

# Facilitating Fatherhood within Early Relational health (ERH)

Changing the Narrative in Early  
Childhood Systems and Supports





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# Disclosures?

**WE HAVE NO DISCLOSURES**



# Objectives

- Understand Early Relational Health (ERH)
- Identify Barriers and Strategies For Father Engagement
- Apply ERH Principles in WIC Practices



First Step Kent  
March 13/14, 2025

# Introduction to Early Relational Health

David W. Willis, MD  
Nurture Connection  
GU Thrive Center



**A baby's future  
starts now.**



Nurture Connection

# Key Elements for Child Development

- Early experiences in life build “brain architecture”
- Genes and environments together interact to shape the architecture of the brain
- Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined
- “Toxic stress” and adverse experiences derail healthy child development
- Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time
- Children develop in an **environment of relationships**







THE POWER OF HUMAN  
CONNECTIONS:

"Its all about the  
relationships"

# Capita 2022 Survey in North Carolina



## Parent Loneliness

*“We found that 46 % of Gen Z parents of young children said they are lonely, which is about 12 % more than older parents.”*

[The Ties That Bind and Nurture](#)



# Population Health

- **Flourishing:** National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) reports only 30% of children meet all four criteria of flourishing. Nearly one quarter of children are not flourishing<sup>1</sup>
- **Mental Health:** One in six U.S. children aged 2-8 years (17.4%) have a diagnosed mental, behavioral or developmental disorder.<sup>2</sup>
- **School readiness:** In 2022, only 63.6% of 3- to 5-year-old children were 'On Track' in 4-5 domains without needing support in any domain. (NSCH, Healthy and Ready to Learn)

<sup>1</sup> Bethell CD, Gombojav N, Whitaker RC. Family Resilience And Connection Promote Flourishing Among US Children, Even Amid Adversity. *Health Affairs*. 2019/05/01 2019;38(5):729-737. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05425

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (2023). Retrieved from: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Survey of Children's Health: School Readiness, 2022. Data Brief (2023). Available at: <https://mchb.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/mchb/data-research/2023-nsch-hrtl-brief-oct-2023.pdf>

