

Baltimore's Promise Neighborhood Initiative



Neighborhoods such as Park Heights desperately need resources and support to encourage community cohesion and nurturance of its children. A team of Maryland behavioral science and neuroscience researchers, health communications experts, and educators proposes to join forces with the Center for Urban Families, local public schools, community health, and other partners to support Baltimore's proposal for Promise Neighborhoods (PN).

The Promise Neighborhood Research Consortium (PNRC) supports this Baltimore team. Funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the PNRC is comprised of a nationwide team of well-known prevention, developmental, and behavioral researchers, neuroscientists, policy experts, educators and health innovators, social marketing experts and community representatives working to develop infrastructure for under-resourced neighborhoods to support and deliver needed programs and services to its citizens. The goal of PNRC is to help rebuild neighborhoods through identifying and implementing evidence-based practices to prevent behavioral problems and promote prosocial behaviors. Along with local experts in neuroscience, education, and communications, this group will bring added resources and expertise to Baltimore's community-based team to promote improvements in social and physical environments, family structure, school performance, and self esteem. The Baltimore-based PNRC team represents experts from Johns Hopkins University, Research Triangle Institute (RTI), the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

We recognize the importance of helping raise brain awareness to influence decision-making that will nurture positive social development. A nurturing environment with adequate social support from the community, schools, and within families is essential to support brain health. On the other hand, negative influences such as child maltreatment, poverty, and lack of opportunities undermine its functioning. Public awareness about the adverse effects of witnessing violence, neglect, abuse, deprivation, and substance use on the brain and appropriate developmental interventions at an early age can have a great impact.

Combining Forces for Change

Beyond the research and assessment component, we can harness numerous resources in Baltimore to achieve a common goal to promote positive change in the neighborhood and its members. First, we have already enlisted support from the United Way of Baltimore to be the lead sponsor for a city-wide Education Fair:

BALTIMORELEARNS, tentatively set for September and the back-to-school setting, will draw on the multitude of public, private, and charter schools; camps; and afterschool programs, activities, and resources throughout Baltimore and already serving parts of the community. Convened with leading educators from Hopkins, UMBC, UM Baltimore and local community colleges, and teachers and alumni of Baltimore schools who have gone on to college and work success, presenters will share the tools, techniques, resources, and secrets of educational success. BaltimoreLearns will offer a day-long symposium to kick off what might become an annual event to celebrate the progress of Baltimore's Promise as a center for childhood education, growth, and leadership development.

In addition, our PN team proposes several projects designed to improve individual, family, and social community cohesion and growth through enhanced social skills between parents or other caregivers and children.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING. Also supported by the United Way, *FamilyStories* is a proposed pilot program with the goal of providing resources to families and promoting attitude change through involvement in a series of community-based workshops. Through a series of workshops, *FamilyStories* will provide at-risk families with practical tools to strengthen parent-child relationships and support early learning developmental milestones. Fun, interactive workshops are designed to explore moments that matter in the lives of families. Workshops will be standalone, two-hour, hands-on, interactive gatherings for children and caregivers that:

- 👉 Explore timely, relevant topics including bedtime, dental care, family health and nutrition, holidays, seasons, family history, and grandparents
- 👉 Facilitate and model optimal interaction between children and caregivers
- 👉 Engage and entertain while educating and informing
- 👉 Provide meaningful, satisfying volunteer opportunities in the community
- 👉 Meet at-risk families where they are with turnkey operations, providing facilitator's guides, and a take-home book for all participants

ORAL HISTORY: INTER-GENERATIONAL VOICES. Oral histories capture a snapshot-in-time of an individual as part of a family unit and a member of the larger community. Video histories have grown along with accessible technology to create multimedia documentaries that capture a neighborhood at a moment in time that, when tracked over key milestones, measure changes in attitude, behaviors, and beliefs.

By training teens and young adults in research, interview and production techniques, a *Park Heights Story* project would allow young people to interview family, teachers, friends, and each other to record a slice of community life during key milestones over the life of the Promise Neighborhood project. Community partnerships with professional documentary producers and media trainers and the Baltimore non-profit Wide Angle Youth Media, which runs workshops and afterschool programs using video technology, public speaking, and critical thinking skills, will provide the tools and experience to enable young people to tell the story of Park Heights in a series of "real life" documentaries.

