



PHOTOGRAPH BY KELLY QUINN, ARKANSAS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

# Rebooting the Brain

Using early childhood education to heal trauma from abuse and neglect

by Ben McLintock, CFRE

100 billion. That is the average number of brain cells we have when we are born, and it is all we ever get. Starting with the time of our in-utero development, our environment shapes our brains, creating critical synaptic pathways, which form the foundation for our minds. Sadly, for abused and neglected children, that environment is not one of nurturance, love, and positive stimulation. Abused and neglected children live in a world that usually includes some sort of violence, chaos, and tremendous physical and mental stress. This toxic environment wreaks havoc on a child's developing brain.

Jayne and Bryce were born into such an environment in Arkansas, United States. Child protective services took the children away from their biological parents due to life-threatening neglect and placed them in foster care. Custody was eventually awarded to the grandparents. Unfortunately, the grandparents were so afraid that Jayme and Bryce would get hurt and be removed from their custody that they kept the children continuously strapped into their baby carriers, high chairs, or baby beds. The children were so young when this was happening that their skull plates had not fully fused together and as a result, the back of their heads were

as flat as a tabletop and had grown large in comparison to the rest of their bodies.

Terri Teters, CDA, Assistant Director for EOA Children's House, remembers the day they were enrolled at the center. "They had poor fine-motor, gross-motor and delayed speech/language skills," she recalls. "They had difficulty with their coordination, due to the proportion of their head size, which made them off-balanced."

Thirty-three years ago Economic Opportunity Agency (EOA), Inc., a community action agency, created EOA Children's House out of a desire to help abused and neglected children like Bryce and Jayme regain their ability to thrive, grow, and succeed academically and socially. The unique, whole child, whole family approach employed by EOA Children's House is a customized, year-round treatment plan designed to empower a child to overcome the trauma of abuse and neglect.

"Each child receives a complete assessment, which gauges their developmental and educational levels plus a mental health evaluation," said Brenda Zedlitz, LMSW, Director of Children's Services at EOA. "This forms the baseline for that child's treatment program. Each child

gets his or her own combination of early childhood education and physical, occupational, and speech therapy, which combine to address a child's developmental delays. The mental health piece of each child's treatment helps the child overcome the severe trauma of abuse and neglect. The effects of abuse and neglect on a child's brain development are insidious. Only intense, long-term therapy and specialized early childhood education before age five will give these children a real chance to succeed when they enter the public school system."

EOA Children's House partners with the Arkansas Department of Education and Arkansas State University (ASU) at Jonesboro through the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Preschool Program to coordinate and direct the educational component of the children's treatment. This partnership greatly enhanced the educational services children received at EOA Children's House's old location and now at its new Springdale, Arkansas-based facility, The Pat Walker Center for Children. "ASU provides multiple resources for Arkansas Early Childhood Programs like EOA Children's House. Our history with them goes as far back as our involvement with the ABC Program," recalled Teters. "They are responsible for conducting our ECERS

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and ITERS program reviews, and EOA Children's House personally receives all our required training through ASU. We're also participating in the Creative Curriculum Training Institute and the pilot program of Conscious Discipline being implemented in Arkansas through ASU."

Arkansas' rise in the early childhood education rankings from the back of the pack to its current status as third best in the United States was part of the state government's conscious decision in the late '80s and subsequent commitment to placing greater attention and resources towards improving the quality of early childhood education. "Our partnership with the ABC Preschool Program has made a tremendous difference," said Teters. "We are so fortunate in Arkansas to have a state government and Department of Education that understand the importance of investing early in children. The most critical period of brain development for children takes place between birth to five years of age. That is why abuse has such a significant impact on a child's development at this age."

It is also only during the first few years of a child's life, when the brain is literally making trillions and trillions of connections between brain cells, that trauma from abuse can be effectively and permanently healed. It is not a short road to recovery. "It takes time to heal trauma from child abuse," said Zedlitz. "The average stay for a child at EOA Children's House is 2 to 2 ½ years, but it is very common for a child to be in our care for 3 ½ years until they transition into kindergarten. These children aren't referred to us through DHS or the Juvenile Circuit Courts because they were abused or neglected one time. The children we work with were subjected to months, or even years, of abuse before coming to EOA Children's House. We have to establish trust with that child and whoever is the child's legal guard-

ian. It can take months to build the kinds of bonds needed for a child and family to truly begin the healing process."

