

# Early Relational Health: The Cornerstone and Common Thread

September 30, 2025



# Presenters



**Mayra Alvarez, MHA**

President

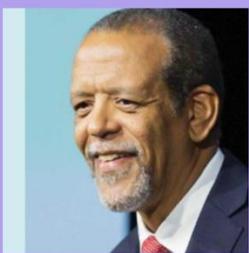
The Children's Partnership



**Miriam Westheimer, Ed.D.**

Chief Program Officer

HIPPY International



**Ronald Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Founder and Executive Director

The Basics, Inc.



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Founder and Director  
Nurture Connection

Thrive Center for Children,  
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CGLR Peer Exchange  
September 30, 2025

# Early Relational Health: The Cornerstone and Common Thread



**David W. Willis, MD**  
Nurture Connection  
GU Thrive Center



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

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# 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**



# 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>

# The Flourishing Paradigm

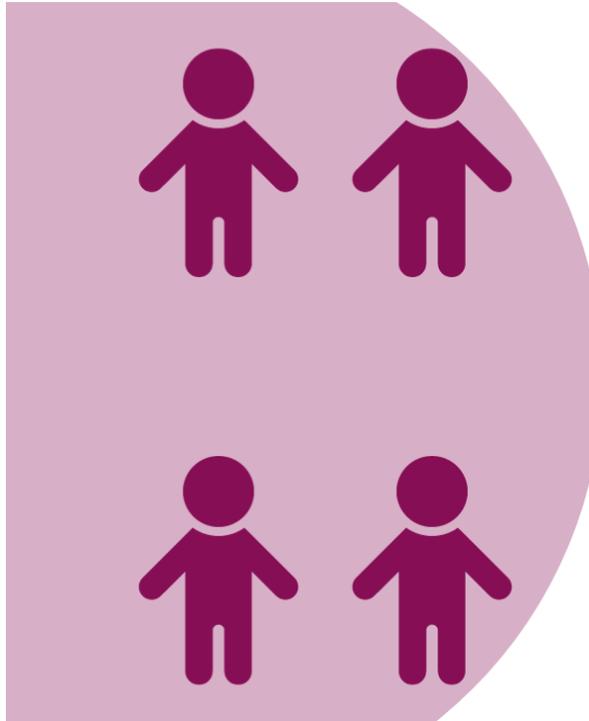


- Family resilience and connection, early relational health (caregiver-child connection) and positive childhood experiences promote flourishing, even amid high adversity
- Child flourishing strongly predicts social-emotional wellbeing, school readiness and engagement, and positive mental health

# National Survey of Children's Health

## Prevalence of Mental, Emotional and/or Behavioral Health Problems

### WHAT ARE KEY DRIVERS THAT DISRUPT FLOURISHING?



#### Relational health risks

- Adverse childhood experiences (ACE's)
- Low parental mental health
- Low parental social supports
- High caregiver aggravation

#### Social Health Risks

- Economic Hardship
- Food Insecurity
- Exposure to community violence
- Racism



## Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World

**Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, 2020**

*“Social connection stands out as a largely unrecognized and underappreciated force for addressing many of the critical problems we’re dealing with, both as individuals and as a society”*

## 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](#)

Capita 2022  
Survey in  
North Carolina



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





**Early Relational Health (ERH)** focuses on the importance of early relationships and experiences in healthy development across a child's lifetime.

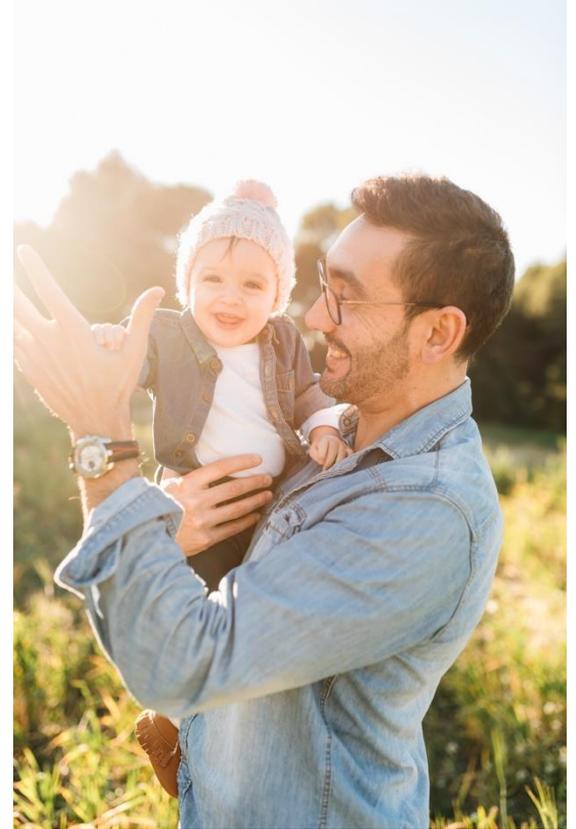
## Definition

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.

