



Georgetown University Certificate Program for Entry-Level Mental Health Workers Helps Build Community-Based ERH Support Networks

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To successfully partner with parents and caregivers and ensure that they have the support and resources they need to form healthy relationships with their babies and toddlers, practitioners must center families' needs and meet them where they are. Community-based organizations (CBOs) serving children and families are uniquely positioned to provide accessible Early Relational Health (ERH) supports to families in trusting, non-stigmatized, and culturally relevant settings — particularly for families in communities that have been treated inequitably and unjustly by systems of care, including the healthcare system.

With the critical need for mental healthcare in Washington, D.C., the [Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies](#); [Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development](#); [MedStar Georgetown University Hospital](#), Department of Psychiatry; and the [Early Childhood Innovation Network \(ECIN\)](#) collaborated to develop the ten-month Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Family Leadership [certificate program](#).

Based on a model of task shifting — an approach recommended by the [World Health Organization](#) as a way to make more efficient use of health resources and increase the agility of health systems — the program seeks to create new partnerships and pathways for extending relational health supports into communities. It accomplishes this through education and training to increase the number of entry-level mental health workers who live in the communities they serve and have shared lived experiences. With a firsthand understanding of the complex, interrelated challenges of their local communities, the program participants learn additional skills that build localized, community-based ERH support networks.

Since the program's launch in fall 2021, 50 participants have completed the certificate program. Students who enroll in the program are often parents themselves. They serve as frontline community health workers, focusing on the social-emotional and early relational health of children and their families. They provide social support and guidance, mental health and early childhood development education, preventive screenings, and referrals to mental health professionals as needed. They also advocate for families impacted by inequitable conditions.

Participants enthusiastically describe the program's benefits. As one participant explained: "I acquired an invaluable body of knowledge through the Georgetown University family mental health course. The course not only introduced me to a subject matter of which I

had little familiarity, but it also stimulated and acutely sharpened my awareness of the stable and nurturing environment we must create in the early childhood arena.”

Another key part in helping mental health workers meet caregivers where they are at is taking into consideration their social, cultural, and racial identities and relationships. Building upon mental health workers’ shared lived experience with the community, the certificate program applies an anti-racist approach to teaching and learning. In turn, the students of this program can form even stronger and more trusting relationships with the families in their communities. It also explains how organizations can progress from being a trauma-informed practice to a healing-centered one — a workplace environment that prioritizes healthy and healing relationships, reflection, growth, and prevention.

“The program has helped me strengthen my knowledge on the topic of mental health. It enlightened my sense of care and compassion in caring for our children,” reported a participant. “It raised my awareness of bias and discrimination, and to be purposeful in promoting respect for one another, and celebrating diversity and inclusion.”

Practicum and apprenticeship placements at healthcare, child welfare, and early learning sites allow students and graduates to make an immediate impact on the lives of families. Certificate program graduates go on to provide direct mental health support services to families in health, education, and other community settings.

The certificate program is illustrative of ERH in action. It builds the capacity of communities from within to better serve the mental and relational health needs of children and families, while simultaneously providing professional development and job placement opportunities for parents of young children in divested communities.

The certificate in IECMH Family Leadership is offered in an online flex learning environment and is open to anyone with at least a high school or general education diploma with lived experience. Learn more about the [certificate program](#).

Parent Perspective

Question: Why are you involved in the Family Network Collaborative?

Claudia Aristy - [Reach Out and Read](#), and parent leader representing Latinx Spanish-speaking immigrant families in New York: “This work is too important not to do. When this is done right, you see the waves. It’s like the gift that keeps on giving. This can be a healing process for the individual parent or caregiver, but it’s the transformation that happens at the societal level because that child who has the emotional connection with their parent or caregiver in turns becomes a caring human being whether they become a parent or not.”



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

Explore More



What is Early Relational Health?



Why We Must BLOOM: Racially Concordant Care in Improving Health Outcomes of Black Children and Families

In a new Nurture Connection blog, Dayna Long, MD shares her personal connection to the importance of racially concordant care, and how BLOOM: Black Baby Equity Clinic, an initiative of UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, is centering the Black family experience in ERH.

Read Here



Building Connected Communities: An action forum for leaders working to address social isolation, loneliness, and connection

Building Connected Communities, an action forum in Boston for leaders working to address social isolation, loneliness, and connection, is happening October 12-14. Hosted by the Foundation for Social Connection, Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program, and Healthy Places by Design, with support from Einhorn Collaborative, the conference will spotlight community insights and solutions for greater social connection from pioneering researchers, social innovators, and corporate, nonprofit, and civic leaders. It's not too late to register to participate virtually and hear speakers like U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, Dr. Robert Putnam, Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, and U.S. Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT).

Register Here

Early Relational Health is the state of emotional well-being that grows from emotional connection between babies and toddlers and their parents and caregivers when they experience strong, positive, and nurturing relationships with each other.

ERH is foundational to children's healthy growth and development and parents' and caregivers' sense of competence, connection, and overall well-being. These strong 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

- Roby, E., et al. (September 2023). Promotion of Positive Childhood Experiences and Early Relational Health in Pediatric Primary Care: Accumulating Evidence. *Academic Pediatrics*. [Read here.](#)
- Van Ginkel, J. B. (December 2023). Chasing Success: The Challenge for Nonprofits. [See book here.](#)
- Gosnell, F., et al. (July 2022). Relational Determinants of Health and Mental Health. *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Critical Perspectives on Mental Health*. [Read here.](#)
- Seligman, M. (2011). Flourish. [See book here.](#)

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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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