**Connected Communities: Thriving Families**

**Literature Review and Strategic Guide**

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| **Introduction** |

In 2022, the Missouri Coalition for Children launched an initiative to take on the root causes of why and how families in Missouri become involved with the child protection system. The initiative, *Connected Communities - Thriving Families*, seeks to promote a more humane narrative about families that experience vulnerabilities and work directly with a select number of communities to develop robust networks of support that help families remain strong, safe, and together. The first year of the initiative is designed to focus on exploration and learning with a focus on hearing directly from parents and youth who have been directly impacted by the child welfare system and community stakeholders from across the state. Time will also be spent during year one researching best practices and synthesizing research and data to help identify resources and supports that will be necessary to drive true change.

*Connected Communities - Thriving Families* is grounded in the values that families belong together, everyone is more than their worst mistake, substance use alone, without clear danger, does not make someone a bad parent, and all parents and youth have strengths on which to build.

The purpose of this literature review and resource guide is to summarize the key components of a community-based approach that supports conditions for families to remain safely together in their communities and thrive. This document provides a summary of four inter-related and complimentary focus areas critical to supporting connected communities where families can thrive, including families that have been involved with the child welfare system. The key components include sustained commitment to and investment in:

* Parent, youth and community voice;
* Civil legal advocacy;
* Community-based, family-strengthening prevention and support; and
* Relational health.

Each of the identified areas contains an overview discussion and annotated bibliography as a resource. This document includes a data-informed summary of why the commitments described are necessary, what they look like and require. The totality of this evidence serves as an instructive call to action on the threshold commitments required to improve conditions for historically disadvantaged and marginalized families and communities.

This review guide is organized as follows:

1. Background
2. Parent, Youth and Community Voice
3. Civil Legal Advocacy
4. Community-Based Family-Strengthening Prevention and Support
5. Relational Health
6. Conclusion

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| 1. **Background**
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The most recently available federal data indicates that almost 4 million reports involving just over 7 million children were made to child abuse hotlines nationally. Of those reports, a little over half were screened out and about 3 million were determined to require an investigation. Ultimately, just under 600,000 children or less than 10 percent of children reported, were determined to have been abused or neglected and over 6 million children reported were not determined to have been maltreated. Of the 600,000 children determined to have been maltreated, 76% were neglected, 16% were physically abused, 10% per sexually abused, and 0.2% were sex trafficked.[[1]](#footnote-1) While neglect can be very serious and must be attended to in a thoughtful way, it is a highly subjective term and finding that is susceptible to varied definition, interpretation, and bias. A child is removed from their home and placed in foster care every two minutes in the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is clear and persistent racial disparity in child welfare in the United States. Black children and Native American children are represented in foster care at 2-3 times their representation in the general public. Comparatively, while children are overrepresented at much lower rates.[[3]](#footnote-3) The outcomes achieved for children that spend time in foster care are consistently very poor.[[4]](#footnote-4)

State specific data in Missouri confirm the same, decades-long trends. There are currently approximately 13,500 children in foster care in Missouri.[[5]](#footnote-5) The rate of children in foster care in Missouri is 9.2 per 1000 children, while it is 5.6 per 1000 for the country as a whole.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Given the persistence of trends in data at the national and state level, there is strong evidence that upstream prevention and family support will help address many of the circumstances that contribute to concerns of and calls to child abuse hotlines for suspicion of neglect, which can often be confused for poverty and the overrepresentation of families of color in the child welfare system. There is also a clear need to work at the state, local and federal levels to ensure help is available to parents, youth and caregivers in non-stigmatic and non-threatening ways. The sections to follow lay out four essential elements for supporting connected communities where families thrive.

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| 1. **Parent, Youth and Community Voice**
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Family and youth voice refers to ensuring that families and youth can be heard and that their input is sought and included in making critical decisions that affect their lives. It also refers to soliciting and using the perceptionsand experiences of families and youth in child welfare to make system-level improvements. The value of involving individuals with lived expertise in decision making about services, supports and opportunities that involve their families is increasingly recognized as critical to success. This is especially the case with services involving the health and well-being of parents, children and caregivers from disadvantaged backgrounds or communities where historic trauma and inequitable access to resources, supports and opportunities are perennial.