## Early Relational Health

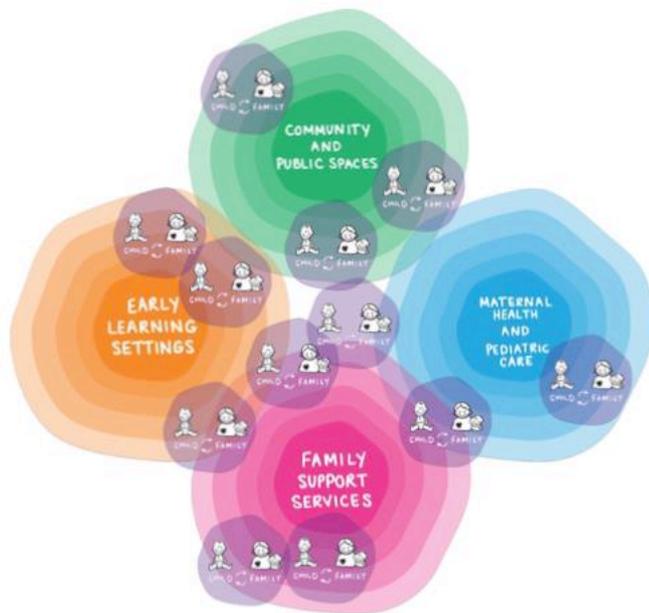
# Foundational early relationships shape the well-being of both the child and the caregiver

- The **two-way nature** of early relationships affects two-generational health and well-being in the moment and long term.
- When we focus on this foundation and support the contexts around these relationships, **children and their caregivers thrive**—now and into the future.





