

April 30, 2026
Wicked Problems Institute
Orlando, FL

From Risk to Resiliency and Flourishing

Reflections



David W. Willis, MD

Thrive Center, Georgetown U.
Founder and Director, Nurture
Connection



**THE POWER OF HUMAN
CONNECTIONS for:**

**GROWTH and
DEVELOPMENT
HEALING and REPAIR
RESILIENCY BUILDING
FLOURISHING**

**"Its all about the
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 ¹
- **Mental Health:** One in six U.S. children aged 2-8 years (17.4%) have a diagnosed mental, behavioral or developmental disorder. ²
- **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)

¹ 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

² 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>

³ 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>

ERH as a Buffer Against Adversity

- **Growing evidence that ERH—and positive relationships during childhood more generally—can serve as a protective factor that buffers against the adverse impacts of stressors on children’s stress biology, physical health, and psychosocial functioning**
 - **ERH mitigates effects of poverty, trauma, parental adversity**
 - **Caregiver presence regulates stress responses**



Key Principles of Early Relational Health

- **Relationships are the foundation** — nurturing, reciprocal, and built in everyday moments
- **Families and communities are the experts** — center culture, lived experience, and generational wisdom
- **Belonging and connection are essential** — for children, caregivers, and communities
- **Equity and justice are non-negotiable** — structural conditions shape whether ERH is even possible
- **Lead with relational abundance** — share power, build on strengths, and expand who can promote ERH

Nurture Connections North Star

Life time flourishing begins in the earliest years

Abundance: A Relational Health Ecosystem

Programmatic Supports

- High performing medical home
- Relational care coordinators
- Family development specialists (HealthySteps)
- Family service workers / Family navigators
- Community health workers
- Home visitors
- Family coaches
- Promotores
- Doulas

Informal social supports



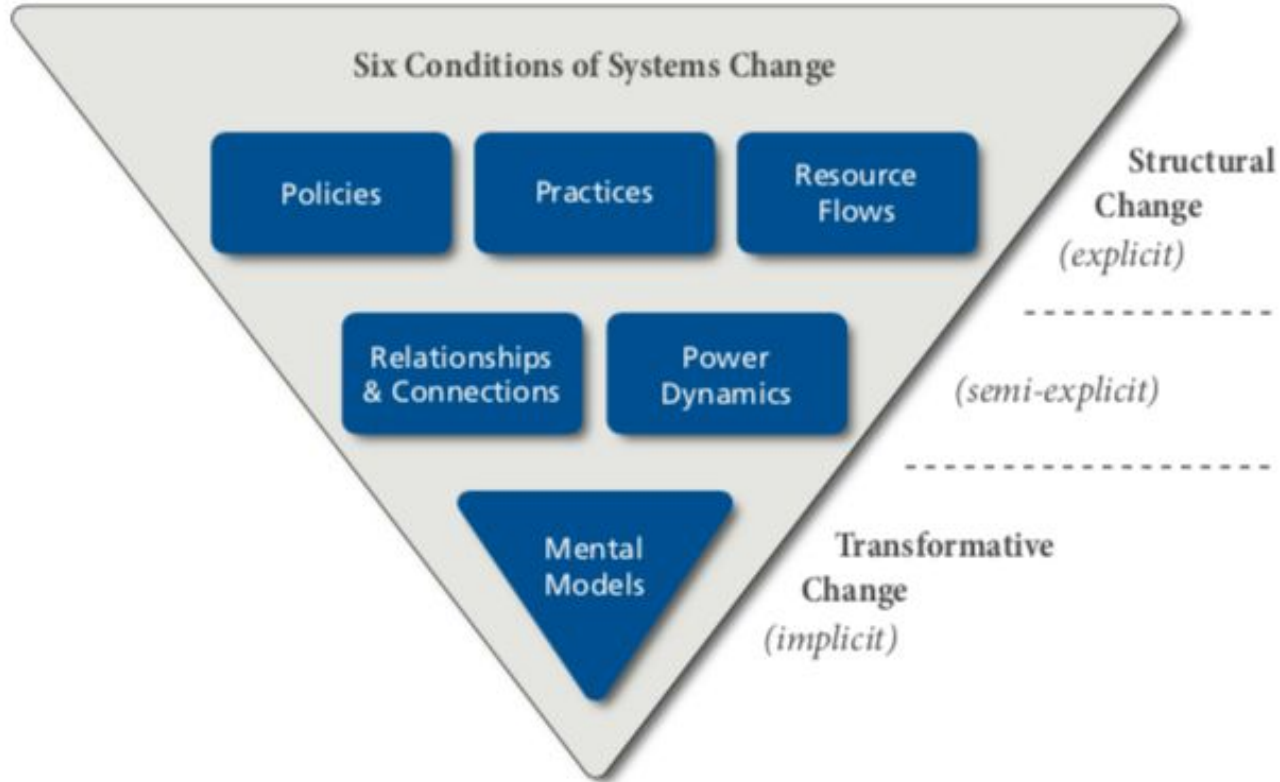
Connection as a Social Determinant of Health

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

Six Conditions of System Change



Essential Mental Models

For generational flourishing

- **Trauma-informed care is relational care**
- **Beyond ACEs: The mitigating power of PCEs**
- **Strength-based, family-centered, relational supports**
- **Authentic, trustworthy parent partnerships**
- **The power of relationships**
- **Relational abundance**
- **The power of hope, love and the spirituality**

Core Relational Practices to advance healing, resilience and flourishing

For Families: Narrative, story telling and reflection

For Service Providers: Reflective Practice



“How you are is an important as what you do”

Early Relational Health Together

MI DOH and Nurture Connection



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

*Janine McMahon, 2023
Ascend Parent Advisor*