Human and social services entities are beginning to make efforts to be more inclusive by forming advisory committees of individuals with lived expertise and community representatives, but such efforts are often superficial and done more so to demonstrate an effort has been made than truly committing to generating actionable information and acting on that information. This has taken the form of federal guidance, philanthropic investment, and cross-sectoral initiatives, and continues to evolve.

Three of the leading strategies for ensuring and amplifying voice are program/service co-design, high quality legal representation, and parent peer partners, (also sometimes referred to as parent peer navigators or parent peer advocates). Co-design has been shown to increase ongoing access, uptake and participation of parents, caregivers and youth in programs and services.[[7]](#footnote-7) Parent peer partners associated with high quality legal representation, especially within the context of child welfare proceedings, has been found to expedite the time to reunification and help ensure parents and children in care receive necessary services and supports.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Voice, parent peer partners and high-quality legal representation all help ensure that parents and youth are heard, seen and have advocacy opportunities and support. Commitments to each one positions parents and youth to shape what their experiences and options are in a way that promotes self-determination and well-being and increase the likelihood that children and their parents will have access to the things they find most helpful in the ways they find most helpful when they need them.

**Annotated bibliography on parent, youth, and community voice**

***Federal guidance***

*ACYF-CB-IM-19-03, Engaging, empowering, and utilizing family and youth voice in all aspects of child welfare to drive case planning and system improvement, August 1, 2019.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-19-03> This Information Memorandum is a call to action to the field to embrace and enable child and family voice in all aspects of case planning and system operations. It points out the benefits of engaging families and youth, along with federal requirements to engage youth and parents in activities such as developing and updating the 5-year Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). It reflects the stories of countless youth and parents on the importance of being heard in child welfare.

*ACYF-CB-IM-17-02, High Quality Legal Representation for All Parties in Child Welfare* Proceedings, January *17, 2017.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-17-02> High quality legal representation is a powerful tool for parent and youth voice. Federal law recognizes the importance of children having an advocate in judicial proceedings to receive funding under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The Information Memorandum is a call to action for states to ensure that all children and parents involved in child welfare legal proceedings have representation and voice through high-quality legal representation.

***Resources, Articles, and Links***

Casey Family Programs. *How do parent partner programs instill hope and support prevention and reunification?*  January 04, 2021. <https://www.casey.org/parent-partner-program/> This informational site describes an approach that has emerged over the past decade in the use of peer mentors, or “parent partners,” who serve to bridge the gap between birth parents and a complex, often challenging, and overwhelming system. Many states and child serving agencies have adopted some version of peer partners in child welfare.

Casey Family Programs. *How have community voice and leadership guided the implementation of Family Success Centers in Washington, D.C.?* June 27, 2022. <https://www.casey.org/fsc-community-focus/> This article discusses how Family Success Centers, the name for Family Resource Centers in some jurisdictions, help families locate and access the resources and services that they need to thrive, which ultimately may help reduce instances of unnecessary child protection system involvement into the lives of families.

Fathaliah, S. and Sullivan, S. *Away from Home: Youth Experiences of Institutional Placements in Foster Care.* A study by Think of Us.

<https://assets.website-files.com/60a6942819ce8053cefd0947/60f6b1eba474362514093f96_Away%20From%20Home%20-%20Report.pdf> This report is based on a study of 78 young people with recent lived experience in institutional placements and recounts their experiences in their own words.

Casey Family Programs. *How can we prioritize constituent voice and choice to transform foster care?* January 25, 2019. <https://www.casey.org/constituent-voice-choice/> This report describes how constituent voice and choice are achieved when birth parents, relative caregivers, foster parents, and youth in care or alumni of care provide ongoing and meaningful input and leadership that the system then utilizes for continuous improvement. It provides guidance on how to incorporate voice into the work of child welfare.

Children’s Trust Fund Alliance. Website. <https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/parent-voice-2023-parent-leadership-month/> This website provides resources on building parent voice and leadership into child welfare operations and its partnership with the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN).

Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Spotlight on Integrating Youth and Parent Voices in Program Design, Planning, and Improvement*. Children’s Bureau Express, March 2019, Vol. 20, No. 2. <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/previous_issues/a86e6d5d1bdec910517620efe54bcb13> This entire issue of the CBX is devoted to integrating youth and parent voice into the work of child welfare.

