

## Understanding Mental Well-being and Resilience: Global knowledge to inform local action

The PEI Alliance for Mental Well-Being is committed to improving mental well-being for all Islanders based on knowledge. Understanding what contributes to mental well-being and how to improve it is an important foundation for actions and solutions that will make an impact for individuals, families, and communities.

This knowledge that the Alliance is using as an initial framework to guide its work is broad and inclusive. It includes what we know about the *human development process*, the critical importance of *early childhood and brain development* to life-long mental well-being outcomes, and the *social determinants of health*, which shape the environments in which we live, work and play, and subsequently our relationships and experiences.

### What is mental well-being?

To be mentally well is to have the capacity to bounce back from significant adversity or toxic stress and sustain mental well-being over the long term.

### What is resilience?

The science of resilience helps us understand how and why this ability is developed or hindered.

### How are well-being and resilience built?

This knowledge tells us that the experiences we have and the environments we find ourselves in, particularly in childhood, are biologically embedded in our brains and bodies for good or for ill. High quality experiences and environments make good outcomes more likely over time; low quality experiences and environments in the absence of any additional intervention make poor outcomes more likely over time.

The good news is that resilience is not a fixed character trait you are born with; rather it is a capacity that can be built throughout life (although starting early is the best investment) by ensuring that everyone has access to positive experiences and environments. The knowledge helps us understand what is involved in building resilience so we can take action. It points to three **Action Areas** that can strengthen resilience and improve mental well-being for individuals, families, and communities:

1. supporting responsive relationships
2. strengthening core life skills
3. reducing sources of toxic stress and its harmful buildup

Actions needed to build resilience and improve mental well-being for all Islanders require input and engagement from across sectors (health, social services, education, justice, Indigenous

communities, businesses, municipalities, etc.), regions, and disciplines - a whole of PEI approach.

As a unifying framework, this common knowledge and collective approach can help build bridges amongst a variety of partners and stakeholders that are all working to improve mental well-being outcomes. This includes everyone – for example, organizations that work with children and parents, those that help youth build core life skills, and those that focus on seniors.

*“In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate those resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.”*

(Ungar 2008, Ungar 2011 <https://resilienceresearch.org>)

*“Resilience is a complex life outcome that is commonly misunderstood. .... Resilience is not simply an inborn trait; instead, it is determined by the complex interplay of genes and experiences that shape brain architecture. .... Resilience is the ability to respond positively in the face of adversity.”*

(<https://developingchild.harvard.edu>; <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org> )

## **SECTION TITLE: THE RESILIENCE SCALE METAPHOR: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION**

The Resilience Scale metaphor uses the visual of a balance beam or see-saw to demonstrate how negative experiences and adversity can be counterbalanced by positive experiences and supports across the life span (see Figure 1). (This metaphor is part of a knowledge-based narrative called The Brain Story. To learn more, see Additional Learning Resources.)

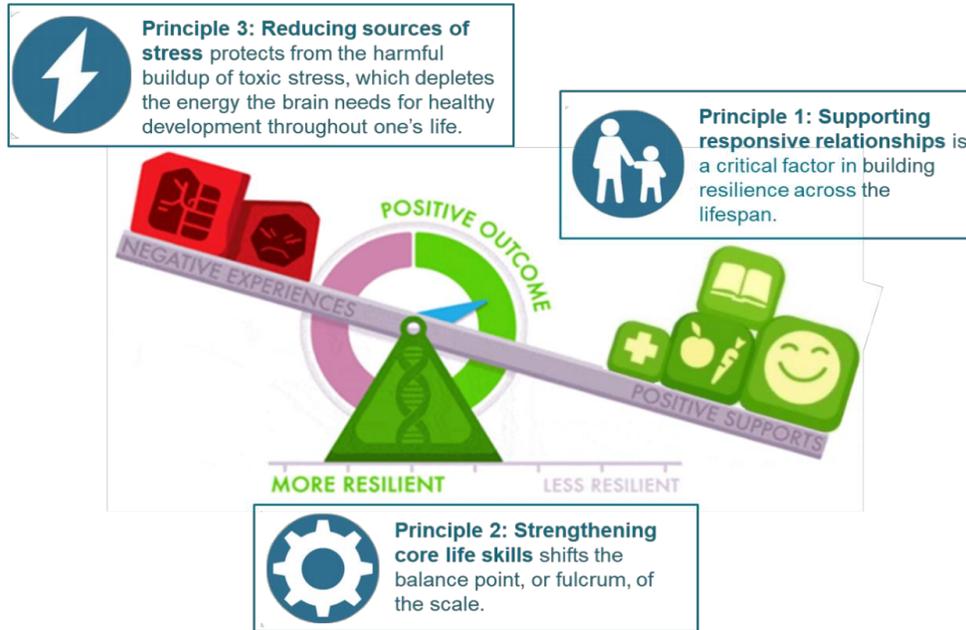
At the individual level resilience can be built by focusing on three **Action Areas** derived from the science of resilience:

1. supporting responsive relationships
2. strengthening core life skills
3. reducing sources of toxic stress and its harmful buildup

Resilience can also be built in families and at the community level by following the same principles - reducing and buffering sources of toxic stress, providing positive supports, and developing family and collective/community skills and abilities.