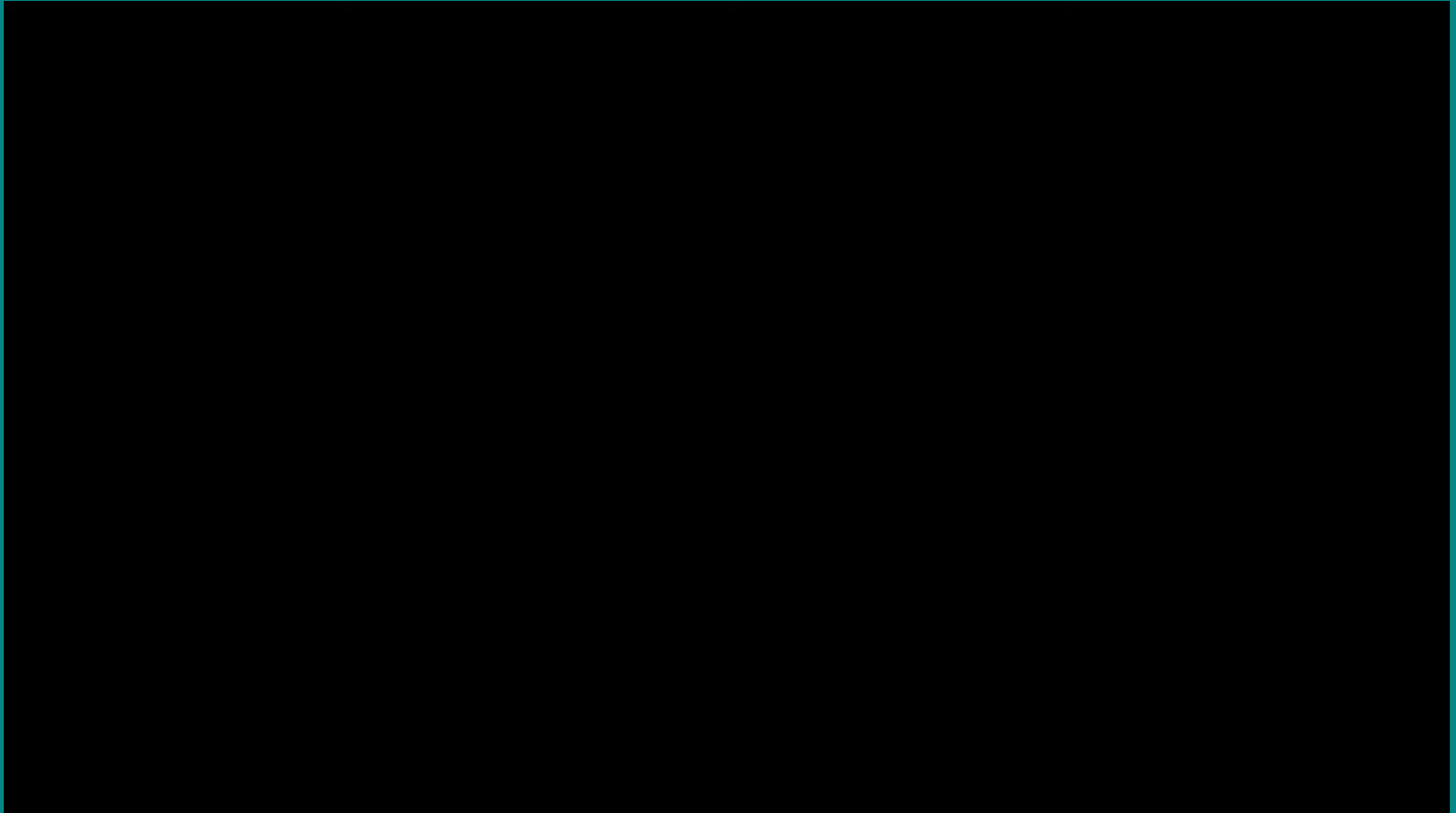




# Early Relational Health: Definition

And, by definition, ERH is the state of emotional well-being that grows from the positive emotional connection between babies and toddlers and their parent/caregivers supported by strong, positive and nurturing experiences.

And ERH shapes the well-being of both the child and the caregiver, the two-way nature of relationships.



Nurture Connection. Sotheara Yem. (May 13, 2018). *More than I deserve*. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uyw9F7FrQkA>

# Relational Observations

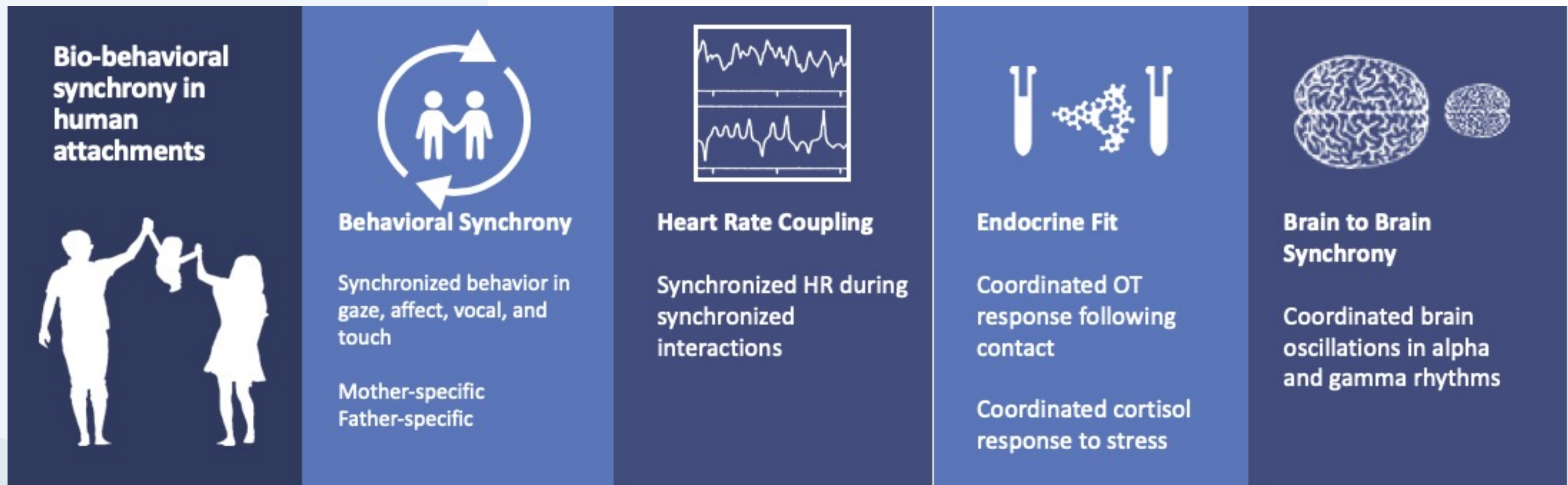
## Relational Health Milestones

- Shared interest in each other
- Engagement w/ each other
- Shared emotions between them
- Shared initiation to create interactions w/ each other
- Imitation of each other
- Use of symbols/gestures to communicate to each other
- Communicate ideas non-verbally





