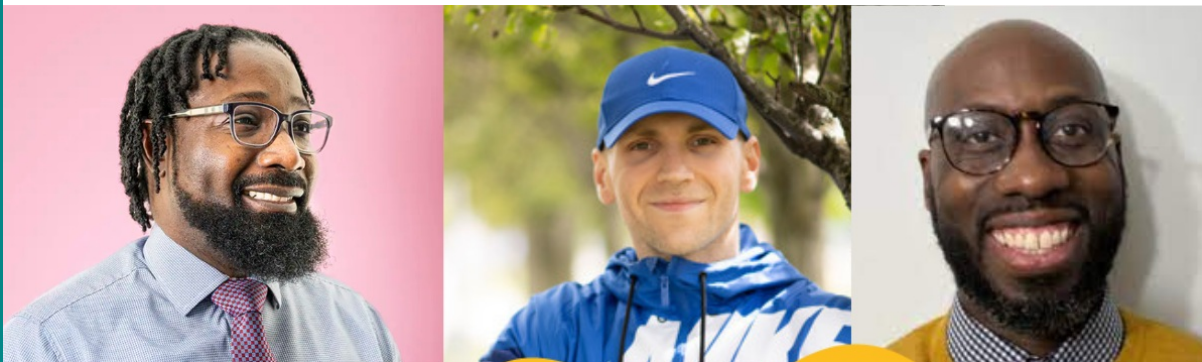




This Father's Day, Three Dads Reflect on Early Relational Health and Fatherhood in Today's Culture

In today's culture, fatherhood is at a crossroads.

On one hand, the image of the hands-on, emotionally attuned dad is more visible than ever. On the other, outdated expectations — of stoicism, distance, and bravado — continue to shape how society sees men as parents. For many fathers, stepping into a nurturing role means navigating these beliefs and assumptions: that caregiving is women's work, that strength means withholding, and that showing up with tenderness is somehow a departure from masculinity rather than a deeper expression of it.

But what if embracing nurturing care is a strength — not just for mothers but for fathers as well?

This Father's Day, we hear from three fatherhood champions who are reframing the roles dads play in children's early lives through advocacy, research, and authentic narratives about fatherhood. Alvin Thomas, Robert Harris, and Steven Thibert believe that fatherhood is both an opportunity and a responsibility. Their work offers a compelling argument: that when systems supporting children and families place value in fatherhood and provide resources to help fathers thrive in their role as caregivers, everyone benefits.

"You can't be focused on families or on child health without also being equally serious about the health and involvement of fathers."

—Alvin Thomas, PhD

[Read More Here](#)

Parent Perspectives: Empowering Fatherhood Through ERH

*This month, Nurture Connection celebrates the important role that fathers play in the Early Relational Health of their children. Hear more reflections from **Steven Thibert** (also featured in [this article](#)), a father, Steering Committee member, and Parent Leader from Nurture Connection's Family Network Collaborative (FNC).*



On the Journey to Fatherhood and ERH

"I never really expected to land in this space. . . . It's been an interesting journey. When I learned I was gonna be a dad, I was scared. I thought I always wanted kids, but I didn't really know how that would come about. I didn't feel confident in my abilities.

"As a single dad, I really had to empower myself. And I learned that I can do it all. I can nurture this child in every way. Going through that journey was extremely empowering.

"I took a parenting class as part of sharing custody for my son. I learned a lot, and I loved the instructor. He focused a lot on things that now, looking back, are healthy development and infant mental health stuff — neuroplasticity and how a child's brain develops and how a child makes emotional connections. So I was learning about Early Relational Health [ERH] and practicing it during the times that I had my kid without even knowing what it was."

Hear More From Steven

Putting Families First with COMBO National

We know that positive interactions with parents/caregivers powerfully impact children's lifelong well-being. Yet when Nurture Connection teamed up with [the COMBO Initiative](#) at Columbia University on a meta-analysis of relational interventions to improve health and development outcomes, we discovered something shocking: there is not sufficient data for any dyadic ERH intervention that would support its implementation into pediatric clinical care.

This finding helped crucially narrow the spotlight for the field of ERH: **to develop relational interventions, we need relational evidence**. The field of pediatrics is uniquely poised to work together with families to promote early relationships, with

enormous potential for improving lifelong health outcomes. But to meet that potential, the field needs concrete ERH science.

COMBO National is answering that call, expanding across the country in an exclusive partnership between Columbia's Center for Early Relational Health and [Reach Out and Read](#), to lead the most comprehensive study of early childhood relationships.

[Click here](#) to learn about how this groundbreaking partnership is uncovering the science of ERH to build a future where pediatricians have access to validated interventions—developed for and with the families they serve—for those crucial early relationships.

