

# Stearns County Public Health

# YELLOW ZONE

*A place where you can flourish*



A Yellow Zone is an environment that cultivates well-being through five pillars:

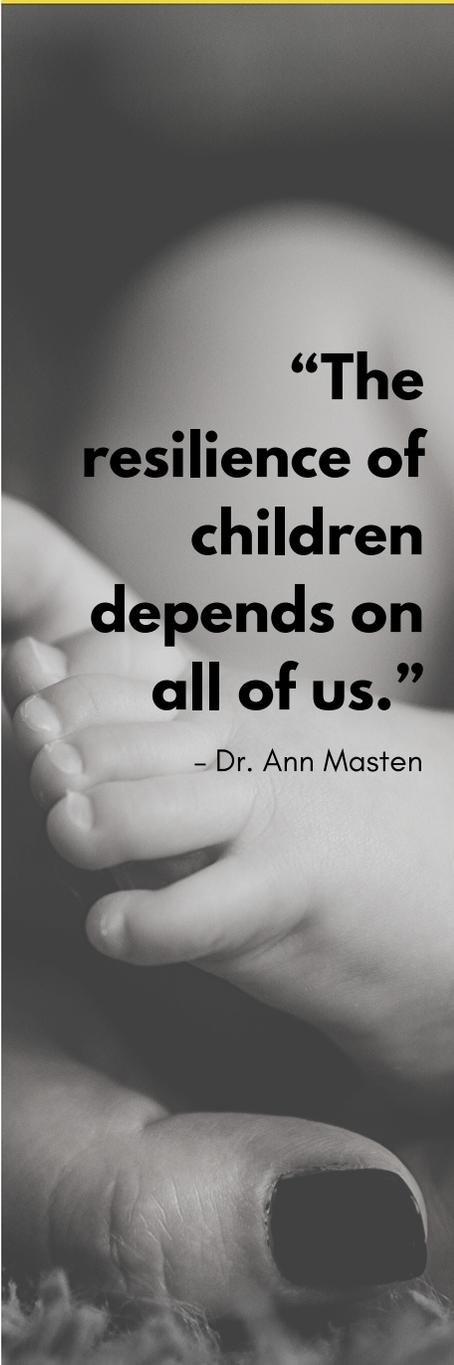
**Help • Socialize • Learn • Play • Spiritual**

which nurture the psychological, emotional, and social aspects of mental health.  
As a result, a Yellow Zone will support a flourishing family.

## Stearns County Public Health

# YELLOW ZONE

*for families*



**“The  
resilience of  
children  
depends on  
all of us.”**

- Dr. Ann Masten

**Young children who experience trauma are at risk because their rapidly developing brains are extraordinarily vulnerable.**

From birth to five young children’s brains are going through an amazing and sensitive period of growth – 85% of brain development happens during these years. A growing body of research has established that young children have long term effects due to experiencing events that threaten their safety or the safety of their caregivers, and their symptoms have been well documented.

Young children depend exclusively on caregivers for survival and protection—both physical and emotional. When trauma also impacts the caregiver, the relationship between that person and the child may be strongly affected. Without the support of a trusted caregiver to help them regulate their strong emotions, children may experience overwhelming stress, with little ability to effectively communicate what they feel or need. They often develop symptoms that caregivers don't understand and may display uncharacteristic behaviors that adults may not know how to appropriately respond to.

*instead of*

**what is  
wrong  
with this  
child?**

*ask yourself*

**what  
happened  
to this  
child?**

**what does  
this child  
need to  
reach their  
potential?**

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### **Development is influenced by many factors, including a child's relationships, experiences and environment.**

Young children need to feel safe and secure in order to be able to develop. Until they feel safe and secure development can be compromised. Once they feel secure, the magic of everyday moments – showing affection, talking with, comforting, and playing with children, etc – helps build strong, healthy brains. If children's systems are protected by adult caregivers and are in good working order, development and resiliency can be robust even in the face of adversity.

Young children who demonstrate difficulties do not intend to be disruptive to themselves/others; their early development has been compromised by persistent/complex trauma and relational stress. We know that children's behaviors reveal their efforts to cope, often with too few resources. Children who have experienced trauma tend to present as developmental younger than their chronological age. It is imperative to keep this in mind when caring for these children.

Culture also plays a significant role in how children develop and experience/understand the world around them. It is important to consider the child/family's cultural background and personal stories when implementing interventions to support development.

It is important to note that very young children 0-5, can participate in relationship-based therapies (with their caregivers). Services can assist children in returning to developmental trajectory, fostering parent/child relationships, learning co-regulating techniques, organizing experiences, developing a sense of safety in relationships, etc.