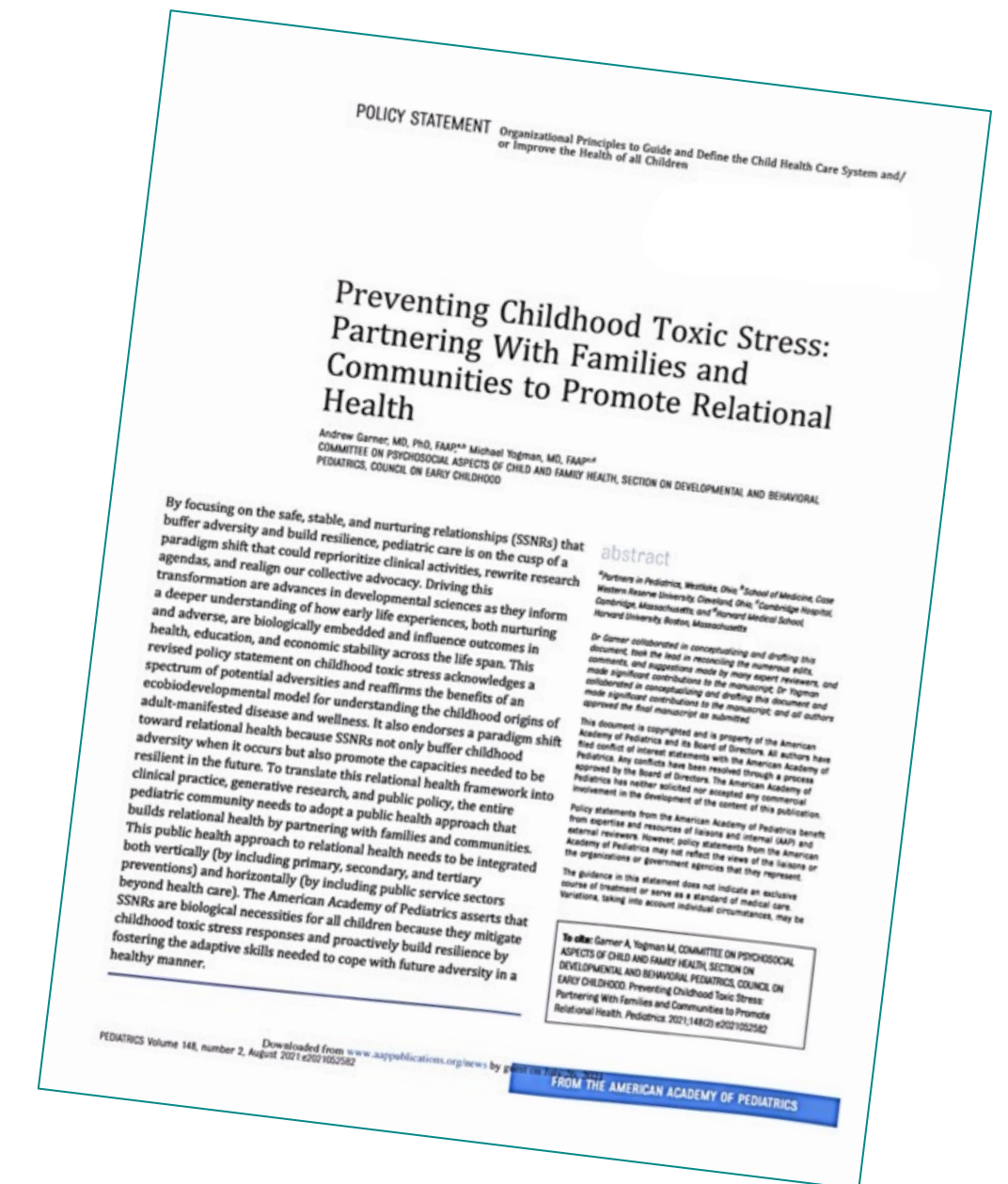
# Bio-behavioral synchrony and dyadic neurodevelopment



## 2021 AAP Policy Statement

# Preventing Childhood Toxic Stress: Partnering with Families and Communities to Promote Relational Health

*“By focusing on the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (SSNRs) that buffer adversity and build resilience, pediatric care is on the cusp of a paradigm shift that could reprioritize clinical activities rewrite research agendas and realign our collective advocacy.”*





# Bundle for Advanced, Team-based, High Performing Medical Homes for Young Children

## Redesigned Well-Child Visits

- Holistic, **team-based care**
- Comprehensive **well- child visits** based on Bright Futures guidelines and EPSDT
- Family-centered, **strengths-based, relational**, holistic approaches
- **Recommended screening** for development, social-emotional health, maternal depression and social determinants of health (SDOH)
- Reach Out and Read as universal promotion

## Relational Care Coordination

- **Routine** care coordination as part of medical home
- **Intensive care coordination** for more complex medical conditions or social risks
- **Relational care coordination staff** (e.g., community health workers, peer navigators)
- More **effective responses, completed referrals, and linkages** to community