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| 1. **Civil Legal Advocacy**
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A significant body of research identifies legal representation as critical to helping families avoid unnecessary contact with the child welfare system and expediting positive outcomes for families with children in foster care.[[9]](#footnote-9) There is a growing consensus among human services leaders, researchers, professional membership organizations, advocates, and individuals with lived expertise that human services programs, services, and supports should center on promoting the social determinants of health and enhancing protective factors, to achieve positive outcomes for children, families, and individuals, and promote community resiliency.[[10]](#footnote-10)

An alarming number of community members, especially in historically disadvantaged populations have a civil legal need.[[11]](#footnote-11) In many instances those needs or the ways to address them may be unknown to a parent or caregiver. Left unattended, civil justice needs can cause crisis, disruption and instability for families and their children. Unfair housing practices, loss of benefits, identity theft, unfair debt collection practices, unestablished paternity, and other issues are prevalent in low-income areas across the country. These obstacles can impede a family’s ability to provide a safe and stable environment for their children. For example, civil legal challenges can interfere with a parent’s ability to maintain suitable housing, gain access to credit to make vital purchases, restrict the ability to enroll a child in school or childcare, find or maintain employment, or make important health care decisions for a child or loved one. The systems that families and individuals must navigate to access supports are often complex and comprised of underlying regulations across multiple agencies. These regulations govern not only what is available to families, but how families must access them and maintain eligibility.

Access to programs and services and navigation of systems is a perennial challenge for parents and caregivers. Civil legal advocacy can empower, support, and restore agency to parents, caregivers, young people, and individuals to help them maintain well-being, preserve family integrity, and promote economic mobility. Civil legal advocacy can also be preventive, especially in the child welfare context, serving as a tool to stop unnecessary family separation. When a family is improperly denied access to public benefits on procedural or substantive grounds, or has another unmet civil legal need, legal professionals can assist the family or individual with enforcing their rights or accessing the supports to which they are entitled.

For families involved with the child welfare system, high-quality legal representation for parents and children has also been found to lead to positive outcomes. Representation of parents and youth by legal teams, also known as interdisciplinary legal representation, has been directly associated with enhanced parental and youth participation in case planning, improved access to critical resources and supports and expedited reunification.[[12]](#footnote-12) For these reasons, the United States Children’s Bureau has identified high-quality legal representation for the agency, parents and youth as critical to a well-functioning child welfare system and now allows for federal iv-e funding to reimburse a portion of the costs for attorneys salaries, overhead costs and the costs of social workers and parent peer partners that are part of legal teams representing parents or children.

**Annotated Bibliography on Civil Legal Advocacy**

***Federal guidance***

ACYF-CB-IM-21-02, *Civil Legal Advocacy to Promote Child and Family Well-being, Address the Social Determinants of Health, and Enhance Community Resilience,* January 14, 2021 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-21-02> The purpose of this information memorandum (IM) is to highlight the importance of civil legal advocacy in advancing child and family well-being; addressing the social determinants of health; enhancing community resiliency; and to strongly encourage state, territorial, and tribal human services entities to work together to support access to civil legal advocacy.

*ACYF-CB-IM-17-02, High Quality Legal Representation for All Parties in Child Welfare* Proceedings, January *17, 2017.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-17-02> High quality legal representation is a powerful tool for parent and youth voice. Federal law recognizes the importance of children having an advocate in judicial proceedings to receive funding under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The Information Memorandum is a call to action for states to ensure that all children and parents involved in child welfare legal proceedings have representation and voice through high-quality legal representation.

***Resources, Articles, and Links***

Legal Services Corporation (2017), *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*, <https://www.lsc.gov/media-center/publications/2017-justice-gapreport#:~:text=Common%20civil%20legal%20problems%20among,%2C%20income%20maintenance%2C%20and%20disabilit> This article discusses the prominence of civil legal challenges in the lives of low-income families and individuals and the barriers such challenges cause to family stability, economic mobility and the overall well-being of families. The discussion highlights how access to civil legal advocacy can help address many of these challenges and help position families for success.