# early relational health ecology



Simple  
interactions  
Positive, supportive  
and nurturing



**Nurture Connection**

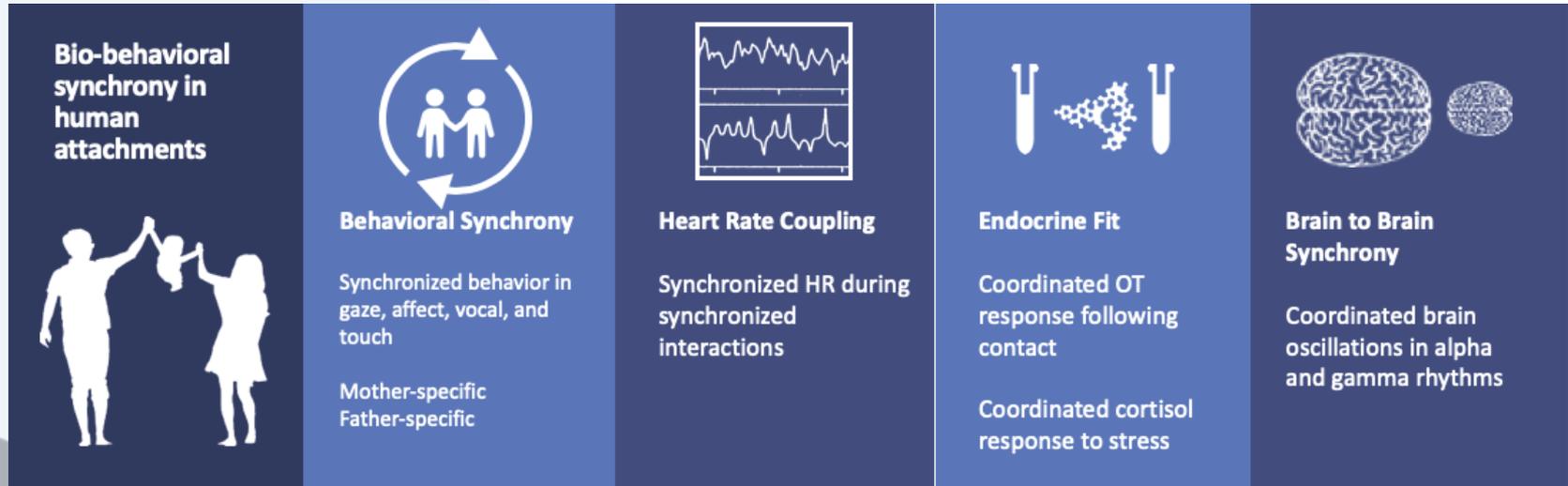
# Relational Observations

## 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



# High Performing Medical Homes for Young Children Promote ERH and Optimal Development

## Redesigned Well-Child Visits

Team-based care

Well-child visits based on Bright Futures/EPSTD

Strengths-based, relational, holistic

Recommended screenings

Reach Out and Read

## Relational Care Coordination

Routine care coordination

Intensive care coordination, when needed

Relational care coordination staff

Effective responses to needs

## Other Services & Enhanced Supports

Co-located programs in primary care

Integrate mental health

Engaged families

Partnerships and referrals to community partners

# An Early Relational Health Ecosystem

## The Relational Health Workforce

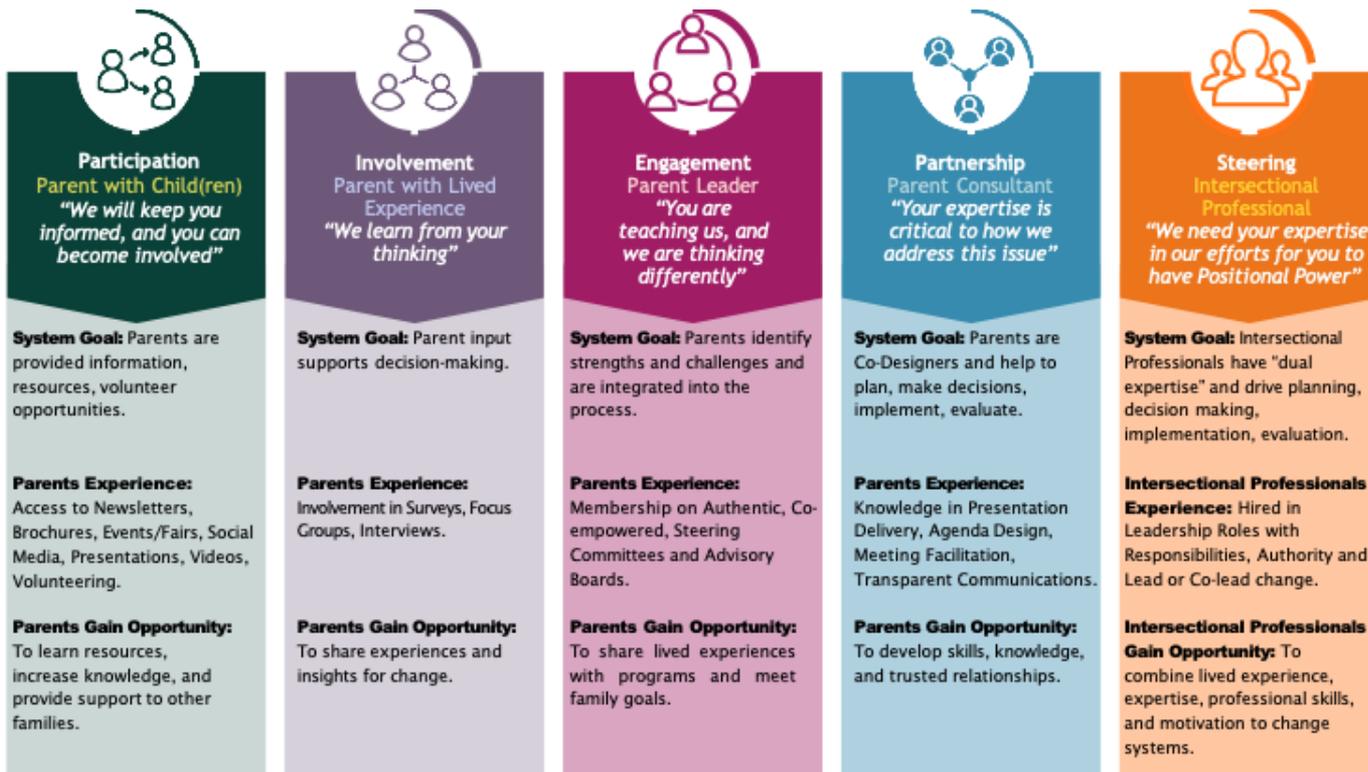
High performing medical home  
Relational care coordinators  
Family development specialists  
Family service workers  
Community health workers  
Home visitors  
Family coaches  
Promotores  
Douglas  
Family navigators