The strategies in this guide are intended to help repair the impact of trauma on the developing child. As recognition has grown about the prevalence and impact of trauma on young children, more age-appropriate treatment approaches have been developed and tested for this population. These interventions share many of the same core components. For example, they are generally relationship-based, and focus on healing and supporting the child-parent relationship.

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# help

In safe, kind, nurturing, consistent, and stable relationships children learn that adults can help them. It is through modeling from adult providers/caregivers that children learn to help others. Helping teaches infants and young children empathy towards those around them. Helping develops mastery of tasks, empowerment, strong sense of self, and belonging. The following are ways to encourage and support development through helping.

Additionally, adults can help children by creating a predictable schedule. It is important to prepare children before a change in their schedule or a transition so they know what to expect. Routine is so important! This can include bed times, meal times, nap times, etc.

## Infant: Birth to 18 months

**Encourage mastery skills.** This can include holding their cup while learning independence in a highchair setting, holding a spoon during feeding, cuddling during breast or bottle feeding.

**Label their feelings.** You are happy, sad, excited, sleepy, etc.

**Create a safe environment for exploring.** Look at the world through their eyes, such as the crawling space, where a gate may be needed, electrical outlets, etc.

## Toddler: 18 months to 36 months

**Practice sorting.** This can be done with colored blocks, markers, etc. Group items by color, size, shape!

**Empathetic communication.** Truly listen to what the child tells you. Repeat what they told you to demonstrate you heard them and their voice matters. Repeat what they said to show you understand.

**Assist them in self-care.** Be patient with your child and let them try to do simple tasks with your help. This can be during bath time, while getting dressed, putting shoes on, getting a snack, etc.

**Let them choose.** Give them multiple choices to pick from, such as a movie choice, snack item or toy.

**Helper.** Allow children to help whenever possible. They may not do a perfect job, but it boosts their confidence and self-esteem.

**Holding a handshake or a hug for at least 6 seconds releases oxytocin, the neurochemical that helps us feel connected and loved.**

## Preschool: 3 year to 5 years

**Practice sorting.** This can be done with colored blocks, markers, etc. Group items by color, size, shape!

**Empathetic communication.** Truly listen to what the child tells you. Repeat what they told you to demonstrate you heard them and their voice matters.

**Assist them in self-care.** Be patient with your child and let them try to do simple tasks with your help. This can be during bath time, while getting dressed, putting shoes on, getting a snack, etc.

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## Random Acts of Kindness

Random Acts of Kindness (RAOK) can be a very simple, yet effective way to brighten another person's day. When teaching children about RAOK, ensure you provide a clear understanding of what kindness looks like. You may teach them the term "bucket filling," which refers to a system that encourages children to fill up each other's invisible buckets by doing RAOK.

And did you also know that kindness is teachable? "It's kind of like weight training, we found that people can actually build up their compassion 'muscle' and respond to others' suffering with care and a desire to help." - Dr. Ritchie Davidson, University of Wisconsin

### Lead by Example!

**Smile and say hello to a stranger · Give someone a compliment · Hold the door open for others  
Leave a positive note for the mail person · Write a thank you note · Say "please" and "thanks"  
Donate unused toys · Read to each other · Give a hug · Tell your child you appreciate them**

### Kindness Educational Books

The Kindness Quilt  
by Nancy Elizabeth Wallace

Kindness is Cooler, Mrs. Ruler  
by Margery Cuyler

Have You Filled a Bucket Today?  
by Carol McCloud

Those Shoes  
by Maribeth Boelts

# spirituality

It is first through the child's relationship with caregivers that the child develops an understanding of themselves. Caregivers' interactions form how the child perceives and feels about themselves in moment by moment interactions. When a caregiver responds to a child's needs in a kind, safe and consistent manner, the child learns that they are important, loved and will be cared for. Caregivers also provide the foundation for helping the child understand their emotions and become partners in helping the child regulate these emotions. Children do not have the ability to self-regulate and need the caregivers in their life to help them through co-regulation. It is through co-regulation that the foundation is laid for future self-regulation and mindfulness. It is important that the caregiver themselves is regulated when they are helping the child calm down, too. The following are ways to encourage and support development through spirituality.