[Read More](#)

Explore More

Nuture Connection

Nuture Connection Presents:

Wednesday, 6/11
2:00-3:30 PM ET

The Power of Codesign in Research
How Parent Partnership Supports Practice Transformation

Nikki Shearman
Chief of Strategic Initiatives,
Reach Out and Read

Dani Dumitriu, MD, PhD
Associate Professor of Pediatrics
and Director, Center for Early
Relational Health, Columbia
University

Desarae Smalls
Parent Leader,
City Hospital of
Philadelphia (CHOP)

Nicole Loveless
Parent Leader, Family
Network Collaborative
(FNC)

David W. Willis, MD, FAAP
Founder and Director,
Nuture Connection

***Webinar Recording* Nuture Connection Presents: The Power of Codesign in Research**

Nuture Connection hosted a conversation on Wednesday, June 11th, 2025 about the power of codesign, and how parent partnership supports practice transformation in early childhood ecosystems.

Presenters shared how researchers, practitioners, and parents worked together to develop Reach Out and Read's recent Parent/Caregiver-Clinician Relationship Survey, a validated assessment tool for assessing the parent-clinician relationship during routine pediatric primary care. Together, they reflected on how engaging families in the research design process offers a relational foundation for implementation research, and furthers the impact of ERH promotion efforts through pediatric primary care.

Guest Speakers:

Nikki Shearman, PhD, Chief of Strategic Initiatives, Reach Out and Read

Dani Dumitriu, MD, PhD, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Director, Center for Early Relational Health, Columbia University

Desarae Smalls, Parent Leader, CHOP

Co-hosted by:

Nicole Loveless, Parent Leader, Family Network Collaborative (FNC)

David W. Willis, MD, FAAP, Founder and Director, Nurture Connection

Watch Here

What We're Listening To . . .



No One is Coming to Save Us: Make Child Care High Quality May 8, 2025 • 34 mins

High-quality child care isn't about fancy buildings or high-tech gadgets - it's about relationships. Meaningful connections between caregivers and children create the foundation for great early education, no matter the setting. In this episode, we talk to early childhood expert Junlei Li to explore what truly defines high-quality early learning, the many places where children can experience it, and why paying teachers like teachers is key to sustaining quality care. We also visit a home child care in Juneau, Alaska, where exceptional early education is happening every day. [Listen Here](#)

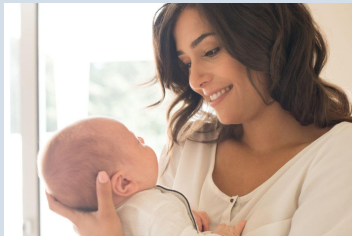


The Black Father's Pulse Podcast: Navigating Black Fatherhood and Professional Life with Dr. Ryan Warner May 8, 2025 • 34 mins

Welcome to The Black Father's Pulse, where Dr. Alvin Thomas dives deep into the unique challenges and triumphs of Black fatherhood. In this episode, Dr. Thomas is joined by award-winning consulting psychologist Dr. Ryan Warner. Together, they explore the intersection of professional lives and fatherhood for Black men, discussing workplace stress, mental health, and systemic barriers while uncovering resilience strategies and the importance of genuine allyship. Dr. Warner shares personal stories and offers valuable strategies for resilience and success. [Listen Here](#)

What We're Reading

- **Receipt of Maternal Warmth Influences Adolescent Health, Mental Well-Being.** Alley J, et al. *JAMA Psychiatry*. Published online May 28, 2025. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2025.0815. [Read here.](#)
 - **Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It** by Richard Reeves. Brookings Institution Press, 2022. ISBN 9780815739876. [Read here.](#)
 - **Promoting Early Years Relational Health to Strengthen Wellbeing Within and Across Generations: Research Roundtable Summary.** Paul Ramsy Foundation. September 2022. [Read here.](#)
 - **Cash Transfers and Their Effect on Maternal and Young Children's Health.** Duncan, G.J., Magnuson, K., Kunin-Batson, A.S., Yoshikawa, H., Fox, N.A., Halpern-Meekin, S., Ainsworth, N.J., Black, S.R., Nelson, J.M., Nelson, T.D., Georgieff, M.K., Karhson, D., Gennetian, L.A. & Noble, K.G. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 2025. DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2025.1612. [Read here.](#)
 - **Income Is Not Enough: Incorporating Material Hardship Into Models of Income Associations With Parenting and Child Development.** Gershoff, E.T., Aber, J.L., Raver, C.C. & Lennon, M.C. *Child Development*. 2007. Issue 1 Pages 70-95. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.00986.x. [Read here.](#)
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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 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](#). 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](#).

Note: Our newsletter will be taking a hiatus next month (July) — we'll see you back in August with more Early Relational Health updates and resources!

If this newsletter was forwarded to you by a colleague and you would like to subscribe, click [here](#).

Contact

info@nurtureconnection.org



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