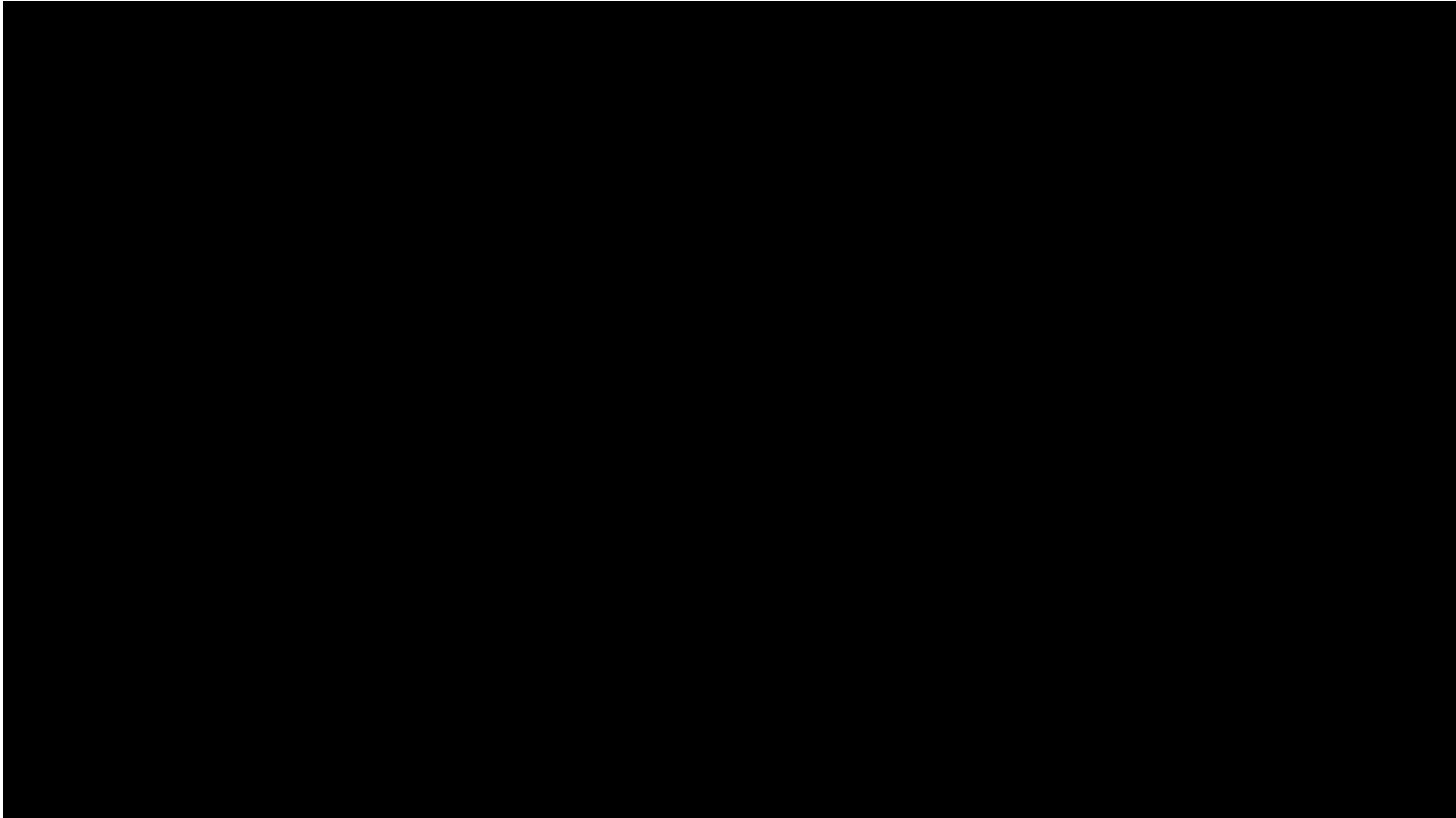
## Other Services and Enhanced Supports

- **Co-located programs in primary care** to promote ERH and development (e.g., DULCE, Healthy Steps, VIP)
- **Integrate mental health**
- **Families engaged** as advisors and partners
- **Referrals and/or linkages** to other services (e.g., home visiting, early intervention, dental care, early care and education, parent-child mental health therapy, nutrition programs)

Adapted from: Johnson K, Bruner C. *A Sourcebook on Medicaid's Role in Early Childhood: Advancing high performing medical homes and improving lifelong health*. Child and Family Policy Center. 2018. [https://www.inckmarks.org/docs/pdfs\\_for\\_Medicaid\\_and\\_EPSDT\\_page/SourcebookMEDICAIDYOUNGCHILDRENALL.pdf](https://www.inckmarks.org/docs/pdfs_for_Medicaid_and_EPSDT_page/SourcebookMEDICAIDYOUNGCHILDRENALL.pdf)  
Willis DW, Paradis N, Johnson K. The paradigm shift to early relational health: A network movement. *Zero to Three*. 2022;42(4):22-30.

