



## May is Mental Health Awareness Month: Can we move from awareness to prevention and healing through the power of relational health?

By David Willis, MD, FAAP & Jennifer Oppenheim, PsyD

*“Our children need help.”* This lament is increasingly vocalized by parents, child health providers, and local and national public health leaders. Across our nation, behavioral health experts are sounding the alarm of rising rates of child and youth loneliness, mental health disorders, and suicide. [A recent CDC survey](#) noted that the percent of teen girls who reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless rose from [36% in 2011 to 57% in 2021](#). Shockingly, nearly 1 in 3 (30%) seriously considered suicide.

Three major child health organizations — American Academy of Pediatrics, Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children’s Hospital Association — have joined together to declare a [National State of Emergency in Children’s Mental Health](#). And just this month, the U.S. surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, MD, released a [new Surgeon General Advisory](#) calling attention to the health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our nation. Surgeon General Murthy notes that, in addition to impacting our physical health, loneliness and isolation contribute substantially to mental health challenges, with childhood loneliness and social isolation increasing the risk of depression and anxiety, both immediately and well into the future.

As we highlight the importance of emotional well-being of children and youth this month, we should also celebrate the growing openness in our society and the healthcare system to talking about the importance of mental health and what we must do to support the mental health of each child, family, and community in our nation. This is one potential silver lining of the pandemic: Its universality seems to have resulted in unprecedented numbers of people candidly sharing their experiences of anxiety, loss, sadness, grief, loneliness, and trauma. This has led to a growing recognition that mental health is something that is relevant to each of us — something that we need to attend to with the same attention we place on our physical health.

Yet at this moment of increased need and openness to seeking mental health supports, [nearly half of Americans](#) live in behavioral health workforce shortage areas. Even where supports exist, barriers still persist. A lack of trauma-informed, racially and ethnically congruent, and culturally responsive treatment options and practitioners is one issue. The hesitation by communities — particularly communities of color — to seek help because of past unjust and discriminatory experiences with systems of care is another. As we recognize the need to increase the number and diversity of highly trained behavioral health clinicians equipped to treat serious mental illness and addiction, might this also be a moment to build a relational health workforce that is trained to offer support and connection for those who are getting by but struggling to move to a place of greater health and well-being?

Several examples illustrate the impact of centering relationships and connection as part of supporting emotional and mental well-being:

The [Friendship Bench](#) is an evidence-based intervention that trains volunteer grandmothers to offer a brief problem-solving therapy to community members struggling with anxiety and depression on designated wooden benches. The model was developed in Zimbabwe, and its founder, Dixon Chibanda, PhD, describes connection as the most therapeutic feature of the work, with storytelling, reflective listening, and problem-solving as key ingredients.

[Facilitating Attuned Interactions \(FAN\)](#), a communications framework and practical tool for building trust and connection, is helping practitioners across disciplines to develop stronger, more respectful and trusting relationships with families. FAN is based on the understanding that careful attunement facilitates a sense of connection and being understood, which in turn creates openings for change.

[The Confess Project](#), which has a mission to build awareness around mental health within the Black community, trains barbers and hairstylists to become mental health advocates to reduce mental health stigma, build connection, prevent suicide, and provide links to treatment. The project started in 2016 with a [goal](#) of “equipping marginalized Black men and boys with mental health strategies and coping skills to help them move past their pain.”

[Whole Hearts, Minds & Bodies](#) is a therapeutic mentoring program based in Tahoe, California, that provides clinically supervised, one-on-one, nature-based therapeutic mentoring for youth experiencing serious mental or behavioral health challenges. By centering relational well-being, the intervention provides the container, support, connection, and opportunities for young people to start their healing journeys and thrive.

While these examples provide some exciting potential ways to address the current mental health crisis by focusing on the healing power of human connection, we can do even more. Promoting Early Relational Health (ERH) offers a path for ensuring that families have the supports they need during the first years of their child’s life so that they both can thrive and experience the joys and health benefits that come from emotional connection. If communities can grow and strengthen their own relational health workforces to partner with and support young children, youth, and families (including ERH-trained doulas, pediatricians, home visitors, teachers, mentors, and others), we can ensure that future generations are mentally healthy from the start.

