

# Beliefs About Children's Mental Health

## A Closer Look

In recent years, information about children's mental health has become more accessible as mental health is talked about more openly. However, despite the availability of information, people's understanding of children's mental health is still quite limited.

**This affects how educators and caregivers think about children's behavior in schools and the types of strategies they select to support their mental health.**



### MISCONCEPTION

Children are just small adults; their brains work the same way as adults' brains.

#### REALITY

Like the construction of a home, a child's brain is built in a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Brains develop from the bottom up and in a predictable sequence, just as a house is built by starting with a strong foundation, framing rooms, and installing plumbing and electrical.

For a child, the earliest years are a critical phase of construction. Brain architecture is built most rapidly in the first few years of a child's life, so early positive experiences can help lay a strong foundation for physical health and overall well-being across a child's life.



### MISCONCEPTION

Children don't have mental health or experience "real" mental health challenges.

#### REALITY

Everyone has mental health. A child's mental health is influenced by their brain architecture, with early positive experiences laying the foundation for a child to have healthy social skills and the ability to cope with everyday problems, make and maintain friendships, learn, play, and follow directions.

However, just like when building a house, the process of building brain architecture can run into difficulties along the way.

A type of stress known as toxic stress in early childhood, caused by experiences such as extreme poverty, abuse, and chronic or severe maternal depression, can disrupt the developing brain. These experiences can lead to mental health challenges, particularly when children lack supports to protect against the harm.



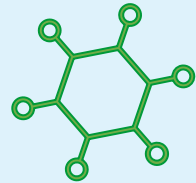
## MISCONCEPTION

A child's mental health is determined by their genetics and biology; either a brain is wired to have positive mental health, or it's not.

There's nothing schools can do to change this.

### REALITY

Child development is like a scale that can tip towards either positive or negative outcomes, depending on which weights are added or taken off the scale. The weights are made up of a combination of a child's genes, environments, and experiences.



When a child develops with a heavy load of positive environmental factors and experiences, like having a relationship with at least one trusted adult, or having opportunities to develop mastery in something, it makes it more difficult to change the direction of the scale.

Schools and communities have an opportunity to implement policies and practices that stack positive factors and build children's resiliency against negative experiences.

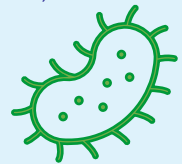
## MISCONCEPTION

A child's mental health only impacts their emotions, so schools shouldn't worry about student mental health.

### REALITY

A child's mental health is like the levelness of a table. The table can be level because of how the table is built, the foundation it's on, or both. The levelness of a table determines how well it functions; if a person tried to eat their breakfast at a table that's sloped, it would be very challenging.

Just like a table, a child's mental health impacts their ability to do many things, like have positive relationships with peers and caregivers, reach their full potential in school, manage their emotions, and contribute to the community.



When a child's brain architecture develops in environments with toxic stress, it creates a sloped foundation for the table. Tables can't level themselves, but schools can help level the floor, or the table, with healthy and safe classroom and school environments, fostering positive relationships, and providing students with opportunities to build resilience.