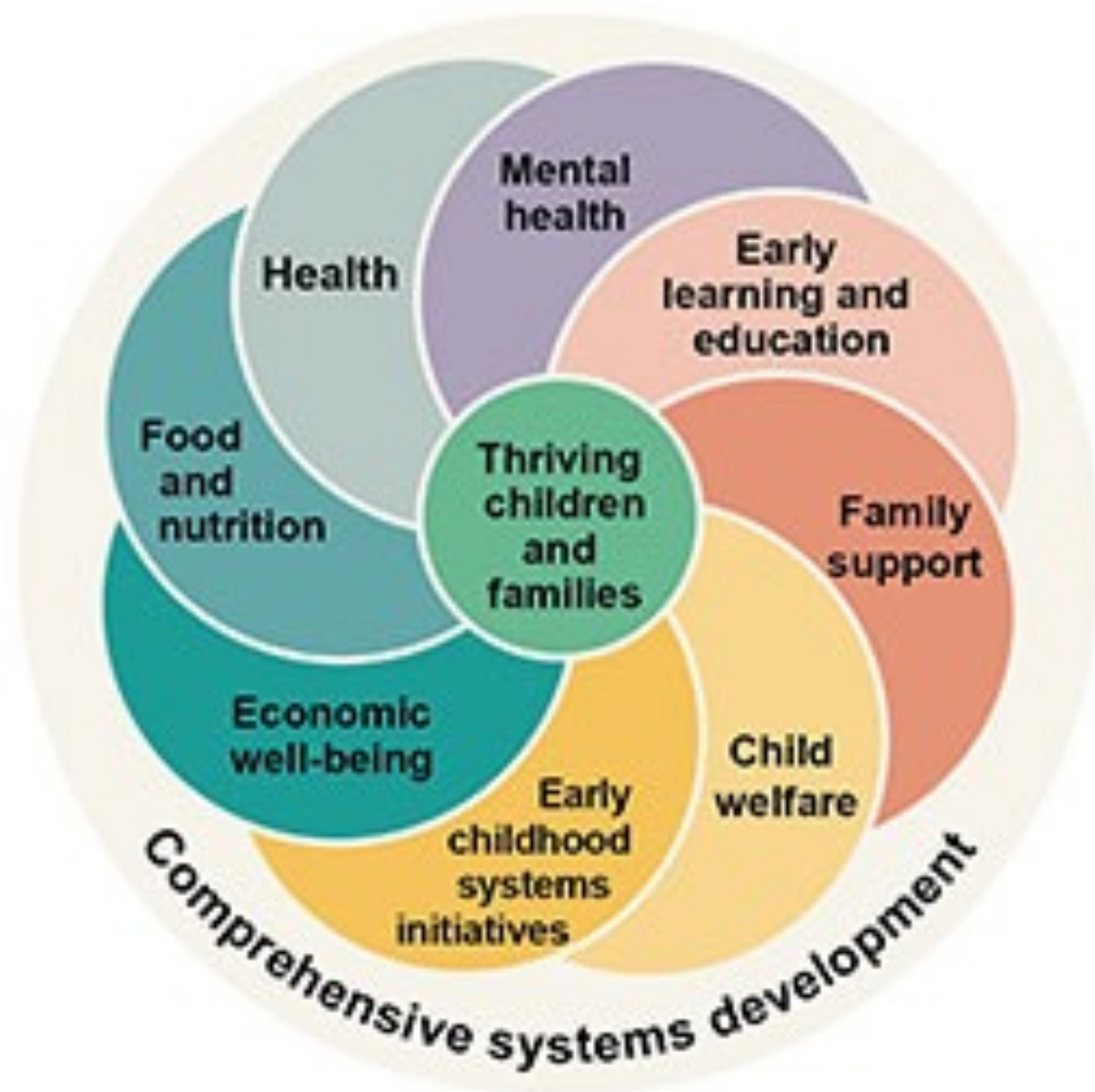


# 6 month Reach and Read Visit



# Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems

## **BUILDING A RELATIONAL HEALTH ECOSYSTEM**



# The Relational Health Workforce

Relational care coordinators  
Family development specialists  
Family service workers  
Community health workers  
Home visitors  
Family coaches  
Promotores  
Doulas  
Family navigators  
WIC Family Specialists

## Connection as a Social Determinant of Health

Research repeatedly demonstrates that social connection strongly influences health. Feeling connected to a community was one of the strengths identified in the community engagement data from this assessment.

“The work of creating health is the work of creating connection.”  
- DIDI PERSHOUSE



# Building Equity Driven Parent Collaboration



# Nurture Connection

## Active Ingredients that advance ERH flourishing within community powered transformation

### 1. Authentic family partnerships

*“Radically different way of engaging families”*

*“Families are telling us the answers.”*

### 2. Evidence based concepts/promising innovations

*“Meaningful shared moments of connection”*

*“Sharing narratives, stories and reflection”*

*“Sitting at the feet of the storytellers”*

# Core Principles of Early Relational Health

- **Nurturing Relationships:** Attentive, responsive, and reciprocal interactions build strong and lasting relationships, benefiting both children and caregivers in the short and long term.
- **Incorporating Family and Culture:** Family experiences and cultural wisdom are essential in shaping early childhood development and strengthening research and practice.
- **Connectedness and Belonging:** The well-being of parents is supported by a sense of connectedness, belonging, and mattering, which directly influences early relational health.
- **Strength-Based and Inclusive Approach:** Emphasizing the strengths and diversity of families, practices, and communities fosters a comprehensive and equitable environment for development.
- **Collaborative and Community Efforts:** Shared decision-making between families, professionals, and community members enhances early relational health and ensures all children and families can thrive.



*Early relational health is  
foundational for health,  
mental health,  
educational readiness,  
and flourishing*