### 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 Parent Collaboration





# Community-powered transformation

## **THREE-LEGGED STOOL OF SYSTEM BUILDING FOR ERH**

**Child health system leaders**  
**Early childhood system organization**  
**Parent leaders**

# Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems

## BUILDING A RELATIONAL HEALTH ECOSYSTEM

**Engage with & Center the voices of families and communities**

**Collaborate with cross-sector leaders at all levels**

**Build leadership capacity**

**Use data to identify disparities & plan strategic interventions**

**Act intentionally to reduce racial inequities**

**Measure impact & continuously improve**



# Housing as a platform to advance Flourishing

## Opportunities to advance early relational health

*Stable housing is protective, but to equalize child and family wellbeing, housing policy must be paired with neighborhood improvements, income supports, and relational/community-strengthening strategies.*

# Housing as a platform to advance Flourishing

## Opportunities to advance early relational health

- UNIVERISAL
  - Co-locate a trained Community Health Worker as a flourishing coordinator for all families
  - Promote family-to-family peer social networking and relationship building opportunities
- TARGETED SUPPORTS
  - Collaborate w/ evidence-based home visiting models (HRSA's MIECHV) to offer family support on site
  - Offer onsite group mental health and substance abuse support programs

*“Don’t meet parents where they are. Meet parents where they dream.”*

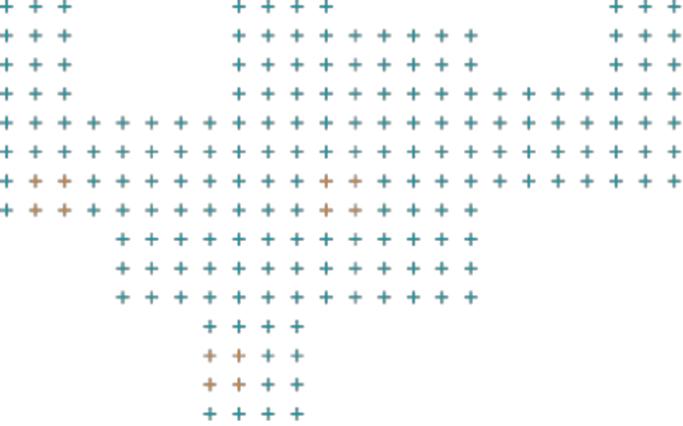
*Janine McMahon, 2023  
Ascend Parent Advisor*



Thank you!



**David W. Willis, MD**  
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# The Basics Principles & Model

## A Relational Health Framework and Community Lifestyle for Helping Children Flourish in Public Housing and Beyond

Ronald F. Ferguson, PhD

Founder & Executive Director, The Basics Inc.