## Infant: Birth to 18 months

**Provide comfort.** Give a sense of safety and calm to the child when they cry or seem distressed.

**Sing lullabies and rock your child back and fourth.**

**Comforting physical touch.** Give gentle messages to their feet, hands or back.

**Snuggle up.** Wrap them in their favorite blanket or or give them a stuffed animal.

**Practicing noticing and naming feelings.** Happy, excited, upset, frustrated, sad.

## Toddler: 18 months to 36 months

**Read together.** Every single day!

**Playtime.** What is their favorite game? Share laughs while playing Hide and Seek or coloring a picture.

**Praise them.** Even on the little things! Tell them positive phrases such as *you are great at coloring* or *thank you so much for putting your blanket away today.*

**Acknowledge and label feelings.** For example, *I know you are sad you have to go to bed, but you are tired and ready for sleep.*

**Practice slow breathing with the child with bubbles or pinwheels.** This can also be a great strategy to use if they are feeling upset or frustrated.

**Create a safe and calm place to regulate.** Provide them with a safe and calm place for your child to use when they are upset or sad. Encourage them to use this space to clam down any time. This can be in their bedroom, on the couch, etc.

# spirituality

## Preschool: 3 to 5 years

**Do calming strategies.** This can include simple stretches and deep breathing exercises.

**Color.** Let them use their imagination to create a picture on blank paper or use a coloring page.

**Sensory interventions.** Give hugs, roll them up in a blanket, use a fidget toy, swing, etc.

**One on one time.** Quality time together can be limited. Truly enjoy the moment with little electronic distraction.

**Read and look at books.** Not only can you read to them, but have them look at the pictures and "read" to you, too!

There's a Free App for That! **Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame**

With sections for both parents and children, this Sesame Street app teaches young kids how to calm down and solve everyday challenges. Children will enjoy the interactive "play time" with a Sesame Street monster, and parents can view educational tools to help them manage their child's anxieties or anger issues.

## Positive Thought and Affirmations

Children who have negative experiences or trauma often possess the belief that they are unworthy, damaged, or worse. These negative thought patterns build the belief system that is carried on through adulthood. It is important to help build children's self-esteem and positive belief system. Giving children positive affirmations daily will help them internalize positive beliefs about themselves, which will boost their confidence and help them to possess a healthy self-esteem.

### Example Positive Thoughts & Affirmations

**I am worthy · I believe in myself and my abilities · I have many talents · I matter  
My family and friends love me for who I am · Every day I get better  
I am deserving of love, happiness, trust and kindness · Today, I am a leader  
I believe I can be whatever I want to be · Everything will be ok · Today I will be happy  
All of my problems have a solution · Today is going to be a great day  
I believe in my goals and dreams · I can make a difference · Every day is a fresh start**

**Emotions can transfer, so check your mood and be intentional!  
What do we want to pass along to children?**

# learn

The experiences a child has during these early years will shape the architecture of their brain and build the connections that allow them to develop lifelong skills like problem-solving, communication, self-control, and relationship building. These skills allow them to survive and thrive within their family, community, and culture. Learning and teaching are not the same thing. Children require environments and experiences that foster and encourage learning. Take time to experience the world with your child instead of just “teaching” them the academic skills of naming colors and shapes. While encouraging brain development can include things like colors, letters, and shapes, it is more important for children to experience a huge variety of environments so that all the areas of their brain can get stimulated and grow. Young children learn in a world of motion and sensation.

## Infant: 0-18 months

**Exploration.** Encourage infants to explore items in different ways through sensory play. This can be done by touching, tasting, banging, stacking, & shaking.

**Playtime.** Keep it simple, such as hiding a toy under a blanket for the child to find.

**Have Conversations.** Repeat the sounds and words your child uses and have back-and-forth conversations. It doesn't have to make sense, just allow your child to be heard and responded to! Don't forget to use expression and laughter, too.

## Toddler: 18 months-36 months

**Get Moving.** Use music, singing, or rhythms to encourage them to move their bodies while learning.

**Have Conversations.** Talk to each other as you play, do errands, or visit friends and family.

**Give Tasks.** Allow your toddler to help with simple chores and tasks at home such as putting toys away or cleaning up a small spill. It may not be done perfectly and take patience, but they are learning!

## Preschool: 3-5 years

**Playtime.** Make or use an obstacle course, play a board game, use their imagination!

**Ask Why?** Ask preschoolers questions that get them thinking. For example, when reading a book together, ask *Why do you think the girl is laughing?* or *How would that make you feel?*

**Help your child be a good problem-solver.** Give them the support they needs to be successful without completely solving the problem for them.

**Read and Sing.** Also, encourage storytelling or have them create their own songs. Try to help them create stories with a beginning, middle, and end.

## TEACHING ABOUT THE BRAIN

When children understand what's happening in the brain, it can be the first step to having the power to make good choices. It can be equally powerful to teachers and parents too because knowing how the brain works means we can also understand how to respond when children need our help.