## State of Fatherhood in Washington 2024

October 24, 2023

2024 NWA Presentation-Fathers at the Beginning of  
Life: the Intersection of Family and Mens Health  
Presentation





# The Study focused on 8 Topical Areas across the Ecosystem of Partners

## Topical Areas (8)

### Basic Needs and Health

Health and wellbeing

Food and financial supports

Housing and shelter

### Education, Employment, Supports

Early education and family supports

Employment and education

### Safety, Legal, and Justice

Corrections and juvenile rehabilitation

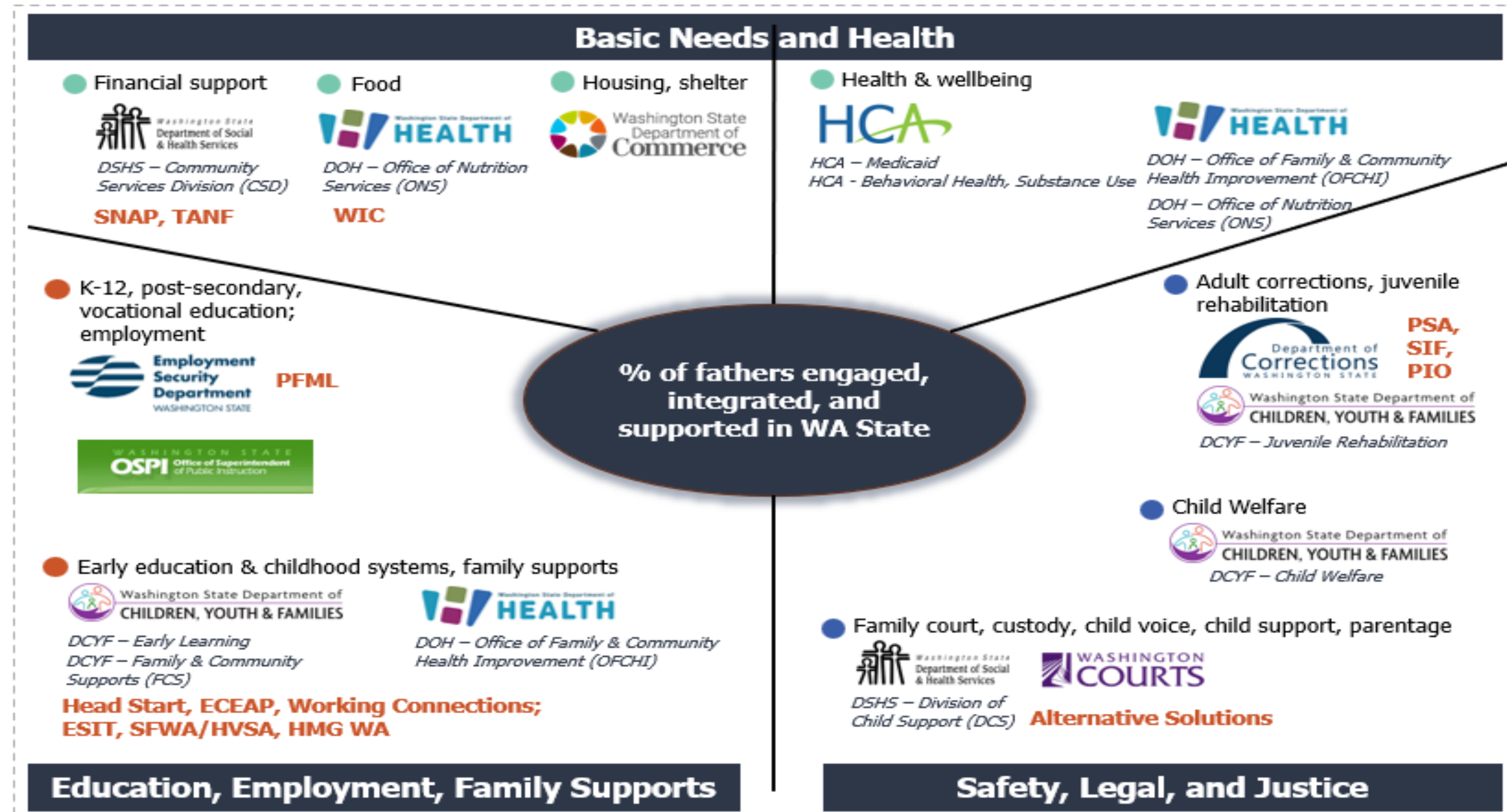
Family court and child support

Child welfare

#### Terms for Programs Offered by Agencies

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Women, Infant, and Children (WIC)
- Paid Family Medical Leave (PFML)
- Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP)
- Early Support for Infant & Toddlers (ESIT)
- Strengthening Families of Washington, Home Visiting Services Account (SFWA/HVSA)
- Help Me Grow Washington (HMG WA)
- Parenting Sentencing Alternative (PSA)
- Strength in Families (SIF)
- Parenting Inside Out (PIO)