Sankaran, V. *Using Preventive Legal Advocacy to Keep Children from Entering Foster Care.* Wm. Mitchell L. Rev. 40, no. 3 (2014): 1036-47 <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1946&context=articles> This article provides evidence of how a new model of legal representation that pairs attorneys and social workers can prevent unnecessary family separation by addressing the issues that may lead to contact with child protective services. The article focuses specifically on the University of Michigan Law School’s Child Advocacy Law Clinic’s work to create the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy (CFA), which provides legal and social work advocacy to families to prevent children from entering foster care. The article also discusses similar programs have emerged in Vermont and California; others are planned in Iowa and the District of Columbia, among other jurisdictions.

Casey Family Programs (2020), *How Can Pre-Petition Legal Representation Help Strengthen Families and Keep Them Together?* <https://www.casey.org/preventive-legal-support/> This article provides a summary of common elements of pre-petition representation offices and approaches, including lessons learned and examples of legal services offices and approaches to providing pre-petition legal assistance.

Naylon, K.M. & Lash, K.A. *Using Legal Aid to Keep Families together and Prevent Child Welfare Involvement,* The Guardian, Vol 42, No. 1, Spring 2020. <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.naccchildlaw.org/resource/resmgr/guardian/2020_spring/guardian_2020_v42n01_r7.pdf> Includes a list of studies showing the effectiveness of civil legal interventions to stabilize a family experiencing domestic violence, such as helping survivors file a protection order, secure child custody, finalize a divorce, and obtain employment and housing.

The Justice in Government Project’s FAQs About Legal Aid & VOCA (last updated May 26, 2020), <https://www.american.edu/spa/jpo/toolkit/upload/faqs-about-voca-1-7-19.pdf>

<https://medical-legalpartnership.org/> For information on medical legal partnerships and their positive outcomes for children and families.

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| 1. **Community-Based, Family-Strengthening Prevention and Support**
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Children and families in the child welfare system are often there due to a variety of societal conditions that affect them in adverse ways, rather than due to actual child abuse. These conditions include chronic poverty, housing and food insecurity, lack of essential supports, and isolation.[[13]](#footnote-13) When conditions become very bad and someone reports them to the child abuse hotline, they have likely experienced a great deal of trauma. In turn, if the child welfare system separates the family with the use of foster care, the trauma is compounded and reflects itself in increasingly higher levels of care, greater alienation, and loss of critical relationships and connections. The harm is likely to carry over generational lines.

Child welfare typically responds after a family is in crisis with therapeutic services designed to fix the family as opposed to preventative supports that can help families heal and become more resilient in the face of adversity. Preventative approaches to supporting families before the call is made and before trauma has occurred can reduce the need for intrusive and expensive services and increase the opportunities for families to navigate their circumstances without child welfare involvement. To reverse troubling trends of increasing foster care populations and reports of maltreatment, along with unsatisfactory outcomes for children and families, there is a need to focus on proactively strengthening families through primary prevention of child maltreatment and family separation.

Preventative approaches have long been recognized as critical to maintaining good health in the medical context. However, other fields have been slower to recognize the benefits of such investments. Child welfare has been behind the curve. Typically, when we speak of prevention, the most understood contexts are in preventing child abuse and preventing foster care entry. These are essential areas for focus, but our approach to prevention should begin earlier by equipping families with the supports they need before hardship becomes a crisis – or harm.

In our child welfare, juvenile justice and mental health systems, children often enter with existing trauma, and oftentimes the trauma is exacerbated when they are separated from their families, placements do not match health or developmental needs, and the almost inevitable moves from place to place occur. These experiences can be directly correlated with highly expensive and intrusive interventions and placements and reduce the likelihood of children and families being reunited. Making strong investments in the supports that can prevent much of the trauma mitigates much of what children and their parents experience otherwise.

A prevention-based approach to supporting children and families requires that our combined systems, including health care, behavioral health, and child welfare, engage with families much earlier than we typically do, i.e., *before* harm and trauma occur. It also requires tackling some of the larger societal issues which, unchecked, can lead to child maltreatment and family separation, such as incapacity in the face of poverty and low socioeconomic status, caregiver burnout, isolation, substance abuse, and mental illness. Addressing these root causes of our involvement with families is a major departure from waiting for a child abuse hotline report to come in. It also requires cultivating a different set of resources, skills and approaches that are broader than relying solely on clinical interventions that treat the symptoms, rather than the causes, of the difficulty.