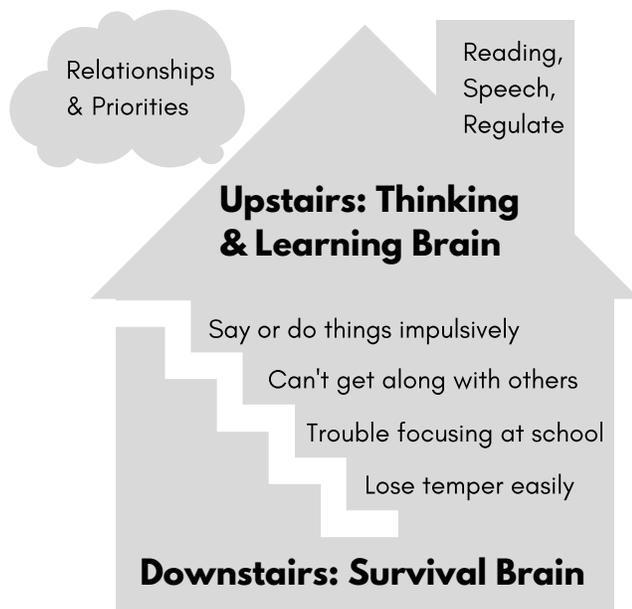
Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson have a concept in their book "The Whole-Brain Child" that helps us understand the brain in a simple way that can be taught to children.

### Upstairs Brain & Downstairs Brain

Picture a brain like a house.

Downstairs is where important things happen, such as basic functions like breathing, strong emotions, and innate reactions to danger. It's like the downstairs of a house, which is where we typically find the basics—kitchen, living room, bathroom.

The upstairs brain is more complex as this is where thinking, imagining, planning come from. We use the upstairs brain to think critically, problem solve, and make good decisions.



#### When I am in my Upstairs Brain...

- Think before I act
- Am in control of my body and reactions
- Can focus
- Can see others' point of view
- Think before I speak
- Feel like I can get my work done

#### When I am in my Downstairs Brain...

- Act before I think
- Am not in control of my body and reactions
- Feel too stressed and tired to focus
- Yell, scream, argue or run away
- Only see a problem from my point of view
- Feel like I cannot get my work done

We need the upstairs and the downstairs brain to work together. The staircase is one of the most important parts of a two-story house, and that same logic is true for the brain. When the brain's staircase is built, the upstairs brain can monitor the strong emotions and impulses from the downstairs and make sense of them. As you work with children, ask yourself, "Am I engaging the upstairs brain, or am I triggering the downstairs brain?" As adults, you can be the brain's staircase builder to make sure the staircase is properly working!

# play

Play encourages children to use creativity while developing their imagination and physical, cognitive, emotional strength. Children's sensory development is supported through different types of play including child directed and caregiver directed play, as well as, imperative for healthy brain development. Play is a form of communication for children. It is through play, with a regulated caregiver nearby, that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. The following are examples of ways to encourage and support develop through play and relationships.

## Infant: Birth to 18 months

**Body:** Clap their hands gently together, stretch their arms (crossbody, overhead, out wide), move their legs as if they are riding on a bicycle, sensory motor play (water, sand, paint), tummy time.

**Watching:** Encourage visual exploration, provide opportunities to watch other children and people.

**Interactive:** Shake rattles or noise making toys, face-to-face time, bath-time, sing songs together.

## Toddler: 18 months to 36 months

**Body:** Build a fort, running games such as tag, go for walks, do art projects such as coloring or painting, explore the world through talk and touch.

**Watching:** Describe the movement of themselves, others, objects and scenes

**Interactive:** Back and Forth games such as catch and face-to-face interactions with others

## Preschool: 3 years to 5 years

**Body:** Expand gross and fine motor skills learned in infancy and toddler age ranges, practice pedaling bikes, balancing.

**Watching:** Encourage child to describe their visual environment.

**Interactive:** Play games such as Hide-and-seek, put together Legos or engage in imagination play.

**"Children learn as they play. Most importantly,  
in play children learn how to learn."**

- O. Fred Donaldson

## Ways to Encourage Play Each Day

**Make Time.** Children need the freedom to play which won't easily happen when their schedule is full of structured activities and screen time. Look at how to free up time if necessary.

**Aim for an hour a day** of uninterrupted time or 2 x 30 minutes as a minimum. Children need time to develop an idea and let it run on. More is better of course!

**Reduce the reliance on structured toys** and equipment that limit a child's ability to use the toy creatively by putting time limits on the use of these toys.

