality is compounded by the situations of war, conflict, and migration to which families are exposed. Indeed, over 200 million children under 5 years of age will likely fail to reach their full development potential because they grow up in the context of *Toxic Stress*. Children who experience elevated levels of toxic stress are at an increased risk to develop emotional and physical health problems across their lifespans. This reality is mediated, in part, by our stress response system and its interface with our immune system.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) and parenting programmes aimed at enhancing responsive parenting can reduce the impact of adverse childhood experiences and can positively impact the child's brain structure and function, their hormonal and immune systems, and even impact how their DNA is read and transcribed! As a consequence, if governments, institutions, and organizations design, implement and refine ECD programmes of proven value, then there will be increased social cohesion within the family and the community. There will also be a reduced risk of the transgenerational transmission of violence; as well as economic growth and sustainable development within communities. Further work is needed to develop a measurement framework which can be used as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers


and ECD service providers working in conflict-affected areas to guide their investment in the development, delivery, and refinement of ECD programmes for peacebuilding and social cohesion.

Throughout the presentation, the efforts of UNICEF, the LINKS network based at Queen's University Belfast, Yale University, the Early Childhood Peace Consortium, the Early Childhood Development Action Network and the Arab Network for Early Child Development will be highlighted. The presentation will also briefly review the results of an ECD/parenting intervention that was implemented by the Arab Resource Collective in two of the Palestinian refugee communities in Beirut, Lebanon.

Bio

James F. Leckman, MD, PhD, is the Neison Harris Professor of Child Psychiatry, Psychiatry, Pediatrics and Psychology at Yale. For more than 20 years he served as the Director of Research for the Yale Child Study Center. His peers have regularly selected him as one of the Best Doctors in America. Dr. Leckman is the author or co-author of more than 480 original scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Dr. Leckman has a longstanding interest in Tourette syndrome and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). His research on these disorders is multifaceted, from phenomenology and natural history, neurobiology, genetics, risk factor research and treatment studies. Based on his work on OCD, Dr. Leckman has also been drawn to study normal patterns of evolutionarily conserved obsessive-compulsive-like behaviors. A major focus has been on parenting and the role of the bio-behavioral systems that closely interconnect our affiliative and stress response systems. He is also a founding member of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC). The mission of the ECPC is to create a legacy of sustained peace by drawing on the transformative power of early childhood development by building a global movement that values the role of young children and families as agents of change (see: <https://ecdpeace.org/>).

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