



# Building Bright Tomorrows...Today

Summer 2014



## Changing the Shape of the Brain...and the Future

A human brain is one of the most complex and extraordinary organs in all the animal kingdom. The most rapid and malleable time of our brain's development occurs from birth to five years of age, when ninety percent of the structures that make up this complex organ are formed. What we are learning now about how these changes affect human behavior is truly astounding! Recent advances in brain scanning and mapping technologies have given rise to a new approach on early education. In fact it is shaping the way we, at Old Mill Center, design our early childhood and parent education programs.

The first parts of the brain to develop control our involuntary systems, like our circulatory, respiratory and limbic systems. Very early on this gives us the ability to interpret surrounding cues through our senses, and act with appropriate responses to our environment. For example, if we walk into our home and see smoke and smell fire, our limbic system floods our muscular and circulatory systems with adrenaline and cortisol, which support

a speedy response to the situation. This system is invaluable towards our longevity, as it serves to keep us safe. Although when this system is over-engaged in early childhood, because of chronic stress, poverty or abuse, it becomes bigger and can lead to a lifetime of challenges and undesirable responses.

The last part of the brain to develop is the pre-frontal cortex. This brain region has been implicated in planning complex cognitive behavior, personality expression, decision making, and moderating social behavior. What we know about the development of this portion of the brain is that an environment that is predictable and nurturing supports growth. When the brain is developing in an environment lacking these elements, this area is slow to develop and actually appears thinner on a brain scan.

The brain can be thought of as a muscle that develops in a "use-dependent" way. ***This means that the environment, in which children develop***

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***"We must all pull together to stitch a safety net for our community's children and their parents." – Bev Larson, Co-Founder of Old Mill Center***

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***from birth to five years old, determines the shape of their brain.*** If the environment is traumatic and unpredictable, the stress response system becomes overused and grows disproportionately and actually looks different than a typically developing brain in an MRI. This different brain supports different behavioral responses. For example, a child of five who has been raised in an unpredictable environment (poverty, drug abuse, neglect) actually views the world as a threatening environment, the chemicals that support quick reactions are released more often and at higher levels.

– Continued P3

## Straight from the Director

Summer is a wonderful time for children and families. There is so much to do around town, grow in the garden, and explore out in nature. School has ended and there is more time to play, read, dream and spend time with family.

We are fortunate in Corvallis and Benton County, to have many low or no cost activities available. Children who qualify for free meals during the school year also have access to meals during the summer. This relieves a burden on families and ensures that children get the nutrition they need to develop and enjoy the summer months.

While most of the programs at Old Mill Center are available to families year round, we do offer two summer specific programs. One is a 6-week summer camp through the Integrated Preschool. It will help 3-5 year olds maintain their skills over the summer and support the transition to kindergarten in the fall.

We will also offer a 3-week Therapeutic Summer Camp for 5-11 year olds. Its aim is to help children who might struggle in a larger camp experience because of the mental health challenges they face. This camp has a 1 to 3 staff/child ratio. Along with therapeutic activities the children will design, build and decorate a mud/straw structure. Look forward to photos in our September issue!

At Old Mill Center we rely on the generosity of the community, state and federal funding as well as program fees. We are deeply grateful for the generous support from so many individuals and organizations. Together we help children and families thrive and make this community an even better place to live and grow.

Thank you for your support.  
–Bettina Schempf, Executive Director

## Old Mill Center Impact and Community Support

### New Occupational Therapist at OMC



We are excited to welcome Pam Hood-Szivek, licensed and registered occupational therapist (OTR/L), to Old Mill Center! Miss Pam, as her young clients call her, began Corvallis Children's Therapy to offer occupational therapy services to help local children meet their full potential. From her new office here and using our wonderful well equipped Monkey Room, she will continue to serve her current clients, as well as see new clients referred by Old Mill Center staff and the community. From handwriting delays to sensory processing disorders, treatment is focused and fun.

Pam crafts home programs to reinforce and expand skills at home. Each child is different, so she works collaboratively with each family, child and their team to create a unified circle of care. With over twenty years of experience in a variety of settings including early intervention programs, schools, homes, clinics and private offices, Pam can help your child achieve functional goals for living well.

### Photo Project Helps Strengthen Families

"A securely attached baby leads to a curious toddler, which leads to a kindergartener ready for school and beyond." This concept is one of the guiding principles of Healthy Families Oregon, a home visiting program serving parents and their newly born children. Our Healthy Families Program at Old Mill Center has had a unique opportunity this spring to incorporate photography into our home visiting services, as a means of enriching attachment and strengthening relationships within the entire family.

