



## Climate Change and Early Childhood Development

On April 22, millions of people across the world celebrated Earth Day, a day meant to raise awareness about the health of the environment and shed a brighter light on the dangerous effects of climate change. As people recommit to efforts to make the planet healthier, we must also acknowledge the ways in which climate change and healthy child development are inextricably linked. The impacts of climate change pose significant risks to the physical health, psychological well-being, and social connections of children. Risks from the impacts of a changing climate and environmental conditions are growing in strength and number and affecting millions of lives in our nation and around the world. These climate disasters are particularly disruptive to the lives of young children and their families, and bring particular attention to the need for ongoing healthy early relationships and nurturing care experiences for young families. Their future well-being and strength will be impacted by the decisions we make today and the planning we do for future climate events. This newsletter article features content from [a new blog](#), which highlights a dialogue between Joan Lombardi, Ph.D., Director of the Early Opportunities Initiative, and David Willis, M.D., FAAP, Senior Fellow at the CSSP, discussing the connection between the climate change movement and advancing Early Relational Health.

The effects of climate change on children can range from physical health impacts to psychological and social consequences. One of the most direct impacts of climate change on child well-being is through the health effects of extreme weather events. Children are particularly vulnerable to these impacts, as they may not have the ability to protect themselves or cope with the aftermath of these events without the protective care of others. Furthermore, the burden of environmental disasters and climate change is not equally experienced by all. In fact, Black, Brown, and Native Communities are more likely to experience environmental racism in the decisions and policies that impact their communities. These communities are more likely to be exposed to disproportionate numbers and types of hazards, including increased pollution and the siting of pollution industries, lack of green spaces, and the proximity of toxic waste facilities and garbage dumps. Children who are exposed to high levels of air pollution are more likely to experience respiratory problems such as asthma and bronchitis.

Beyond the physical health impacts, climate change can also have negative psychological and social consequences for children. This is especially important when there are limited or disrupted opportunities for children to experience relational support. Children who are exposed to extreme weather events or other environmental stressors may experience trauma and stress, which can have long-term impacts on their mental well-being. We must also remember that the recovery of the family and the buffering support that children receive to protect them from these long-term impacts is also dependent on the social and economic stability of the family and the broader community.

There is a clear growing need for broad collaboration and cross-sector planning to support children, families, and communities being impacted by the climate crisis. Vibrant, interconnected, and stable neighborhoods and communities are vital environments for

raising healthy and strong families. The intersection of climate-safe communities and nurturing care initiatives brings a greater focus on the development of future generations, and both groups can better learn and plan together. Such relational efforts offer hope and opportunities for a brighter future amid changing and unpredictable environments.

Climate change is on the minds of young families and causes anxiety for many families and communities, which in turn can have an impact on child well-being. By planning and taking actions at the individual, community, and policy levels, we can help families ensure that their children are protected from the negative impacts of climate change and are able to adapt and thrive in a changing world. Nurture Connection highlights the power of human connection as being protective, preventive, and essential in creating safe and nurturing environments. More than ever, we must turn our attention to new policies and practices that support families and communities as they prepare for the impacts of climate change and create conditions to protect the health and well-being of all children, families, and communities.

## Parent Perspective

**Question:** What do you think about the climate crisis for yourself, your family, and your community?

**Family Network Collaborative Response:** "I think we are poisoning our future and not protecting a nurturing environment for our future generations. We are losing beauty that we take for granted. Just because we can't see what is happening doesn't mean it's not real." – Nicole Loveless, New Mexico



## Explore More

**Willis, Long, & Friends**  Nurture Connection  
*Relief Nurseries:*  
*ERH in Action at the Community Level*  
Wednesday, March 29  
2:00 PM ET



**David Willis, MD, FAAP**  
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**Cara Copeland, MS, MEd**  
Executive Director, Oregon  
Association of Relief Nurseries

**Amber Ziring, MSW, MPH, IBCLC**  
Program Director, Oregon  
Association of Relief Nurseries

### Willis, Long, & Friends March 2023 Relief Nurseries: ERH in Action at the Community Level

Last month's Willis, Long, and Friends featured Cara Copeland, Executive Director of Oregon Association of Relief Nurseries (OARN), and Amber Ziring, Program Director of OARN. The conversation included the purpose of Relief Nurseries, OARN'S model of supporting 38 centers across Oregon, and what their work looks like at both the community level



## What is Early Relational Health?

Early Relational Health is the state of emotional well-being that grows from the positive emotional connection between babies and toddlers and their parents when they experience safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with each other. ERH is foundational to children's healthy growth and development and parents' sense of competence, connection, and overall well-being. These resilient and enduring relationships also help to protect the family from the harmful effects of stress.

and policy level.

Watch the Recording Here



### **Pairing Parents and Providers to Examine Early Relational Health in Academic Pediatric Primary Care Clinics**

A new Nurture Connection blog by Jenna Russo, M.S., and Dayna Long, M.D., FAAP, examines how uniting academic medical centers with caregivers to discuss how to talk about Early Relational Health has the potential to transform service delivery, inform new policies, and inspire relationship-driven change across all sectors — leading to better and more equitable outcomes for all children and families.

Read Here

### **Core ERH Resources**

Frameworks Institute. [Building Relationships: Framing Early Relational Health](#). Prepared in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Social Policy. May 2020.

Willis D, Chavez S, Lee J, Hampton P, Fine A. [Early Relational Health National Survey: What We're Learning from the Field](#). Center for the Study of Social Policy. 2020.

Willis D, Sege R, Johnson K. [Changing the Mindset: Foundational Relationships Counter Adversity with HOPE](#). (Blog) Center for the Study of Social Policy. May 2020.

Perspectives on ERH Video Series. [Perspectives on Early Relational Health Series](#). Center for the Study of Social Policy. 2022.

Center of the Study of Social Policy and Health+ Studio. [How to Communicate Effectively About Early Relational Health: What It Is and Why It Matters..](#) 2022.

## **What We're Reading and Listening**

- **'Small Things Often' Parenting**. The Gottman Institute. March 2023. [Read here.](#)
- Rides At The Door M, Shaw S. **The Other Side of the ACEs Pyramid: A Healing Framework for Indigenous Communities**. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. February 2023. [Read here.](#)
- Milligan K, Zerda, J, & Kania J. **The Relational Work of Systems Change**. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. January 2022. [Read here.](#)
- **Teachers, Toddlers, and Tissues: Candid Conversations on Health and Child Care**. Rachel Giannini & Dr. Dipesh Navsaria. [Listen here.](#)

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### **Contact**

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[The Center for the Study of Social Policy \(CSSP\)](#), which conceived Nurture Connection, is a national, non-profit policy organization that connects community action, public system reform, and policy change to

create a fair and just society in which all children and families thrive. We work to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. To do this, we translate ideas into action, promote public policies grounded in equity, support strong and inclusive communities, and advocate with and for all children and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

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