Leveraging Science to Support Children and Families in Crisis Settings

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The science behind caring for young children: Strengthening Nurturing Care approaches to achieve better health outcomes

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The Challenge

• The **prenatal to age three** period has the most rapid brain development & sets a foundation for lifelong learning, behavior, and health

• The protracted nature of many emergencies means millions of children spend their entire childhood in crisis settings

• The humanitarian response system is not set up with a focus on developmental timing
Responsive Relationships and Early Experiences Shape Brain Architecture
Why Early Experiences are so Important

Brain Plasticity Influenced by Experience

Physiological Cost Required to Modify Neural Connections

Source: Levitt (2009)
Timing Matters

Timing and critical periods
Impact of Stress on Multiple Biological Systems

Stress Response: “fight or flight”

Brain & Autonomic Nervous System: manage and respond

Neuroendocrine system: maintain hormonal balance

Immune system: defend against infection & heal injury

Heart & Cardiovascular system: pump blood, distribute oxygen & glucose

Gut & Metabolic system: turn food into energy

Stressors in the Environment

Take-Home:
Supporting families with young children is as much about building a strong foundation for lifelong health as it is about early learning, social-emotional development, and school readiness.
Place Matters: What Surrounds Us Shapes Us

How the environment we create shapes the foundations of early childhood development
Social Environment

The presence or absence of key influences in a child’s social environment plays an important role in their development.

Responsive relationships
Significant stress and adversity
Caregiver well-being
Social connectedness
Community supports
Faith and cultural traditions
Built & Natural Environments

The accessibility and exposure to various influences in a child’s built and natural environments shape their development directly, by influencing their developing biological systems, and indirectly, by interacting with their environment of relationships.
Systemic Influences

Broader systemic influences such as the ones listed here shape children’s development directly, while also shaping their environment of relationships and their built and natural environments.

- Current and historic public policies
- Systemic racism
- Structural inequities
- Intergenerational poverty
- Healthcare system disparities
- Access to quality childcare and education
The Science of Resilience

**Resilience is a positive, adaptive response in the face of significant hardship or adversity**

- Resilience is built over time; it is NOT a trait
- It is the **interaction** between protective factors in the social environment and responsive biological systems
- A combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill-building, and positive experiences form the foundation of resilience.
- Resilience can be situation-specific, not a generalizable outcome
Increasing Resilience in the Face of Adversity
by strengthening buffers and building adaptive capacities

- Structural Inequities
- Displacement
- Poverty

- Faith and cultural traditions
- Supportive services & social capital
- Strengthen skills and agency
- Responsive relationships

Negative Outcomes  Fulcrum  Positive Outcomes
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Negative Outcomes  Fulcrum  Positive Outcomes

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The “Actors” Shaping Resilience
3 Science-Based Principles to Help Build Resilience

- Support Responsive Adult-Child Relationships
- Reduce Sources of Significant Stress
- Strengthen Adaptive Skills in Context

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Support Responsive Adult-Child Relationships

Reduce Sources of Significant Stress

Strengthen Adaptive Skills in Context

Aligning Science Principles with the Nurturing Care Framework

Components of nurturing care

GOOD HEALTH
ADEQUATE NUTRITION
OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY LEARNING
RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING
SAFETY AND SECURITY