Premiering these documentaries in a series of Park Heights Town Hall Meetings, teens and adults would have a regular public forum for talking about their lives, their communities, and the ways they see life changing for themselves based on the Promise Neighborhood interventions. Town Hall Meetings would then feature live question-and-answer sessions to talk about the documentary process and how it changed the way they relate to each other and how they see themselves as a result. These Q&A sessions would be taped with the aim of eventual airing on Maryland Public Television and YouTube to illustrate the power and promise of Park Heights' Promise Neighborhood.

Research + Education + Social Marketing=Community Catalyst

Combining neuroscience and behavioral research with integrated programs designed to contribute to prosocial cognitive development, we can provide compelling evidence that PN interventions are altering developmental trajectories that will ultimately reverse or prevent effects of adversity and place these children on an equal playing field with upper middle class children, who have received every opportunity since infancy.

RESEARCH INNOVATIONS. We propose to study mechanisms that explain effects of community-level interventions on behavioral outcomes. Only then can we know what works, for whom, why, and under what circumstances. Our intensive research work will allow us to:

- 👉 Determine how interventions are working and ways in which they can be improved

- ☞ Identify subtle changes in brain development in children in response to PN interventions
- ☞ Determine what types of interventions improve brain development in ways that lead to our final outcomes
- ☞ Indicate those developmental windows during childhood that may be most critical for intervention effects

Baltimore PNRC Leadership Team

DIANA H. FISHBEIN is a Senior Fellow directing the Transdisciplinary Science and Translational Prevention Program for RTI International. For 25 years, she has studied influences on brain development and functioning and ways in which neurological deficits and developmental delays alter behavior and the ability to respond to interventions. She applies a model that accounts for a new generation of findings in neuroscience in the context of environmental and psychosocial (e.g., child maltreatment, witnessing violence) risk factors. Her research suggests that an interaction between brain and environmental factors contributes to behavioral problems in children, adolescents, and young adults. New strategies for preventive and treatment interventions to target these underlying mechanisms can minimize risk-taking behaviors and improve healthy decision making. Neuroscience shows that brain plasticity continues into adulthood; thus, targeted behavioral and social interventions can help “rewire” neural circuits to compensate for poor environmental conditions to promote more advantageous outcomes.

DANA ELDTRETH is a Johns Hopkins University-trained researcher whose degree in cognitive neuroscience focuses on cognitive function and brain imaging. She has over 10 years of research experience, much of which has focused on Baltimore City, investigating the consequences of substance abuse, foster care, anxiety, aging, and health disparities on cognition, behavior, and brain function. Dr. Eldreth’s research and training is grounded in a lifespan perspective, whereby early life decision-making, stress, and environmental exposures may adversely impact brain development and function into late-life. She has additional training from Johns Hopkins University in intervention methods to promote brain plasticity and state-of-the-art brain imaging techniques to measure it.

SUSAN MAGSAMEN is an award-winning writer and advisor on family and children’s issues. Her work has been called “a beautiful celebration of family life,” empowering parents and children to connect with each other, other families, and the world around them. Her work is widely recognized as fostering and enhancing the ways we learn, play, create, and grow as individuals, families, and communities. She unites scientists, educators, parents, psychologists, advocates, policymakers, educational media, and others to share their perspectives on topics that matter, including education, family life, careers, and more. She is co-director of The Johns Hopkins School of Education Neuro-Education Initiative (NEI), in the School of Education and works in collaboration with the JHU Brain Science Institute.

ROBIN STEVENS PAYES is a member of the PNRC Networking Team and consultant for RTI. As principal of WordsWork Communications, an independent marketing and communications consulting firm, she has worked with health nonprofit, education, and government clients for more than 25 years. Her current focus on health education and community empowerment enables her to work with scientists and educators to translate technical research findings and communicate them to policy experts, business and community leaders, and the diverse public to increase understanding and awareness and promote access to prevention, treatment, and cures. Documentary and public affairs television credits include Public Television-aired *Black Georgetown Remembered*, Emmy-nominated *WomenUSA!*, and the first two-way interactive local weekly news and public affairs cable program, *Cincinnati Alive*.