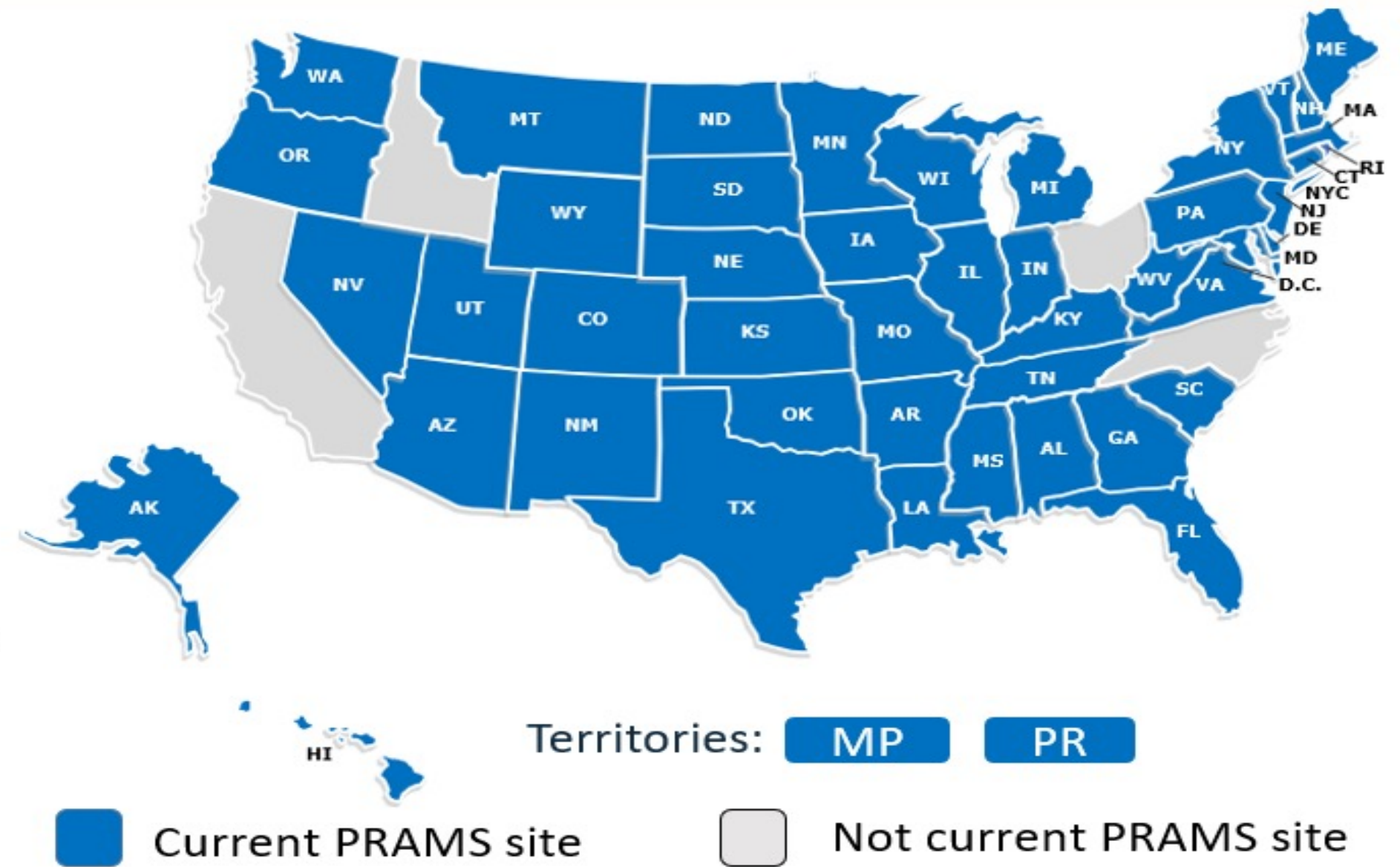
## Landscape Ecosystem





# Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS): Public Health Surveillance since 1987

- Captures maternal experiences before, during, and after pregnancy
- Linked birth certificate sample
- Mail, phone survey 2-6mo PP
- 50 jurisdictions; 81% of US births
- Key MCH data:
  - PNC, substance exposures, safe sleep, BF, mental health, etc.





Ohio Commission on Fatherhood  
Fatherhood Well-Being Screening Tool

This is a tool used by the fatherhood program to help you with being a healthy, engaged, and responsible father. Your responses are voluntary and the information you share is confidential.

1. Do you have health insurance?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Do you have a primary health care doctor?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

3. To better serve you, do you have a preference about the medical provider you meet with? For example, this may include a preference for the medical professionals' gender, race, etc.  
☐ Yes ☐ No

4. When was the last time you sought medical treatment?  
☐ In the past 30 days ☐ In the past 6 months ☐ In the past year ☐ I do not remember

5. Where did you last receive treatment?  
☐ Doctor's Office ☐ Emergency Room ☐ Other

6. Please answer the following questions, Yes or No.

Are you currently enrolled in any type of substance use treatment?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Are you unable to perform work or regular life activities because of your substance use?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever considered reducing your substance use?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you had past treatment for substance use?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Are you currently in any support group for addiction. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), etc.  
☐ Yes ☐ No

7. About how often have you felt the following in the past thirty (30) days?

	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
Nervous	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Hopeless	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Stressed	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Restless or Fidgety	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Depressed	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Alone	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Worthless	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Angry	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1

Other. Please explain.

Have you sought help for these feelings?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you been in mental health treatment at any time in the past?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

Are you currently seeking mental health treatment?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

What do you do to help with these feelings? For example, what are your hobbies?

	Family For example, significant other, children, etc.	Friends For example, work friends, neighbors, etc.	Sports Team For example, basketball, football, golf, etc.	Place of Worship For example, synagogue, church, etc.	Other (please explain)
Do you have a support system to address your mental, spiritual, and physical well-being? Check all that apply.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