September 30, 2025



# The Basics, Inc.

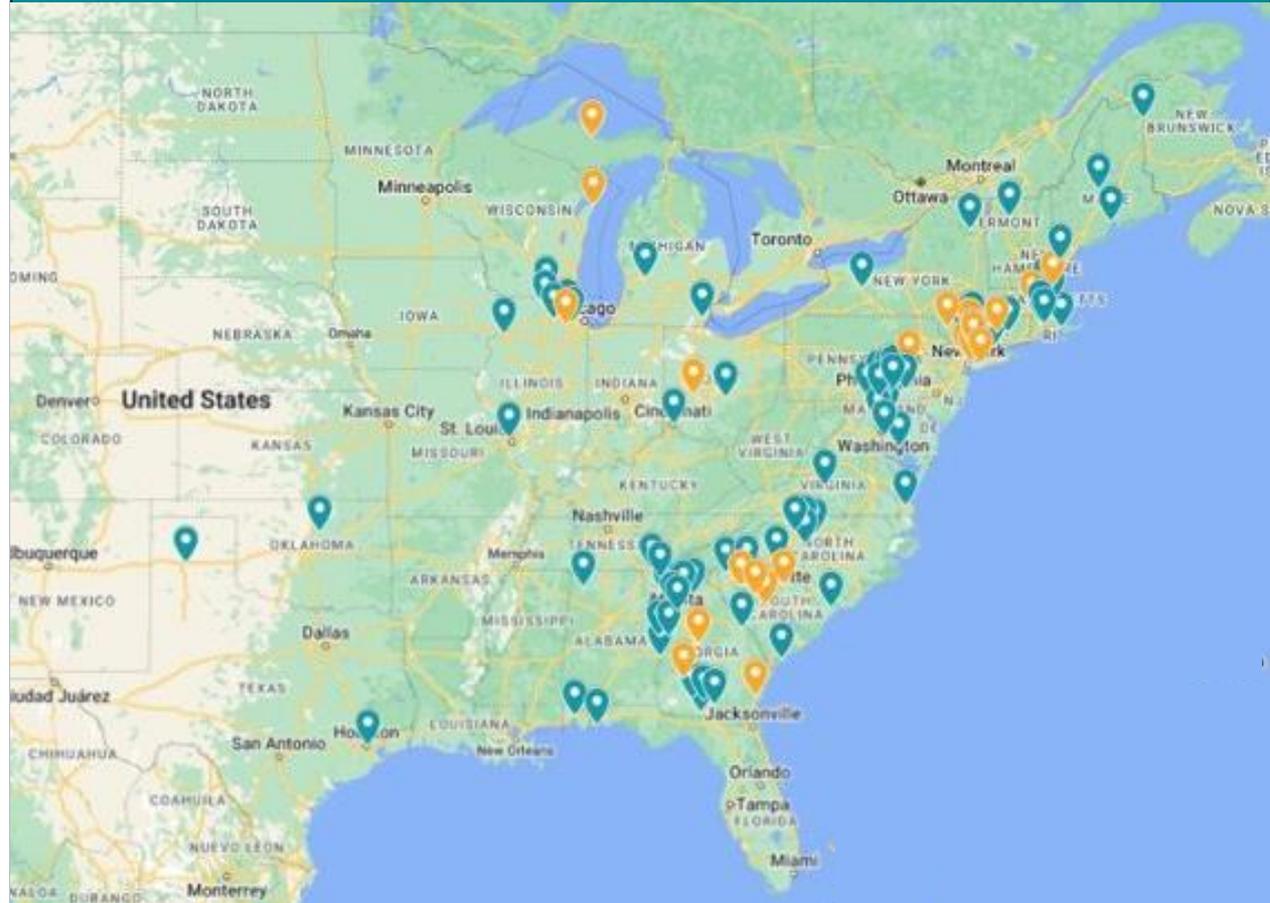
supports relational health by helping agents of change in communities, regions, and states build capacity for

supporting parents and other caregivers

in promoting children's cognitive and social-emotional development

for kindergarten readiness and overall flourishing.

# The Basics Learning Network



Note: Teal pins represent communities that have initiated or completed a formal BLN membership. Orange pins represent communities with Basics initiatives that have not yet entered the formal membership process. Note shown on this map, are member communities in Australia, Bermuda, Brazil, and Canada.

# Socioecological Saturation



# Common Language: The Basics Principles

- Holistic coverage of key caregiving behaviors



Maximize Love, Manage Stress



Talk, Sing, and Point

- Blends well with other frameworks



Count, Group, and Compare

- **Goal:** All five Principles, every child, every day



Explore through Movement and Play



Read and Discuss Stories

# A Relational Health Lifestyle as Daily Routine



Let them know every day that I love them.  
That includes when I'm tired and stressed.



Yes, we talk, sing, and point as we go back-and-forth,  
Having fun with the thoughts we express.



We count fingers and toes and put objects in groups,  
And we find lots of things to compare.



We explore while we play and discover new things  
And we do it almost everywhere.



We read stories in books and discuss what we think,  
And sometimes what the books make us feel.

