

Conversations in Home Visiting: Home Visiting and Early Relational Health

National Home Visiting Network

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The National Home Visiting Network (“Network”) was formed in 2018 to create space for critical conversations that are needed across practice, policy, and research to continuously refine and advance the field of home visiting so that more families with young children can benefit from this evidence-based service.

For several years now, Network advisor David Willis has been working to elevate increased awareness of the importance of early relationships for healthy child development. While the Network was privy to his early thinking, we felt the need to develop a deeper understanding of early relational health (ERH), and specifically to explore linkages with home visiting.

Actions to Better Understand Early Relational Health

The Network met in person in September 2024 and a substantial portion of the agenda was devoted to a conversation about home visiting and ERH.

Going into the meeting, we had several wonderings—what is ERH and how does it relate to home visiting? Can the ERH movement be a catalyst for home visiting to reach more families? What are the opportunities and challenges of aligning ERH and home visiting?

We heard from four thought-leaders who know both ERH and home visiting:

- **Junlei Li** (*Saul Zaentz Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, Faculty Co-Chair, Human Development and Education Program, Harvard Graduate School of Education*). We watched a video presentation featuring Junlei Li. He spoke about how ERH can help to complete the big picture of an early childhood ecosystem and everyone in it, especially parents and caregivers who too often are the invisible characters in the picture. He emphasized the reciprocal nature of relationships between children and their parents and the “caregiving network” that is triggered in the adult brain to engage with the child.

- **David Willis** (*Founder, Nurture Connection; Professor of Pediatrics, Georgetown University Center on Child and Human Development*). David helped us understand the evolution of ERH, the launch of Nurture Connection, and how the work is unfolding across practice, workforce, research, communications, and policy to raise awareness about the importance of emotional connections between babies and toddlers, their parents and caregivers as a way to strengthen relationships, promote positive early everyday experiences, and mitigate toxic stress.
- **Mary Mackrain** (*Senior Advisory to Maternal and Child Health Programs, Education Development Center*). Mary shared early findings from a Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) ERH Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN) project focused on Caregiver-Child Interaction where they are learning that home visitors feel ready and able to engage in supporting child development and adult wellness, but home visitors are less comfortable with the in-between interaction between parent and child and talking and wondering with parents about their relationships with their children. The CoIIN is currently engaging nine local implementing agencies across four states to work on possible solutions, from helping home visitors talk about relationships as part of their day-to-day work with families, to developing skills to reflect and learn together with parents, and more.
- **Nicole Loveless** (*Native American Representative, Nurture Connection Family Network Collaborative; Cohort 1 Parent Leader, National Home Visiting Network*) Nicole shared about her role on the Nurture Connection Family Network Collaborative (NC-FNC), a network of six parent leaders who each engage 10 families in their “community” to find ways to translate the ERH concepts and research into living room language. The NC-FNC is also represented on the ERH research team, reviews the Nurture Connection newsletter before publication, writes blogs, and is involved in policy discussions as well.

Roundtable Discussion

A heart-felt conversation was had by all with respectful recognition that ERH is part of our DNA and has always been foundational to home visiting. Allison Parish commented that “It was baked into home visiting models from the very beginning.”

Network members agreed that ERH is reflected in the foundation of best practice in home visiting and related fields like doulas, and family support. Indeed, it is these fields that most often engage relationally with children and parents. Further, Meghan Schmelzer emphasized that there are “more similarities than there are differences between Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) and ERH. What is important is raising awareness and action around the unique needs of babies and the adults that care for them.”

ERH starts with understanding the relational needs of the child and at the same time, respecting, supporting, and nurturing the relational caregiving capacity of the adults to be attuned caregivers. This is core to the field of home visiting, and why home visitors, model developers, and program administrators do what they do in service of children and families and the larger ecosystem of support. It is preventative. It is culturally responsive. It is grounded in respect and trust. And it can act as a buffer for adversity.