For Jayme and Bryce, that process began with every form of treatment EOA Children's House could provide. There were concerns that the children had suffered permanent brain damage because of the malformation of their skulls. They gradually began to respond to their teachers who provided them nurturance and attachment-building activities. The physical therapy Bryce and Jayme received slowly began to improve their gross-motor skills and they began to build upper body muscle control. Their speech/language skills also improved as they were provided proper stimulation and speech therapy. The counseling services gave the children self confidence. Jayme began to make up ground educationally and started taking in the new information provided to her. Although Bryce was initially very withdrawn with little self confidence, he slowly began to show signs of an outgoing personality. His classroom teachers increasingly found him exploring his surroundings, whether it was an insect on the playground, or tools in the home living center.

"We keep our child to staff ratios in the classroom at 4 to 1. All therapy is conducted at a 1 to 1 ratio. These children need a lot of personal attention to help their brains re-establish the healthy connections that will allow them to learn and socialize in positive ways when they get into school, and later in life as adults," said Zedlitz. She cautions that to be successful in helping a child overcome the effects of abuse and neglect, you cannot provide early childhood education and long-term therapy in a vacuum. "You have to involve the caregivers for a child to heal," she says. "The parents and extended family members taking care of these children very fre-



quently do not know how to be a parent or positive role model in that child's life. They were often victims of abuse and neglect themselves when they were growing up. Child abuse is a cycle that is passed from generation to generation. Only by involving the entire family can we break that cycle permanently."

EOA Children's House also worked with Bryce and Jayme's grandparents, teaching them parenting skills, providing guidance on appropriate ways for them to keep the children safe and allow them to physically develop. When Bryce and Jayme made further progress in their treatment, EOA Children's House provided family counseling services at the center. The grandparents gained the ability to provide appropriate care for Jayme and Bryce and felt more confident in their parenting skills. The children remained at Children's House for three years, then transitioned into kindergarten.

Bryce and Jayme's family remained in contact with EOA Children's House over the years and the children have done very well. They were both on the honor roll throughout their time in public school. A few years ago, Bryce

and Jayme were both accepted to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and awarded full academic scholarships. Both graduated this past spring with bachelor's degrees and are looking for employment. When Bryce and Jayme were placed with EOA Children's House, they had such significant delays it was believed they would never be able to overcome the obstacles that stood between them and the chance to live healthy, productive lives.

"These are the kinds of outcomes we have seen over and over again for the past 33 years at EOA Children's House," said Teters. "But we could only serve 22 children at a time. We did not have the ability to serve children from birth to 18 months of age, which is the most critical time for a child's brain development after the child is born. We did not have spaces that were designed for today's therapy standards. All that has changed now that EOA Children's House is in The Pat Walker Center for Children."

The new EOA Children's House redefines what can be done to help and heal abused and neglected children. The Pat Walker Center for Children was built entirely with charitable gifts from private sources and represents an evolutionary leap forward in treatment and best practices for early childhood education for abused children. The new center can serve up to 72 children at a time and has a wing dedicated to providing treatment for abused infants as young as six weeks of age. The new EOA Children's House is the largest, long-term early childhood abuse treatment and prevention center in the United States.

"Our vision is to make what has been built here a national model that can be replicated elsewhere," said Zedlitz. "Victims of child abuse are everywhere and those children are no less deserving than the children we serve at EOA Children's House to get the treatment

they need to grow up and live a life free from the scars of abuse."

100 billion brain cells. But only one chance to form them into a foundation that will allow a healthy mind to grow and flourish. Bryce and Jayme are living proof that when that opportunity is acted upon, abused children can have a chance to enter school on equal footing with the rest of their classmates, grow up to become productive members of society, and bring us one step closer to breaking the cycle of child abuse.

To learn more about EOA Children's House and its mission for "Stopping Child Abuse. Saving Lives." please visit [www.ChildrensHouseNWA.org](http://www.ChildrensHouseNWA.org) and become a fan on Facebook.

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