



New Course Explores Ties Between Healthy Early Relationships and Infant and Child Mental Health

By: David Willis, MD, FAAP, and Marian F. Earls, MD, MTS, FAAP

A robust body of research shows that strong, positive, and nurturing relationships are at the core of health and well-being across the life span. That research, which forms the underpinnings of what constitutes Early Relational Health (ERH) led to the formation of Nurture Connection and an American Academy of Pediatrics [policy shift](#) in 2021. Revising an [earlier policy statement](#) that focused on the damage to children caused by toxic stress, the new policy emphasizes that positive childhood experiences based on safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (SSNR) help children flourish and buffer adversity.

Building on those tenets of ERH, developmental behavioral pediatrician Marian Earls, MD, MTS, FAAP, led a small development team, including David Willis, MD, FAAP, of Nurture Connection, in the development of a five-module PediaLink online course entitled "[Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: Relational Foundations for Lifelong Health](#)." The online, self-paced course shows participants how to use an ERH framework to promote and intervene in support of infant and early child mental health. In a recent webinar, Dr. Earls and Dr. Willis provided [an overview](#) of what is covered in the course.

This PediaLink course covers early childhood mental health principles and the role that SSNRs play in promoting well-being, as well as the evidence-based research supporting it. It also shows pediatricians how to work with parents to encourage safe, loving relationships with their babies and young children.

Importantly, the course takes a deep dive into communications strategies informed by Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) that focus on building trust, increasing parents' confidence, strengthening relationships between parents and their children, and promoting healthy development. A key part of the groundwork for communication starts even before a pediatrician sets foot in the examination room. "It's about how we build on our ability to be calm, ready, and mindfully ready to listen deeply — that empathic inquiry of connecting, sharing, and attuning is an essential skill for effectively partnering with families," Dr. Willis told participants in the webinar.

The course also covers how to promote protective factors and prevent risks to social-emotional development as well as discusses screening tools and evidence-based therapies and interventions for infants and young children at risk. Engaging with families over such potentially fraught issues is something that all pediatricians do on a daily basis, notes Dr. Earls. "Every encounter is an opportunity for a brief intervention," she says, stressing that a common intervention is making sure that patients' concerns are heard. "We don't have to have thought of a solution to everything. But that brief intervention in that interaction with the family is so powerful and so helpful to families and to us."

Beyond brief interventions, there's no question that the prevalence of mental health conditions is significant, says Dr. Willis, noting that one in seven children has such a condition. And [research](#) shows that the fewer relational health risks around young children, the lower the prevalence of mental health problems. "It calls out how critical it is to focus on the relational well-being of the entire family from your first well-child encounter, as a way to open a door toward true prevention," he says.

For those interested in the "Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health" course mentioned in this article, please visit the [AAP website](#). The course is free to AAP members with the code SAVE5 and is \$5 for non-members. Anyone can access the course by creating an [aap.org](#) account if they don't have one. The course was developed by Marian Earls, MD, MTS, FAAP, a developmental behavioral pediatrician; Linda Gilkerson, PhD, a professor at the Erickson Institute; Sherri Alderman, MD, MPH, IMH-E, FAAP, a developmental behavioral pediatrician; David Willis, MD, FAAP, senior fellow at the [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#); and Mary Margaret Gleason, MD, a member of the child mental health team at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters.

Parent Perspective

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

Steven Thibert - Parent leader representing the [Washington Fatherhood Council](#), and Nurture Connection Steering Committee Member: "Becoming a dad and going through the tumultuous, traumatic situation with my son's mom and only having limited time with him, all made it even more important that I make sure our connection is really strong. Then I have an influence on him becoming a healthy individual who contributes positively to society and has a good life. My broader 'why' is wanting to help other fathers and all parents feel that connection and feel like they have a positive impact on their child."



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

Explore More



[Finland's Social Policies Offer Insights for U.S. Policy Work to Promote ERH and Well-Being](#)

In a new blog by David Willis, MD, Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and Joe Waters, CEO of Capita, the focus is on the pivotal role of public policy in enhancing ERH and family well-being. The blog explores the impact of policies



What is Early Relational Health?

[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

through reflection on a conversation with author and journalist Anu Partanen, comparing U.S. and Finnish approaches. Finland's family-friendly policies, including extensive social benefits and paid parental leave, showcase significant positive outcomes supported by global rankings. The insights from Finland can inspire U.S. policy reform to promote equity and strengthen families and communities.

[Read Here](#)



[ERH in Action with R.O.C.K. Mat-Su: Parent Voices Invaluable to Alaskan Collective Championing Early Childhood Well-Being](#)

This blog on [R.O.C.K. Mat-Su](#) is part of Nurture Connection's "ERH in Action" series of listening and learning sessions. Our network is full of meaningful examples of people and organizations promoting ERH in their daily lives and work. Our new "ERH in Action" series highlights and uplifts stories from various fields to share learnings, challenges, and bright spots in the movement.

[Read Here](#)

Nurture Connection
Nurture Connection Presents:
ERH Research, Principles, and Perspectives
Thursday, 12/7 | 12:30-1:45 PM ET
<https://tinyurl.com/erh-principles>

 LaVonja Abavana Parent Leader and Early Relational Health Champion, The Burke Foundation	 Monique Fountain Hanna, MD, MPH, MBA Chief Medical Officer, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) & Innovation Advisor, US Department of Health and Human Services	 Kay Johnson, MPH President, Johnson Group Consulting	 Junlei Li, PhD Saul Zaentz Senior Lecturer, Early Childhood Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education	 Usha Ramachandran, MD, FAAP General Pediatrician and Professor of Pediatrics, Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School
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[Nurture Connection Presents: ERH Research, Principles, and Perspectives](#)

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](#).

On December 7th Nurture Connection hosted a webinar exploring the Burke Foundation's "[ERH Principles](#)" report, connecting the research of ERH with actions for parents, caregivers, practitioners, and policymakers. The "ERH Principles" webinar features insights from parent leader LaVonia Abavana, Monique Fountain Hanna, MD, MPH, MBA of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Kay Johnson, MPH of Johnson Policy Consulting, Junlei Li, PhD of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Usha Ramachandran, MD, FAAP of the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

[Watch the Recording](#)

What We're Reading

- K. Jones-Mason, et al. (September 2023). Parental sensitivity modifies the associations between maternal prenatal stress exposure, autonomic nervous system functioning and infant temperament in a diverse, low-income sample. *Attachment & Human Development*. [Read here.](#)
- G. Nardini, et al. (October 2020). Together We Rise: How Social Movements Succeed. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. [Read here.](#)
- Justis, C. & Student, D. (February 2023) Don't Lead Alone: Think Like a System, Act like a Network, Lead Like a Movement! [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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