

A photograph of several children holding hands in a grassy field. The children are wearing colorful clothing: a pink shirt and blue shorts, a floral dress, a red shirt and blue pants, a blue shirt with a sun graphic and light pants, and a green dress. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

THE BUSINESS AND BRAINS OF RELATIONSHIPS

The brain can be a lazy organ.

It loves patterns. It'll fight learning something new, if it can use something old.

"Keep that in mind, as we talk about the brain."

Kathleen Gallagher said this last September in her keynote speech at the "Learn, Play, Grow" early childhood conference at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. She came to the conference to talk about young brains and to explain how the connections they make very early in life — among

neurons as well as with people — make all the difference later in life.

For the child. For the world.

"The more ideas and the more sentences that babies are exposed to, the more of those connections are made between neurons," she said. "But the less the babies experience, the less connections develop between neurons. It's about relationships.

"Ultimately, the single most important thing we need to be thinking about is relationships. We're teaching kids to have relationships. That's our business.

And we're looking for relationships with families."

Gallagher came to Kearney last fall as the first-ever recipient of the Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education. She holds the first endowed chair in UNK's College of Education as well as the first of four community chairs the University of Nebraska will establish through its Buffett Early Childhood Institute. She came to Kearney from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after more than 30 years of working with and studying young children, families and early childhood

professionals. She brought with her a reputation as a leader in the field of early childhood care and education.

One of her passions — and her mission at UNK — is helping develop the early childhood workforce. In her new role in Nebraska, she'll work with both UNK and the Buffett Institute to apply the best research in ways that will help Nebraska families, communities and early childhood professionals, like those who were in her audience that day.

"I realize I'm speaking to the choir," Gallagher told her audience — child care home providers, child care center

staff, preschool teachers and staff, Head Start staff, elementary teachers and administrators, college students and parents interested in the topic.

They came from the Kearney area and from across the state. They came to fill their brains with wisdom from Gallagher, whose keynote speech was "Transformative Early Childhood Care and Education: What It Means and What It Takes."

So what does it mean?

It means developing the whole child and empowering families, she said, not just

focusing on developing academic skills. It means beginning with the brain even before birth with good prenatal care and nutrition because those neurons are connecting so quickly, even before birth.

The brain also is learning about emotions. Nature sets it up so that babies need to have a lot of negative emotions in the early months, to get their needs met — "I need to eat" and "I need to be changed."

"Why are negative emotions really important for babies?" Gallagher asked.

"Safety," a voice called out.

(continued)

“Yes.”

Caregivers and early childhood teachers understand that early in development, the child’s brain recognizes patterns related to people’s faces (“Oh, I know that person” or “I don’t know that person.”) and decides what adults feel “safe” for feeding and playtime.

Stress can be a teacher and keep them safe.

But too much stress on young brains isn’t good. When we are stressed, Gallagher said, our bodies produce a hormone called cortisol. High cortisol levels make it harder for young children to regulate their behavior and harder to learn and to think.

“Think of the last time you had a fender bender,” Gallagher said. “How well did you use your words? How regulated were your emotions?”

People in the audience laughed.

“So if children experience emotional

fender benders all the time on a regular basis, their cortisol remains high and they struggle to learn and develop.”

One big stressor: poverty. Although Nebraska is doing better than most other states, Gallagher said, it still has 16 percent of its children living in poverty.

And what does it take to transform early care and education?

It means we need to take care of families.

“You can’t take care of children without taking care of families,” she said, “because that’s where they grow up and that’s where some sources of stress are.”

It means we need to talk with young children.

The more ideas and the more sentences babies are exposed to, she said, the more those connections between neurons happen. But babies

also need to have mostly positive experiences and positive relationships very early because those negative experiences get held tightly in their early memory.

The single most important process for caring for and educating young children, Gallagher said, is a process called “serve and return” — being “contingently responsive.”

It goes like this:

Baby: Ga!

Caregiver: Hello, sweet baby, are you ready to play?

“Babies are born ready to be in relationships. It’s our job to make sure they’re good ones. So ‘serve and return’ is essential. If you take nothing else from my talk today, it is that the most important thing I do is talk to a young child and have them talk back. Look at young children, have them look back. Because that is the essence

of learning and development.”

And that’s why, she said, the role of early education professionals — the front-line “serve and returners” — is so important.

While family members may have one or three or four children to “serve and return” with every day, an early childhood educator may have six, 12, 24 kids they must interact with every day. It can be hard work, she said, like being a family member on steroids.

That’s why professionals need to be educated and well-compensated, skilled and healthy.

“I like to think of you — early childhood care and education professionals — as superheroes.”



- Kathleen Gallagher

Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education

What others say about Gallagher:

“We are very fortunate to have an early childhood leader like Kate Gallagher joining us at UNK. She believes in our commitment to supporting and increasing the early childhood workforce and is ready to play a leadership role in our outreach to rural areas of Nebraska.”

- Sheryl Feinstein, dean, UNK College of Education

“The community chair positions were created for individuals who are leaders, innovators and catalysts for change in their communities. Kate Gallagher certainly fits that description. Her work embraces opportunities to learn from and teach families, early childhood professionals and communities at the highest level.”

- Samuel Meisels, founding executive director, NU’s Buffett Early Childhood Institute

“I would say thank you to the donors who support early childhood (and Gallagher’s chair). I would say thank you as a future educator, as well as a student who had a positive experience during preschool. What children learn and experience in the first few years of life sets them up for the rest of their future.”

- UNK sophomore Breanna Hiner, a first-generation college student studying early childhood education who plans to open her own family daycare someday

“Kate Gallagher cares deeply about children and their families. She’ll work tirelessly to make sure that Nebraska is the best state in the nation to be born. She’ll elevate the dialogue on early learning and family supports. And she’ll do it in a way that encourages engagement from diverse stakeholders.”

- Kirsten Kainz, associate director for research development and translation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work