Early Relational Health: Foundations for Health, Early Learning and Future Wellbeing

David W. Willis, MD
Senior Fellow, Center for the Study of Social Policy
The Core Story of Child Development

• Early experiences in life build “brain architecture”
• Children develop in an environment of relationships
• Genes and environments 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

A baby’s future starts now.
“Early Childhood requires nurturing care....

....health, nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and early education.”

The Lancet Early Childhood Development Series, 2016
What does Early Relational Health look like?

Engagement, Emotional Connection

Serve and Return, Initiation, Imitation
Definitions of Early Relational Health

- **Relational Health** reflects the capacities of individuals, families, classrooms, schools, or communities to engage in positive, growth-promoting and responsive interpersonal interactions.

- **Early relational health** describes the positive, stimulating, and nurturing early relationships that ensure the emotional security and connections that advance physical health and development, social well-being, and resilience.

- **Relational health care** are those elements of health care that specifically address relational health as an integral component of physical, developmental, mental health and other health care.
Early Relational Health

Relational Health
- Promotion
- Prevention
- Surveillance
- Screening/Monitoring

Infant Mental Health
- Prevention
- Assessment & Dx.
- Treatment
- Consultation/Liaison
- Competencies
- Principles

Specialized Interventions
- PCIT, ChildFirst, ABC, CPP,
  Circle of Security, Promoting First
  Relationships, etc.

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
Early Relational Health

• A dyadic and two-generational focus
• A bidirectional perspective for parent-child development with the centrality of shared positive affect
• Foundational to equity, resiliency, recovery and protection
• Health, MEB health, early learning, and social-emotional competencies are outcomes of ERH
• Science-based, strength-based and family-centric
• Recognizes cultural variability in parenting, but sees ERH as universal
• A paradigm shift for early childhood, society and out culture
Early relational health is about advancing a framework that......

• Builds MEB health and social emotional competences in children (and in society) through positive family child interactions (social competence)

• Intentionally strengthens the relationships of “the first 1000 days”

• Is not one program, but an “all-in approach” across all place-based, community efforts with young families

• Expands the social capital in a community to support all families

• Is strength-based and builds resilience and recovery in face of trauma

• Is not about teaching parenting, but about supporting the development of healthy relationships

• Is a mind shift from the individual to a universal relational focus
Early Relational Health in action:
Advances in child health systems

- Reach Out and Read (ROR)
- Promoting First Relationships in Pediatric Primary Care
- Triple P Positive Parenting Program
- Video Interaction Project (VIP)
- Early Relational Health Screen (ERHS) and video feedback
- Welch Emotional Connection Scale (WECS)
- Filming Interactions to Nurture Development (FIND)
- Evidence-based home visiting
- Healthy Steps and DULCE
Early relational health in action: Across early childhood systems

**Programmatic impacts**
- The advanced pediatric medical home linked with communities
- The continuum of home visiting
- Advancing relational care in early care and education programs
- Child welfare, upstream prevention

**Population health and developmental impacts**
- Addressing equity in health and development with a relational and resiliency focus
- Foundational for kindergarten readiness
- Promoting MEB health and preventative mental health
- Breaking the generational transmission of ACE’s by a resiliency focus
- The potential for bending the cost curve of health

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
PSP Common Practices: Nurture Parent’s Competence and Confidence

- Use strengths-based observations and positive-affirming feedback
- Model activities and use strengths-based observations
- Provide enhanced and tailored anticipatory guidance materials
- Partner with parents to co-create goals
- Create opportunities for families to connect with other families
- Integrate strategies to support the parent’s well-being and mental health

Fostering Social and Emotional Health through Primary Care: Common threads to transform everyday practice and systems, 2019.
PSP Common Practices: Connect families to supports to promote SED and address stressors

- Standardize workflow to provide developmental, behavioral, and SDOH screenings, health promotion, support and resources
- Cultivate community partnerships through clear processes and protocols
- Outreach to parents during pregnancy

Fostering Social and Emotional Health through Primary Care: Common threads to transform everyday practice and systems, 2019.
PSP Common Practices:
**Develop the care team and clinic infrastructure and culture**

- Integrate new roles into the care team
- Foster care team communication and collaboration
- Provide ongoing learning and development opportunities
- Support care team well-being to prevent burnout/stress/fatigue and retention issues
- Create environments and structures that promote respectful relationships and positive patient experiences

Fostering Social and Emotional Health through Primary Care: Common threads to transform everyday practice and systems, 2019.
CSSP Early Relational Health Initiative

Progress

• Framework ERH Study
• National ERH Advisory Team
• Place-based EC system and network explorations (EC-LINC)
• Family voice and equity pilot study in Portland, OR
• Emerging next efforts, in partnerships, for advancing ERH
  • ERH tool development for scalability for child health practice
  • Expanding video feedback within home visiting programs
  • Survey of current ERH activities across networks
  • Making visible policy levers to advance ERH

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
“The key to success is simple: make people dream”

Gerard de Nerval
French Writer, 1808-1855