The new ERH framing makes it more explicit that the work of home visiting and sister fields is not just about the child at the center, but that the parent is at the center too. As Monique Fountain Hanna shared, “ERH is the great equalizer. It says you are important as a parent or caregiver. You hold value. It doesn’t matter your ethnicity, race, whether you live in poverty. You hold value in the life of your child and you are valuable in and of yourself.” And David emphasized that within the context of home visiting, there is the potential to say home visiting is healing families as well as focusing on child well-being, demonstrating thriving outcomes for all. It should be highlighted that home visiting programs have different levels of focus when it comes to promoting parent-child interactions.

Continuing the Conversation: National Alliance of Home Visiting Models

In addition to having representatives of the National Alliance of Home Visiting Models (Model Alliance) at the Network table who participated in the September Network meeting, the full Model Alliance requested that the Network facilitators join their December 2024 meeting so that more perspectives could be shared. Attendance included representatives from the following models: Child First, Early Head Start, HIPPY, Healthy Families America, Nurse Family Partnership, ParentChild+, Parents as Teachers, and Safe Care. This conversation resembled the Network discussion with key points that included:

- At the core, home visiting—regardless of the model—is about building strong relationships between the caregiver and child, including early in pregnancy. The home visiting field has always recognized the importance of the early relationships for supporting child and family development and well-being.
- While not all in the home visiting field use the ERH terminology, we have been doing ERH for more than 60 years. Home visiting is synonymous with ERH.
- ERH is not a “paradigm shift” for the home visiting field. Maybe it’s an opportunity to refocus and amplify the importance of early relationships.
- Maybe we should be more explicit in talking about the concentric circles for supporting and raising children and how they fit into the ecosystem.
- It’s important to know your audience. Sometimes you need to change the language to ensure it resonates with the audience. Words matter.
- How can we lift-up and align both movements—the movement in home visiting to reach more families, and the ERH movement to raise awareness about the importance of early relationships?

Considerations for Strengthening Both Home Visiting and Early Relational Health

Across these conversations, Network members raised practical questions, many of which can be answered by the decades of research and established competencies from related fields, especially IECMH:

- How do home visiting programs identify and hire staff who have the capacity to engage in deep relational work, to build trusting, culturally responsive, respectful relationships with families and create a safe space for mutual reflection and vulnerability?
- How do programs/models help home visitors to wonder together with families, to help families see the magic and bright spots that can be part of parent and child daily routines?
- How can programs/models support home visitors so that they have the time to engage in the relational work and deliver the curriculum?
- How can home visitors be supported if the relational work uncovers trauma within the family and/or it triggers a trauma remembrance for the home visitor?
- For some families, their need for emotional support will extend beyond the knowledge, skills, and competencies of their home visitor. How does the home visitor and the home visiting program recognize when a referral is needed and ensure that the family gets support from a higher level of care?

And some systems-level questions were generated as well:

- How do we explain ERH and clarify to those in the broader early childhood system and fields (e.g., home visiting, infant mental health, doulas, etc.) so that they can see themselves in these conversations?
- How do we help Medicaid understand that home visiting is a critical service effort for achieving Medicaid outcomes? Therefore, investing in home visiting as a service delivery method for supporting ERH is beneficial to Medicaid?
- How do we help systems leaders adopt an abundance rather than scarcity mindset? When we can show the alignment and overlap we can more clearly map the resources and show the need.

As Junlei Li reminded us, “We cannot make a lasting impact on children by skipping over the adults in the middle.” Members of the Network appreciate this framing and look forward to working more closely with the ERH movement to be an essential partner in delivering support and services to families in ways that bolster child and parent relationships.

Early Relational Health Resources

- [Nurture Connection](#)
- [*Clarifying the Terms: Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health And Early Relational Health: A Joint Statement*](#)
- *Nurture Connection Presents: ERH Research, Principles, and Perspectives.* See minutes 16–32 for the excerpt the Network viewed together, featuring Junlei Li.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iq5hj1SV1NU>