### **Figure 1: The Resilience Scale Metaphor**

( <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>; <https://albertafamilywellness.org> )



**Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families, 2021 Update, April 2021**

(<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/> )

**Principle 1: Supporting responsive relationships**

For children and youth, responsive relationships with adults have a triple benefit – they promote healthy brain development, scaffold the development of core life skills, and provide the buffering protection needed to prevent toxic stress build-up.

For adults both young and older, responsive relationships also boost well-being by providing skill-building opportunities, advice and emotional support which strengthen hope, confidence, and the ability to weather stressful situations.

When families and caregivers have the supportive relationships and the safe, stable, environments they need to engage in responsive serve and return with the children in their care they have the power to promote children’s healthy development and reinforce core adult skills, ultimately helping children and youth to become healthy responsive parents themselves.

**Principle 2: Strengthening core life skills**

There is a set of core skills that help people manage life, work, and relationships successfully that includes the ability to focus, plan, and achieve goals, adapt to changing situations and resist impulsive behaviour. No one is born with these skills; they develop over time through practice and feedback, with some children and youth needing more time and support than others to build them.

Initiatives that help children, youth and adults strengthen these core skills not only affect their success in schools and jobs but also their ability to become parents that support the development of these capabilities in the next generation.

**Principle 3: Reducing sources of toxic stress and its harmful build-up**

Learning to cope with stress is an important part of development but the unremitting stress experienced by some children, youth and families experiencing poverty, systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, family violence, parental substance abuse and/or mental illness, can, without intervention, cause long-lasting problems for children, youth and the adults that care for them.

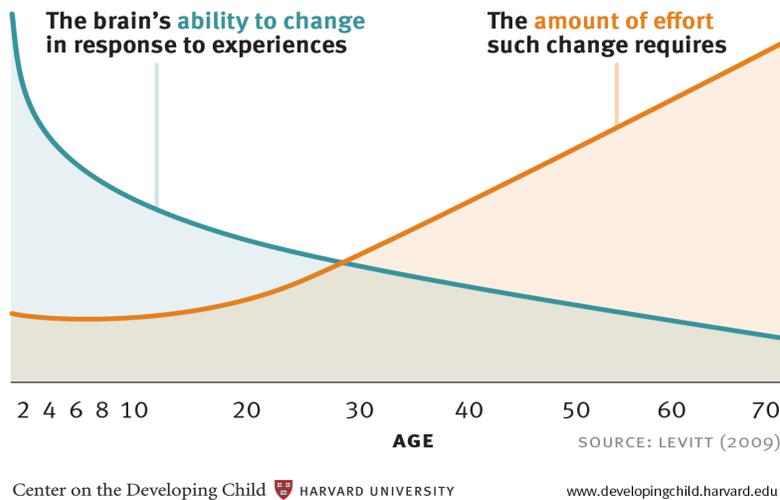
Reducing the pile-up of potential sources of toxic stress will protect children and youth directly (decreasing the biological stress response) and indirectly (by influencing adult behaviour so adults that they depend on are better able to protect and support them thereby preventing lasting harm).

Children and youth are better able to thrive when we lighten the load on their parents and other adults who care for them (e.g., grandparents; childcare workers) so they can meet their families' essential needs. Toxic stress drains precious energy the brain needs for healthy development and mental well-being.

**As your organization works in this area, here are a few things to keep in mind.**

- The social determinants of health shape the environments in which we live, work, and play and influence our mental well-being across the lifespan
- Mental well-being at the individual level is dependent on our capacity for resilience
- The organ of interest in building resilience is the brain
- The brain is plastic and changes in response to experiences and environments (i.e., the social determinants of health), for good or for ill
- Because brain plasticity is greatest in childhood, upstream and inter-generational approaches are critical to strengthen resilience and establish a strong foundation for lifelong mental well-being
- The brain remains plastic across the lifespan, offering a multitude of opportunities to influence mental well-being
- Resilience can also be built in families and communities by following the principles embedded in the resilience scale metaphor - reducing and buffering sources of toxic stress, providing positive supports, and developing family and collective/community skills and abilities.
- It's never too late to build resilience, but starting early is the best investment (see Figure 2)

**Figure 2: The brain's plasticity curve**



## **SECTION TITLE: RESILIENCE INFORMED PROJECTS FROM OTHER JURISDICTIONS**

### **Example 1: Supporting Children by Supporting Families**

An agency that provides programs and services to young children with learning disabilities and developmental delays recognizes that it has a high case load of vulnerable families. The organization's mandate is to serve children, but the agency's leadership is aware that they need to do more to help parents support their children for the children to have the best chance to succeed.