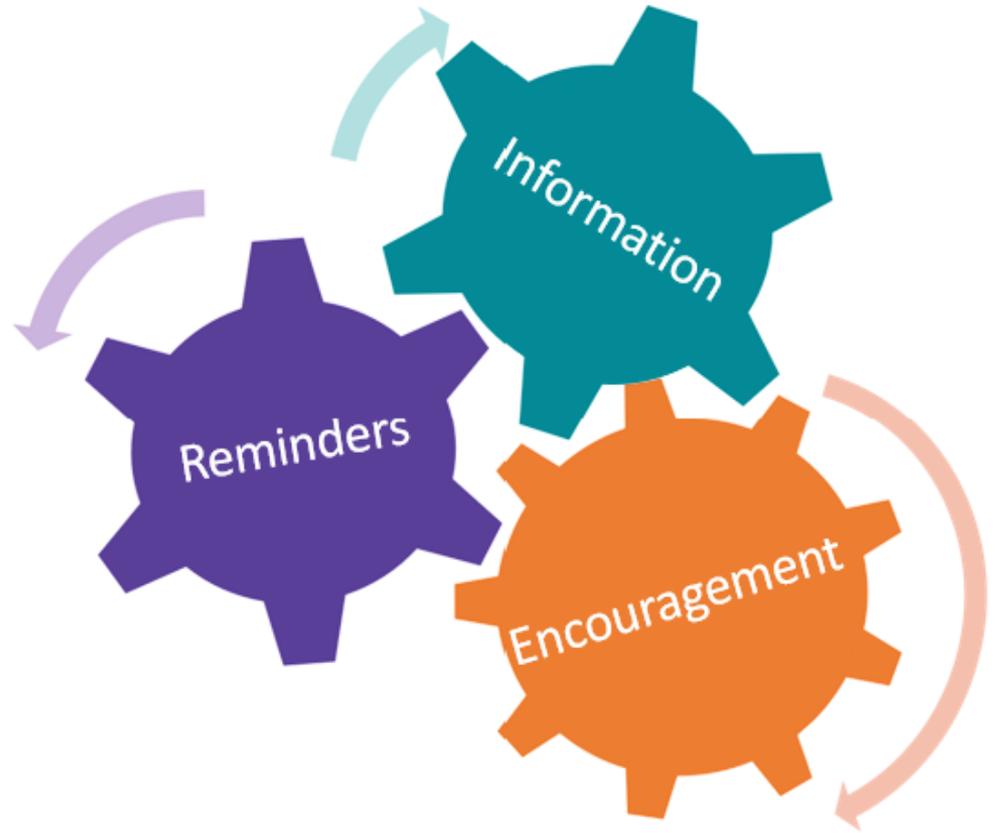


Yes, The Basics are things that we do every day,  
As a fun way to make our dreams real.



# Strategic Components

For Making  
The Basics Principles  
Daily Routines





## *In Public Housing*

### PREPARE STAFF TO SHARE

- Collaborate with **Resident Services Coordinators**, housing authority staff, or tenant councils to include The Basics in regular programming.
- Incorporate Basics language and examples into everyday conversations with families.





## *In Public Housing*

### USE PUBLIC SPACES

- Display **posters** in lobbies, elevators, laundry rooms, and hallways
- **“Learning Corners”** or boards near playgrounds, entryways, or mail areas with rotating prompts. Make an empty apartment into a Basics-themed playroom.



### **The Basics Principle #5: Read and Discuss Stories**

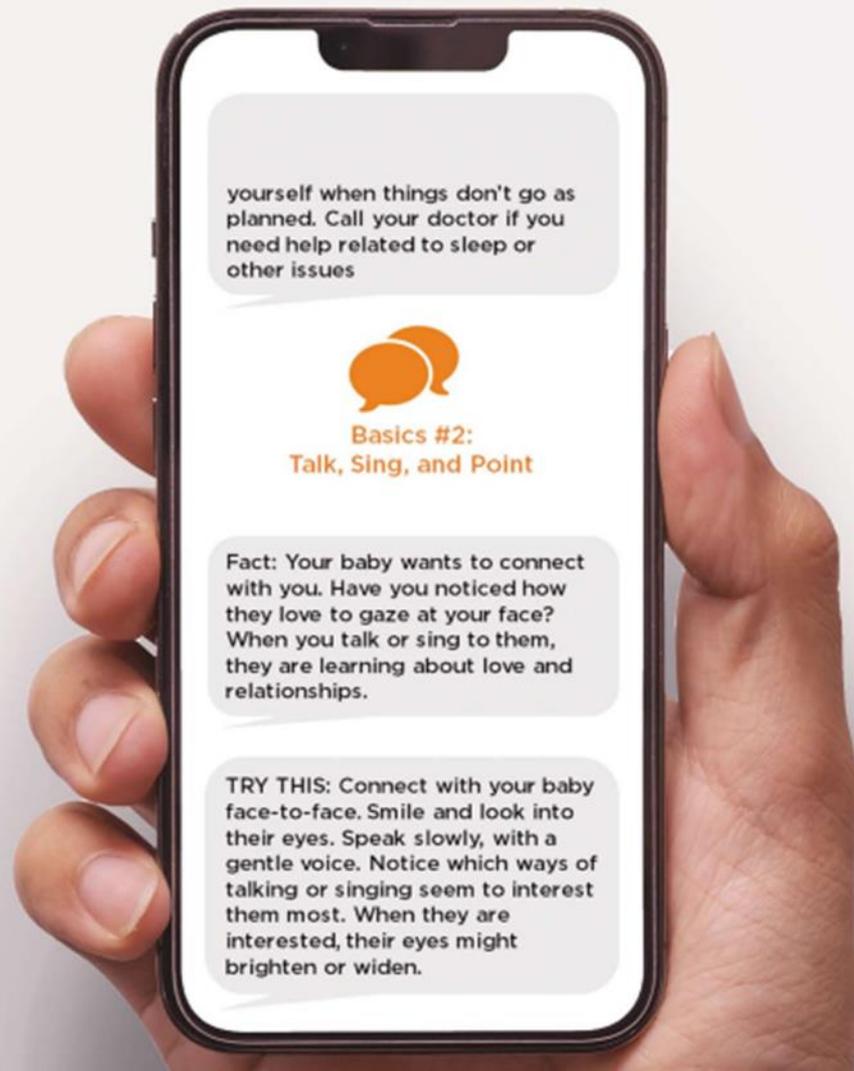
- ✓ **Have an everyday routine** for example, at bedtime.
- ✓ **With an infant**, point to and name the pictures. You don't need to read all the words.
- ✓ **With a toddler or preschooler** read what is on the page or tell a story that goes with the pictures
- ✓ **Make reading interactive** by talking about and pointing to the pictures, asking questions, and responding to your child.