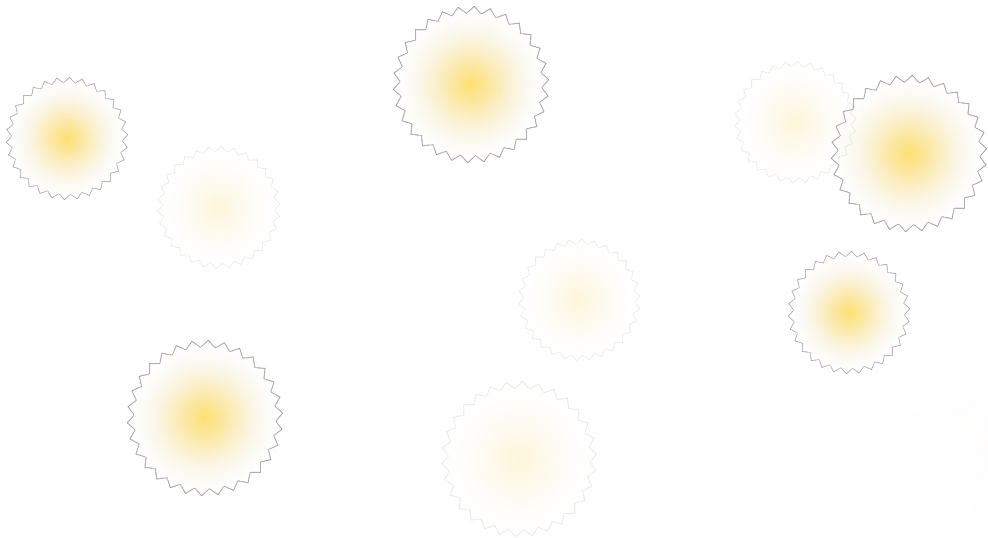
Date Completed

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Notes







Hospital Birth



Home Birth









**Steve Thiebert**

Parent Leader, WA Fatherhood Council  
Nurture Connection



**Robert Harris, PhD**

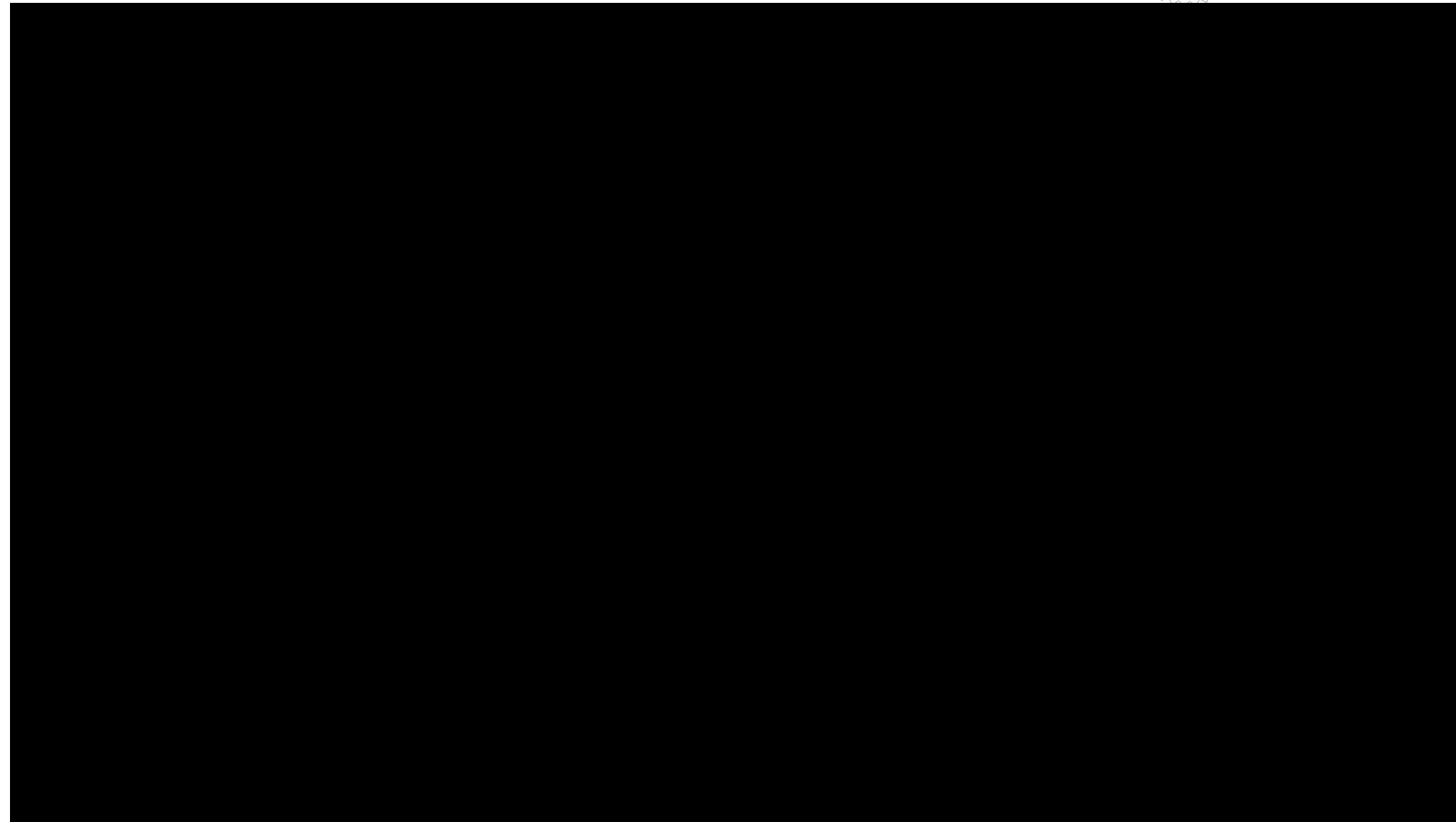
Thrive Center  
Georgetown University

# Disclosures?

**WE HAVE NO DISCLOSURES**



# Fatherhood Panel Discussion-Video





## AUDIENCE DISCUSSION:

### ***Applying ERH Principles in WIC Practices***

- The role of WIC specialists
- WIC Practice transformations
- Strategic messaging
- Engaging fathers

# Contact information

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