



Climate Change, Young Children, and the Importance of Nurturing Relationships

By David Willis, MD and Joan Lombardi, PhD

The evidence is mounting that climate change and other environmental conditions are having an impact on the developing child and the well-being of families — making climate change a major issue in the promotion of Early Relational Health (ERH). Two important reports released in October bring critical attention to this reality. Both underscore the importance that nurturing relationships play as both a protective factor and a way to build mental strength in navigating life's challenges.

- ["Flourishing Children, Healthy Communities, and a Stronger Nation: The U.S. Early Years Climate Action Plan"](#) by the Early Years Climate Action Task Force, convened by [Capita](#) and [This Is Planet Ed](#) at the [Aspen Institute](#), outlines the impacts of climate change on young children based on 18 months of research and learning. The report provides a clear action plan for policymakers at all levels of government and other key stakeholders to assure steps are taken to help all young children thrive.
- ["Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Children and Youth Report 2023"](#) by the [American Psychological Association](#), [Climate for Health](#), and [ecoAmerica](#) provides recent research on the impacts of climate change on children and youth as well as guidance for response. It highlights that extreme weather makes children more vulnerable to mental health effects due to their dependence on caregivers and other direct impacts on health and well-being.

It has long been understood that young children are impacted by their families and that families are impacted by the communities they live in. While children in many communities have suffered decades of environmental risks due to racism and poverty, climate change is exacerbating those conditions. As Joan Lombardi, PhD, longtime champion of children, pointed out in her remarks to the Early Years Climate Task Force, "Equity and justice are part of the early childhood mission. We don't have to be experts on climate, but we do have to help build awareness of what is at stake for children."

Helping others understand the value of positive early childhood experiences and family support is more important than ever. Dr. David Willis, the core driver of [Nurture Connection](#)'s engaged movement for ERH, notes: "Climate change is now the context for human development, and thus it is critical that the promotion of supportive relationships is recognized as central to human flourishing."

As conveyed in both reports, climate change is already impacting families and their communities and is expected to intensify. Early childhood service providers (e.g., child health providers and early care and education providers) have a critical role in helping families cope with changes and responding and preparing for emergencies. Young

families, especially those with the least resources, often live in regions with visible climate and weather-related risks. These families face intensifying climate-related weather events that impact their employment, income, and access to housing, food, and safe drinking water, which disrupts their safety and stability.

For instance, warmer temperatures increase flood risks, which many cities are clearly not equipped to handle. According to the [“Flourishing Children, Healthy Communities, and a Stronger Nation” report](#), currently, 14.6 million U.S. homes face a substantial flood risk and the stress and turmoil of such a natural disaster has immediate impacts on families, their children, and the community of supports and services that maintain family health and well-being. Other studies outlined in the report show that air pollution is linked to diminished child cognitive development and increases in mental illness in teens and adults. Both reports offer immediate action steps across all sectors within their detailed recommendations.

But hope lives in action. Guided by ERH principles and the foundation of Nurture Connection, we encourage all people and communities who interact with young families to adopt the following guidance:

1. Open the conversation about climate change with all families and listen to and respect the perspectives of parents.
2. Raise awareness of environmental impacts of climate change, particularly on pregnant women and young children.
3. Promote environmental education for young children to raise a generation mindful of the environment.
4. Prepare for climate change–related emergencies and weather events.
5. Foster a spirit of hope, discovery, and strength.
6. Focus on building connected communities for the future.

With these actions, the wisdom from both of these reports, the Nurture Connection network, and the power of our day-to-day human connections, each of us can shift to a mindset that focuses on making sure our next generation thrives and flourishes.

Parent Perspective

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

Shayla Collins - Parent leader representing children with special healthcare needs in Washington, and Nurture Connection Steering Committee Member: “I came to this work because of my children. I wish I had known more about ERH when they were younger. Now that I am aware of its importance, I enjoy sharing what I’ve learned with other families. We must support each other on our journey towards healing for ourselves and those who come after us.”

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



Explore More



What is Early Relational Health?



Social Isolation and Loneliness: An Early Relational Health Perspective

In a new Nurture Connection blog, Claudia M. Gold, MD writes about the epidemic of loneliness and isolation, and its impact on mental, physical, and societal health. The blog underscores how we can prevent and address loneliness by prioritizing connection and advancing ERH policies, practices, and infrastructure.

[Read Here](#)

Nurture Connection Presents:
ERH Research, Principles, and Perspectives

Thursday, 12/7 | 12:30-1:45 PM ET
<https://tinyurl.com/erh-principles>

LaVonja Abavana	Monique Fountain Hanna,	Kay Johnson,	Junlei Li,	Usha Ramachandran,
<small>MD, MPH, MBA</small>	<small>MD, MPH, MBA</small>	<small>MPH</small>	<small>PhD</small>	<small>MD, FAAP</small>
<small>Parent Leader and Early Relational Health Champion, The Burke Foundation</small>	<small>Chief Medical Officer, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) & Innovation Advisor, US Department of Health and Human Services</small>	<small>President, Johnson Group Consulting</small>	<small>Saul Zevitz Senior Lecturer, Early Childhood Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education</small>	<small>General Pediatrician and Professor of Pediatrics, Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School</small>

Nurture Connection Presents: ERH Research, Principles, and Perspectives

Join us on **December 7 from 12:30-1:45pm ET** to learn the science behind how ERH connects with principles for actions for parents, caregivers, practitioners, and policymakers based on the Burke Foundation's [new report](#). Speakers from multiple perspectives include LaVonja Abavana, Monique Fountain Hanna, MD, MPH, MBA, Kay Johnson, MPH, Junlei Li, PhD, and Usha Ramachandran, MD, FAAP.

[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

- Eddy, J. M., et al. (January 2020). Outcomes from a Randomized Controlled Trial of the Relief Nursery Program. *Prevention Science*. [Read here.](#)
- Katsantonis, I., & McLellan, R. (October 2023). The role of parent–child interactions in the association between mental health and prosocial behavior: Evidence from early childhood to late adolescence. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*. [Read here.](#)
- Van Ginkel, J. B. (December 2023). Chasing Success: The Challenge for Nonprofits. [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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