## *In Public Housing*

### EMBRACE BASICS INSIGHTS

- Developmental sequence based on child's age (birth – 5)
- Aligned with key early childhood frameworks (e.g., Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework)
- Covers one Basics Principle each week with two messages, a FACT and a TRY THIS





## *In Public Housing*

### ENGAGE PARENT PARTNERS

- Residents can host Basics play groups, make informal home visits, help with events
- Stipends can incentivize participation and leadership

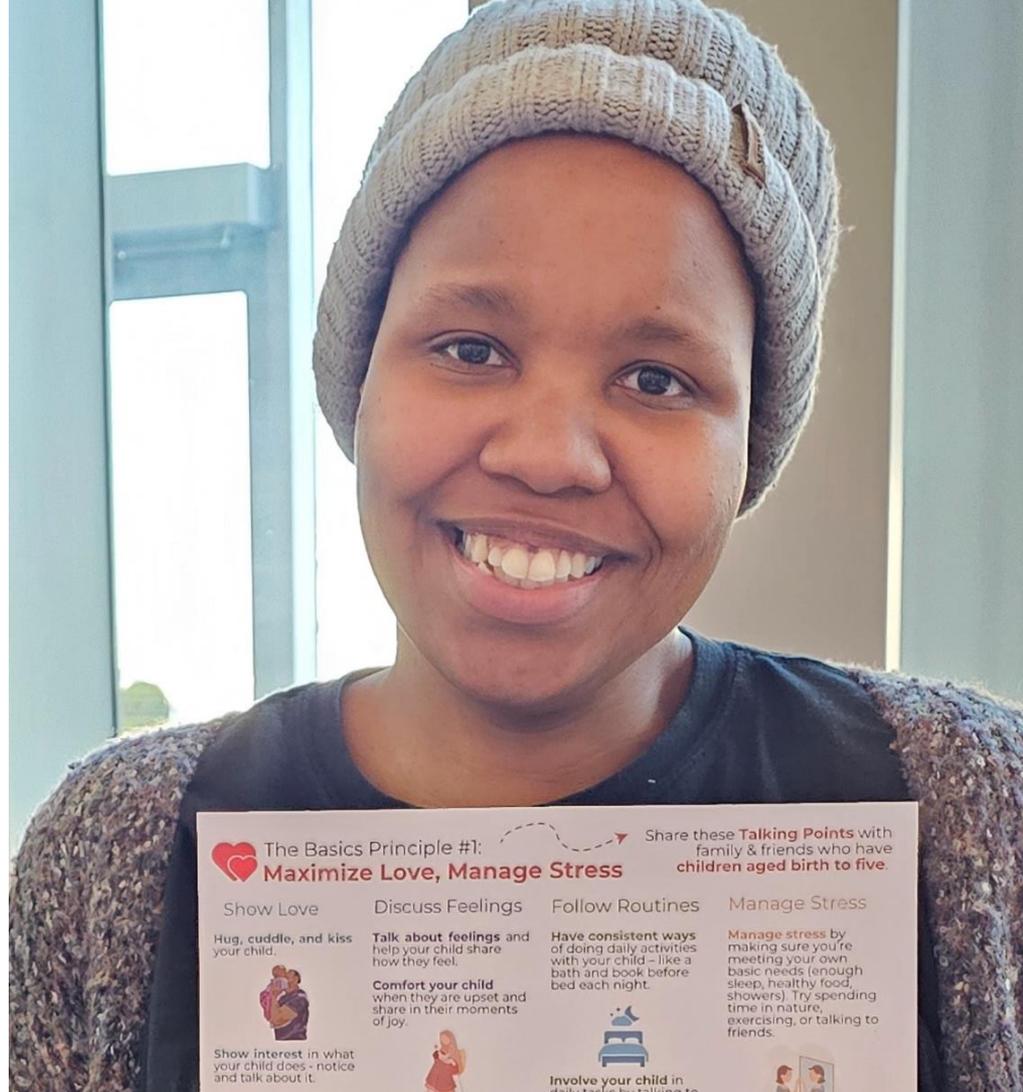




## *In Public Housing*

### RECRUIT PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

- Head Start programs, WIC clinics, pediatricians, libraries, and more
- “Basics at Home” kits with books, toys, and printed tips shared during health or education-related events



The Basics Principle #1:  
**Maximize Love, Manage Stress**

Share these **Talking Points** with family & friends who have children aged birth to five.

#### Show Love

Hug, cuddle, and kiss your child.



Show interest in what your child does - notice and talk about it.

#### Discuss Feelings

Talk about feelings and help your child share how they feel.

**Comfort your child** when they are upset and share in their moments of joy.



#### Follow Routines

Have consistent ways of doing daily activities with your child - like a bath and book before bed each night.



Involve your child in daily activities.

#### Manage Stress

Manage stress by making sure you're meeting your own basic needs (enough sleep, healthy food, showers). Try spending time in nature, exercising, or talking to friends.





## *In Public Housing*

### DEVELOP RITUALS

- Celebrate milestones—“Basics Families of the Month,” group challenges, and resident-led storytelling sessions
- Incorporate The Basics into **resident orientation** for new families.