This focus on photography came about as a special intern project for Alexi Schweitzer, a senior in the Oregon State University Human Development and Family Sciences program, who completed her 270



hour internship with Healthy Families this spring. Families were offered the opportunity to have a photography session with Alexi (a skilled photography enthusiast) and the family's Home Visitor, following an initial set of home visits to get acquainted with parents and their babies.

Eugenia Sotelo, Healthy Families Home Visitor, shares that the family interactions and closeness during the photo sessions were amazing to observe, and for some families proved to be therapeutic to their relationships with each other. Supportive, loving relationships are the cornerstone of effective parenting and family attachment, and this unique project has provided many new perspectives and creative opportunities to promote families' relationships with each other.

Kelly Longway, Healthy Families Home Visitor, notes that an outcome of this project is that, "Families seem closer to our program. It's a wonderful way to make families feel special and to give them lovely photographs they can share with family and friends. The experience really promotes family bonding too!"

Alexi herself summarizes her experience well: "To invite a new person into your home can be a scary experience. Being able to take pictures for families has been a great and unique way for me to connect with them and to develop positive relationships. The pictures represent strength, unity, and happiness for the families and it has been such an honor to provide them with this gift."

## Volunteering at Old Mill Center

### Thank You Volunteers!

On May 20th, Old Mill Center was the fortunate recipient of fourteen sets of extra hands. A wonderful group of volunteers from HP, led by Mark Rebhuhn, came to our center armed with tools and ready to work. We can't thank them enough for all that they accomplished that day—sanding and staining our outdoor furniture, replacing stained ceiling tiles, patching holes in walls, repairing gutters, trimming and removing countless lost/damaged shrubs, cleaning our HVAC vents to keep us safe from fire and so much more. They were fantastic. We could not do the work that we do for children & families in our community without wonderful volunteers like this bunch!

*Would you like to volunteer at Old Mill Center? For more information about volunteer and intern opportunities contact Kerrie Tarkinton.*



## Shape of the Brain

—Continued from P1

Essentially, it makes them quick to react and slow to generate healthy solutions to problems. Projected across a lifetime, there is little doubt that the consequences are dire—to the children and to our community. Our penal system is full of people whose brains were shaped by adverse early childhood experiences.

When a child from a nurturing and predictable family enters a kindergarten classroom, they see numbers and colors, shapes and animals, and most importantly opportunities. When a child from a family plagued by drug abuse, domestic violence, and poverty enters the same classroom, they see threats. The shape of their brain, based on their first environment, sets in motion a chain reaction of interpretations that affect their responses for a lifetime.

Another amazing thing about brain development is that malleability continues throughout life and, with practice, one can create new pathways in their brain that support different and more productive behaviors. At Old Mill Center, we are trained in techniques to support young children in developing systems to manage their stress responses. We hear children say, “I felt my heartbeat getting fast and my hands wanted to punch, but then I remembered what to do, and I sniffed the flower and blew out the candles (deep-breathing) and thought of a different way to solve the problem.” We are changing the shape of the brain and the shape of the future, one child and family at a time.

## Quality Early Education Creates a Safety Net

Old Mill Center’s early education programs are designed to help children thrive—to mitigate the impacts that chronic stress can have. Children not only learn age appropriate academic skills but also social emotional skills that will allow them to better cope and respond to their environments and to be successful in school and life.

There are multiple ways to access our early education and development services.

- Our Integrated Preschool is open to all 3-5 year olds and provides children with the unique experience to share a classroom with children of a diverse range of abilities and backgrounds. Our 6-week summer program begins July 7th and runs until August 15th. Enrolment is open for the 2014 – 2015 school year.
- The Relief Nursery education programs run year-round and enrolment for the toddler and preschool classrooms is available to qualifying families. In addition to the education programs, the Relief Nursery offers comprehensive services that include home visiting, parent education and mental health support for parents.

Both programs recently earned the highest score (a five star rating) in the Oregon Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The Integrated Preschool is also accredited through NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children).

We can create a safety net for families that allows children to avoid, and recover from, the painful effects of early exposure to trauma and stress.



*With practice, one can create new pathways in their brain that support different and more productive behaviors.*

## PRESCHOOL SUMMER CAMP

July 7th - August 15th  
8AM - NOON

Ages 3 - 5  
Register Now!



Newsletter contributors: Gretchen Thielman, Samantha Newton, Alexi Schweitzer, Bettina Schempf, Kerrie Tarkinton, & Medora Tuck

# Thank you for supporting us at the annual auction!

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The 34th annual auction, held on May 9th, brought in over \$200,000! Thank you to the community of Corvallis for its overwhelming support. A special thank you to Adam Kirsch and his scouts for helping to breakdown and clean up after the auction. Thank you to Philip Gutt for allowing us to display his beautiful mosaic surfboards during auction. We were all intrigued by his work.

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