The [Nurture Connection](#) network is working toward this goal of creating a foundation for flourishing by advancing Early Relational Health (ERH) for babies, toddlers, their families, and communities. Below are some examples for building healthier, more connected communities. We’re partnering with:

- [Health Connect One](#) to lift up the ERH practices of community-based doula’s (CBD) and elevate their voices, lived experiences, and ancestral practices.
- [Reach Out and Read: Next Chapter](#) initiative training more than 10,000 pediatricians and encouraging conversations with families about the importance of foundational emotional connections for future well-being.
- Communities that are creating universal supports for all new babies and families. The [Bridgeport Baby Bundle](#) is showing promise in population-based child well-being trajectories at age 3, and its work is now expanding to Nurture CT 359, focused on ensuring children are “on-target at 3, ready by 5, and thriving by 9.”

#### [Nurture Connection](#) [Believes In](#)

- Power of human connection
- Family partnership and cultural wisdom
- Equity and justice
- Community leadership
- Hope for a healthier future

Hope springs eternal for growing these and other ERH initiatives as a means to promote flourishing and prevent future child mental health challenges. We also need to advocate for policies that cultivate strong, positive, and nurturing relationships as a foundation for

health and well-being. By strengthening our ERH efforts, we are responding to the surgeon general's call to **strengthen social infrastructures, enact pro-connection public policies, mobilize the health sector, deepen our knowledge, and cultivate a culture of connection.** [We invite you to join Nurture Connection, the growing movement to promote Early Relational Health.](#)

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## Parent Perspective

**Question:** How do you manage your stress in the day-to-day care of your family?

**Family Network Collaborative response:** I prioritize caring for myself so I can be present with my family.


- I create a list of things that bring me peace, pleasure, and joy — journaling, reading, meditating, etc.
- It's important to remember that self-care is not one-size-fits-all. I design what is true for me in that moment.
- If I begin to feel overwhelmed, I make a list of the top five things I need to address and just concentrate on one thing at a time.
- I enjoy a BIG laugh.



To learn more about the Family Network Collaborative at Nurture Connection, visit our website [here](#).

## Explore More

**Nurture Conversations**  
Promoting ERH in Pediatric Healthcare

 Nurture Connection


Wednesday, May 17  
2:00 PM ET



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### **Nurture Conversations May 2023** **Promoting ERH in Pediatric Healthcare**

This month's Nurture Conversations features Carrie Quinn, MD. Dr. Quinn is a pediatrician and executive

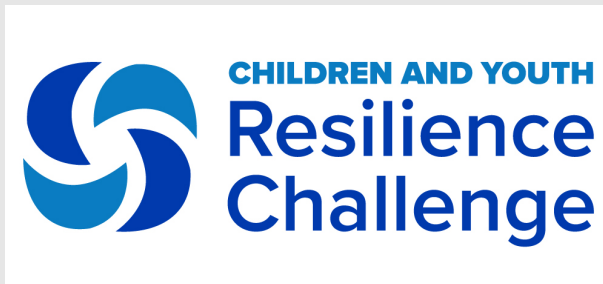


## What is Early Relational Health?

**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,

director of [Mount Sinai Parenting Center](#). The conversation includes background on the center, a discussion about the importance of training pediatricians in parenting knowledge, and explaining and modeling those concepts with parents to promote early relational health.

[Watch the Recording Here](#)



### **Children and Youth Resilience Challenge**

The US Department of Health and Human Services has launched a [Children and Youth Resilience Prize Challenge](#) intended to award prizes to innovative community-led solutions to promote resilience in children and adolescents affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters. HHS is hosting its [second of three webinars](#) to share information about the challenge on June 6.

[Learn More](#)



### **The Power of Relationships: The FAN Approach & Infant/Toddler Development**

Erikson Institute is hosting a three-day workshop focused on the FAN (Facilitating Attuned Interactions) approach as part of its [Summer Learning](#) series, from June 27 to 29. The workshop will be offered in both English and Spanish and will provide in-depth training in using the FAN tool to promote healthy infant/child development, increase parental/practitioner confidence, and strengthen relationships. The registration deadline is May 30.

[Learn More](#)

connection, and overall well-being. These resilient and enduring relationships also help to protect the family from the harmful effects of stress.

### **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.

Find additional resources on our [website](#).

## What We're Reading and Listening

- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. (May 2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. surgeon general's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*. [Read here.](#)
- Minoff, E. (May 2023). *Let us rise: How parents and caregivers would design a permanent child allowance to advance racial and economic justice*. Center for the Study of Social Policy. [Read here.](#)
- Coker, T., et al. (April 2023). Community health workers in early childhood well-child care for Medicaid-insured children: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA*. [Read here.](#)
- Nolvi, S., Merz, E., Kataja, E., & Parsons, C. (May 2023). Prenatal stress and the developing brain: Postnatal environments promoting resilience. *Biological Psychiatry*. [Read here.](#)

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### **Contact**

info@nurtureconnection.org

**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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