Analyses find positive impacts on parenting behavior, child development, and job satisfaction in trusted messenger organizations. The largest changes in parenting behavior in the months following Basics Insights enrollment are for parents with the lowest initial levels of future orientation and persistence.



# The Basics Caregiver Promise

With my heart I will love you  
And shield you from stress.

With my mouth I will speak what I feel.

With soft words and sweet songs every time I behold you  
I'll show you that my love is real.

With my fingers I'll point at the objects I name  
And I'll count them in groups to compare.

With my feet I will take you outdoors to explore  
While we play and enjoy the fresh air.

With my eyes I will read as I show you the world  
Through bright pictures and stories in books.

These are ways to make sure that your brain is prepared  
For successes wherever you look.

This my promise I make from the day of your birth  
That these basics I'll faithfully do.

For my job is to help you grow happy and smart  
Starting now when your life is brand new.

You will learn that your life is an artwork.  
And that you are the artist in charge.

But before you decide what to do with your life

Listen now  
To the beat  
Of my heart.



# Upcoming GLR Learning Tuesdays Webinars:

## GLR LEARNING TUESDAYS

Curriculum at a Crossroads: Evidence and What Works

Tuesday, September 30, 3:00–4:30 p.m. ET/12:00-1:130 p.m. PT

## CRUCIBLE OF PRACTICE SALON

The Moonshot Series Preview: A Powerful Launchpad for Collective Learning

Tuesday, October 7, 12:30–2 p.m. ET/9:30 a.m.–12 p.m. PT

## GLR LEARNING TUESDAYS

TBA

Tuesday, October 7, 3:00–4:30 p.m. ET/12:00-1:130 p.m. PT

## TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED TEACHING AND LEARNING

Screens in the First Five Years: What We Need to Know and Do

*Co-Sponsored by Children and Screens*

Tuesday, October 14, 3:00–4:30 p.m. ET/12:00-1:130 p.m. PT

## PARENTS AS CURATORS

The Evolution of Homeschooling

Tuesday, October 21, 3:00–4:30 p.m. ET/12:00-1:130 p.m. PT

Please stand by...Webinar will begin momentarily!

