

Reports & Working Papers

Understanding Motivation: Building the Brain Architecture That Supports Learning, Health, and Community Participation

A healthy, engaged community depends on people achieving to the best of their potential, contributing actively to the economy and public well-being, and helping the next generation to thrive. A complex set of intertwined social and biological factors influences people’s motivation to participate actively and productively in schools, jobs, and communities—and to persevere in the face of setbacks.

To unlock this puzzle and ensure that all people have the opportunity to develop motivation to learn, improve skills, and make healthy choices, it would be helpful to understand the underlying mechanisms in the brain that develop in childhood and build the foundation for later complex behavior.

This Working Paper from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child explains the science behind motivation—the “wanting” system and the “liking” system—as well as how those

systems develop, and how that development can be disrupted. It also dives into the implications of the science for parents, caregivers, and teachers, as well as policy and public systems.



To learn more about the brain regions involved in motivation and how they work together, view [this interactive graphic](#).

Understanding Motivation: Building the Brain Architecture That Supports Learning, Health, and Community Participation

WORKING PAPER 14

Understanding Motivation: Building the Brain Architecture That Supports Learning, Health, and Community Participation: Working Paper No. 14



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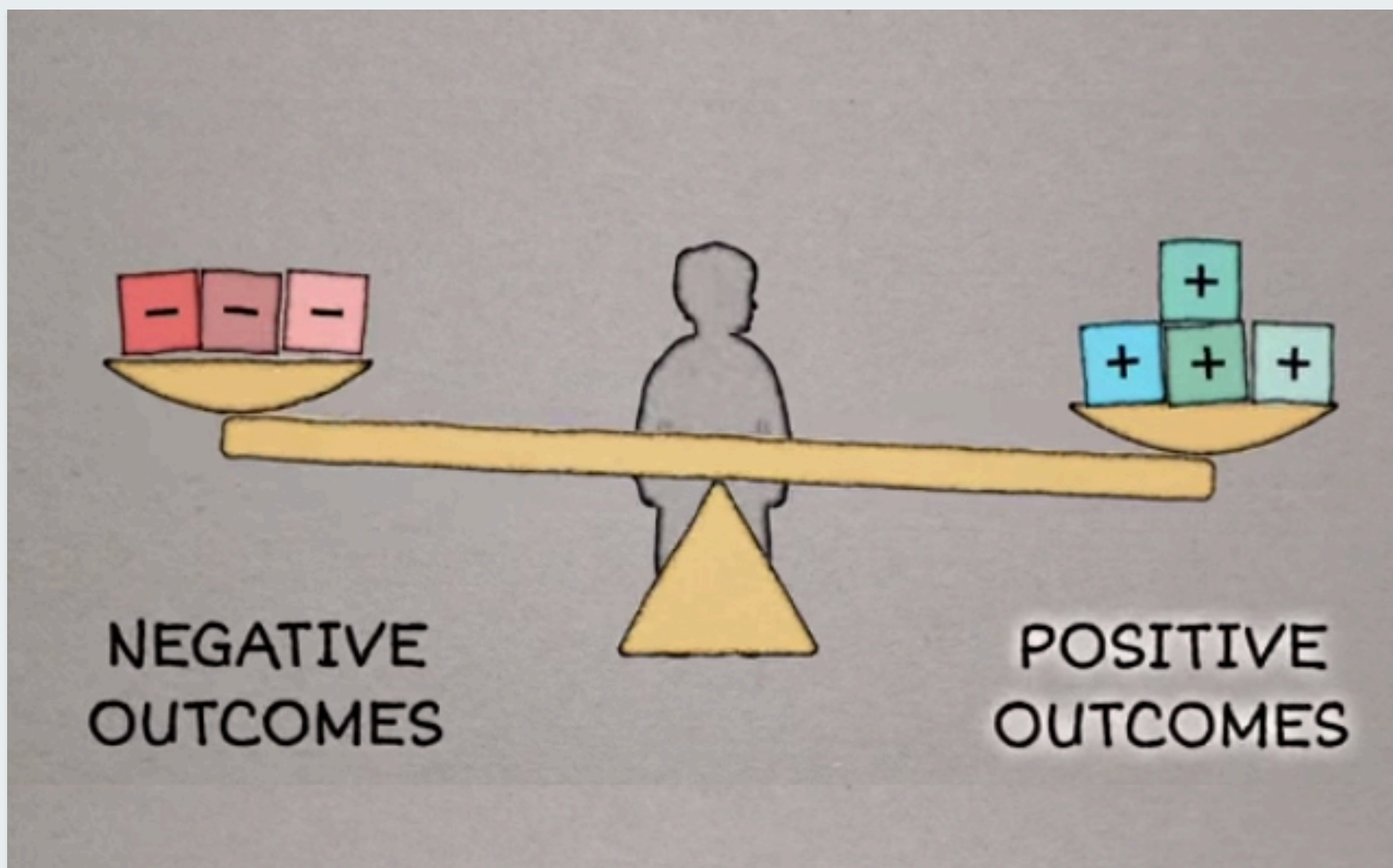
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From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts

A series of brief summaries of essential findings from recent scientific publications and presentations by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

Reducing the effects of significant adversity on young children's healthy development is critical to the progress and prosperity of any society. Yet not all children experience lasting harm as a result of adverse early experiences. Some may demonstrate “resilience,” or an adaptive response to serious hardship. A better understanding of why some children do well despite early adversity is important because it can help us design policies and programs that help more children reach their full potential.

One way to understand the development of resilience is to visualize a balance scale or seesaw (see image below). Protective experiences and adaptive skills on one side counterbalance significant adversity on the other. Resilience is evident when a child's health and development are tipped in the positive direction, even when a heavy load of factors is stacked on the negative side. Understanding all of the influences that might tip the scale in the positive direction is critical to devising more effective strategies for promoting healthy development in the face of significant disadvantage.

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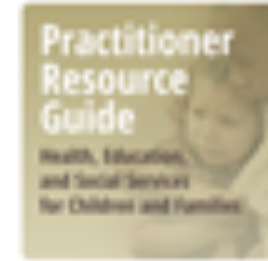
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