They apply for funds to support staff training in mental well-being and resilience and subsequently convene a community of practice to engage the staff in generating new ideas to enhance their existing programming based on this knowledge. They create a business case to pitch the idea of offering parenting programs to their major funders and develop a new partnership with a local adult mental health clinic so they can rapidly refer parents who need mental health supports.

### **Example 2: Enhanced Staff Understanding Improves Programming**

A residential addiction treatment centre for adult men wants to improve its ability to break the intergenerational cycle of addiction for its clients by providing more family-focused, trauma-informed programming. They apply for funds to train their staff in the foundational knowledge underpinning mental well-being and trauma-informed practice.

They train staff in couples and family therapy approaches to addiction treatment, trauma-specific interventions, and develop additional modules for their program that focus on

parenting and co-parenting skills for those who are separated or divorced. They also develop an evaluation plan to ensure the changes they have made are reducing toxic stress and improving outcomes for both the clients and their families.

### **Example 3: Community of Practice and Capacity Building**

Leaders from various organizations that help youth build core life skills decide to start meeting regularly and to apply for funding to build a community of practice. They initially focus on learning about resilience and mental well-being. They then develop ways to apply this knowledge to building and strengthening their collaborations and to leveraging and developing new programming, such as helping youth learn parenting skills.

They also connect with local seniors' organizations to explore ways for youth and seniors to mutually benefit from opportunities to interact and develop positive relationships. They document what they are learning in their new community of practice and its impact for the individuals and organizations involved. They share this knowledge with other groups that are also creating new ways of working together to build resilience.

To learn more about activities underway in other jurisdictions focused on improving mental well-being and building resilience based on this knowledge see (not meant to be an exhaustive list):

- Alliance for Strong Families and Communities Change in Mind Institute: <https://www.alliance1.org/web/community/change-in-mind-institute.aspx>
- Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction Brain Builders Lab: <https://www.ccsa.ca/brain-builders-lab-adverse-childhood-experiences>
- The Resilience Scale: A Tool for Change: <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/reports/early-learnings-about-the-resilience-scale-metaphor-in-practice>
- Frontiers of Innovation: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/innovation-application/innovation-in-action/>
- R2Resilience: <https://r2.resilienceresearch.org>
- Well-being and Resilience Framework, Alberta Ministry of Children's Services, 2018, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/520981c4-c499-4794-af55-bc932811cb1e/resource/7fda0ae8-8d97-49e7-b94b-7f0088cd767d/download/well-being-resiliency-framework-march2019.pdf>
- The Well-Being and Resiliency Framework, kâ-nâkatohkêhk miyo-ohpikinawâwasowin (miyo Resource) & Evaluation Framework 2019 <https://alignab.ca/early-intervention-prevention-early-intervention-framework/>

## **SECTION TITLE: LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND RESILIENCE**

The following are a few more resources to help you learn more about mental well-being, resilience, child and brain development and other important concepts.

- A Guide to Toxic Stress: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-toxic-stress/>
- Alberta Family Wellness Initiative and the Brain Story Certification Course: <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org> and <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/what-we-know/resilience-scale>
- Brain Architecture: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>
- Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html>
- Building Core Capabilities for Life: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/building-core-capabilities-for-life/>
- Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) Early Child and Brain Development Research Group: <https://cifar.ca/research-programs/child-brain-development/>
- [Human Early Learning Partnership: http://earlylearning.ubc.ca](http://earlylearning.ubc.ca)
- [National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/national-scientific-council-on-the-developing-child/](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/national-scientific-council-on-the-developing-child/)
- Resilience: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>
- Resilience Research Centre, Michael Unger, Dalhousie University: <https://resilienceresearch.org>
- [Serve and Return: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/)
- [Social determinants of health and health inequalities: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health.html)
- [The Foundations of Lifelong Health are Built in Early Childhood: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/deep-dives/lifelong-health/](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/deep-dives/lifelong-health/)

- The Center for the Developing Adolescent - Core Science:  
<https://developingadolescent.semel.ucla.edu/the-core-science-of-adolescent-development/the-core-science-of-adolescent-development>