

CONCORD MONITOR

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New Hampshire had one of the highest rates of opioid-related fatalities in the country last year. Communities across the state are reporting that there is a surge in grandparents raising their grandchildren because of both the chaos and tragedy the crisis has had on families.

Most New Hampshire citizens know at least one person affected by the opioid crisis, and so there is emerging public support for prevention. Unfortunately, most discussions about prevention look at intervening in middle school at the earliest. While prevention in middle school is important, we have to set our focus much earlier in children's developmental trajectories if we are to effectively prevent the kind of crises we are now experiencing.

Science tells us that brains are built over time, and from the bottom up, with simple circuits and skills providing the scaffolding for more advanced circuits and skills that develop later. Early experiences literally shape the architecture of the developing brain, and skill begets skill. We also know that experiences such as abuse, neglect and exposure to violence can cause toxic stress responses in the brain, with lifelong consequences in health, learning and behavior. The active ingredient in healthy brain development, and the very thing that protects against toxic stress, is children's engagement in relationships with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community.

That is why effective early childhood programs and services can protect against a range of problems later in life – including substance misuse. In addition to buffering toxic stress, early childhood programs also help to link children to the services they and their families need.

Intervening early can shape developmental trajectories by piling on protective factors and minimizing risk factors – even for children most at risk. Programs like evidence-based home visiting, and high-quality child care, preschool and Head Start can help promote the development of cognitive and social skills which are protective factors against later substance use. These programs teach children to manage their own emotions and cope with adversity, and can help parents and other caregivers develop the skills to be supportive in ways that steer children away from substance use.

(Laura Milliken is director of Spark NH and Nick Willard is Chief of the Manchester Police Department)