**Offer support to younger children** who are learning to play creatively and may find deep play more demanding at first. Act as a second in command playmate but offer options when things falter to keep the play going. Don't direct however tempting that may be.

**Declutter play spaces.** Too many toys can swamp creativity and encourage children to flit from toy to toy without getting the experience of deep play.

**Focus on the process not the outcome.** Don't look for results or expect to be told what happened or how it went. Play can have a dream like quality which can't easily be described but is none the less important.

## Benefits of Play

**Physical.** Active play helps children with coordination, balance, motor skills, and spending their natural energy (which promotes better eating and sleeping habits).

**Emotional.** During play, children learn to cope with emotions like fear, frustration, anger, and aggression in a situation they control. They can also practice empathy and understanding.

**Social.** Playing with others helps children negotiate group dynamics, collaborate, compromise, deal with others' feelings, and share, etc.

**Communication.** Play lets children exchange thoughts, information, or messages by speech, signals, writing, or actions.

**Creative.** By allowing imaginations to run wild during play, kids create new worlds, and form unique ideas and solutions to challenges.

**Cognitive.** Children learn to think, read, remember, reason, and pay attention through out play.

# socialize

A child's first experience of socialization begins in their relationship with caregivers. The interactions between infant/ young child and caregiver sets the blueprint for future relationships with peers, family and members. Children need to establish basic interactions skills such as cooperative play, gratitude, and empathy in order to learn more advanced ways to interact later in life. It is important to allow a child to stay close to a regulated, caring adult when they need extra time to adjust to an environment. Often children will utilize a 'security or transition object'. It is important that caregivers allow and support children in utilizing their developed strategies to socialize and adjust. Socializing begins to teach cause and effect (for example, *If I do \_\_\_\_, adults respond by doing \_\_\_\_*). The following are examples of ways to encourage and support child development through socialization.

## Infant: 0-18 months

**Interact.** Use eye contact, smile often, listen and respond to infant's babbles and coos. Also, describe how you are taking care of the infant such as saying *I am washing your hands* or *I am making a bottle*.

**Read books.** The more stories you read aloud, the more words your child will be exposed to and the better he or she will be able to talk. Use expression to teach a variety of sounds and emotions.

**Play games together.** They can be as simple as Peek-a-boo or using their favorite toy. If using a toy that you can make noise with, make a pattern with the sounds, take a pause, and repeat the pattern.

## Toddler: 18 months to 36 months & Preschool: 3 years to 5 years

**Assist them in conflict resolution.** Toddlers learn through experiences. Provide young children with opportunities to work on their problem solving skills and offer gentle guidance and encouragement when they are struggling.

**Encourage free play.** Let them use their imagination and explore together by them leading the fun!

**Encourage play with other children.** Use turn taking activities such as rolling a ball between children. This is also a great time to model positive interactions, such as sharing, trading and taking turns.

**Teach children how to be in relationships.** Acknowledge cues, talk about empathy, discuss needs and perspectives of others. This can also be a good time to teach and encourage boundaries. Additionally, you can identify feelings of the other children during interactions (*such as she is sad because you took her ball without asking*).

**Read.** Explore stories about cooperative play such as sharing, trading and taking turns.

**Sensory play.** Use playdoh, water, sand, etc.

## An Attitude of Gratitude

Research shows only about 10 percent of our happiness depends on our situation, which means that WE are responsible for our own happiness! One major component to one's happiness is resilience and the ability to manage stress. Resilience is a learned skill and the more it is practiced, the better we become at it. One way to build one's resilience is to express gratitude often. We can do this by practicing being content and focusing on what we have, not on what we don't. Gratitude is contagious. Expressing it regularly will build a positive culture throughout the building.

### 3 Good Things

Expressing Three Good Things refocuses the mind on the positive, instead of the negative. Have your child write, draw or tell you 3 good things that happened to them that day. You may have to give them ideas to get them started (their favorite toy, a yummy snack, etc). Positive things can be big or small! As they start practicing expressing their gratitude, it becomes much easier for them to name what they are grateful for.

### Model Gratitude

Research shows that people are more likely to value gratitude when they can see it firsthand. Be a role model by expressing your gratitude to your child throughout the day. This will demonstrate that gratitude is an important value. Tell them stories about what you are grateful for, and make sure that they always hear thank you. This is particularly important for younger kiddos.

According to Psychology Today, there are **7 scientifically proven benefits for expressing gratitude**:  
Gratitude opens the door to new relationships · Gratitude improves physical health  
Gratitude improves psychological health · Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression  
Grateful people sleep better · Gratitude improves self-esteem · Gratitude increases mental strength