To be effective, primary prevention services should be in communities where families live, where they are easily accessible, and culturally responsive. Those services should also focus on the overall health and well-being of both children and families and be designed to promote resiliency and parenting capacity. In some situations, these resources may exist but need bolstering and in others they may need to be developed through partnerships and community work. Second, we must use the resources in ways that will lead to the outcomes we desire, which includes awareness and engagement at many levels. In the short term, we can reasonably expect to build or strengthen the structures, awareness, processes, and pathways that will lead to the ultimate outcomes that we are seeking to help families, children and youth achieve.

**Annotated Bibliography for Community-Based, Family-Strengthening Prevention and Support**

***Federal guidance***

*ACYF-CB-IM-18-05, Strengthening families through primary prevention of child maltreatment and unnecessary parent-child separation, November 16,2018.* [*https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-18-05*](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-18-05)The purpose of this Information Memorandum (IM) is to strongly encourage all child welfare agencies and Children’s Bureau (CB) grantees to work together with the courts and other appropriate public and private agencies and partners to plan, implement and maintain integrated primary prevention networks and approaches to strengthen families and prevent maltreatment and the unnecessary removal of children from their families. Coordinated and robust primary prevention efforts are critically important to strengthen families, prevent the initial occurrence of and ongoing maltreatment, prevent unnecessary family disruption, reduce family and child trauma, interrupt intergenerational cycles of maltreatment, and build a well-functioning child welfare system.

ACYF-CB-IM-21-03. [*Lessons From the COVID-19 Pandemic: Supporting Families Through More Just, Equitable, Proactive, and Integrated Approaches*](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-21-03)*,* January 14, 2021. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-21-03> The purpose of this Information Memorandum (IM) is to highlight opportunities to emerge from the Covid-19 Pandemic with new, more effective and streamlined approaches to proactively meeting family needs and improving access to critical supports and services.

**Resources, Articles and Links**

Weiner, D., Anderson, C., Thomas, K. *Addressing Economic Hardship Key to Preventing Child Welfare System Involvement.* Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2021. <https://www.chapinhall.org/research/economic-supports-child-welfare/> This report of Chapin Hall’s research shows that poverty is a key driver of child welfare system involvement and that families do better when they have access to concrete services and have economic stability. This makes providing economic and concrete supports an important component of preventing child abuse and neglect and reducing involvement with child welfare. Since families of color are disproportionately affected by poverty, these supports can serve as a strategy to reduce racial disproportionality in child welfare systems

Centers for Disease Control, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Essentials for Childhood: Creating Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments for All Children.* <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/essentials-for-childhood-framework508.pdf> The framework is designed to allow for multi-sector approaches to comprehensive child abuse and neglect prevention activities with involvement from multiple sectors that promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for children. It is based on the knowledge that young children experience their world through their relationships with parents and other caregivers and that safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments are essential to preventing child abuse and neglect. The framework has been adopted by a number of states with financial support from the CDC and some states without funding.

Other resources related to Essentials for Childhood framework can be located at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/essentials/index.html>

Wulczyn, F. and Lery, B. *Do Family Support Centers Reduce Maltreatment Investigations: Evidence from Allegheny County.* Chapin Hall at The University of Chicago, Center for State Child Welfare Data. December 2018. <https://fcda.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FSC-Allegheny-County-_Dec2018.pdf> Chapin Hall conducted an evaluation of Family Support Centers in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Limitations of the study noted in the report notwithstanding, the study found that areas within the county served by Family Support Centers had fewer maltreatment investigations once the level of social disadvantage and population size were considered.

Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities. *Within our reach: A national strategy to eliminate child abuse and neglect fatalities.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cecanf_final_report.pdf> This report describes the work and recommendations of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities by making major changes to the existing child welfare system in the country.

OMNI Institute. *Advancing the Family Support & Strengthening Field Project: Survey Results.* 2016. <https://8c49defa-92cd-4bf1-ac5b-91471683def4.filesusr.com/ugd/20e556_58df7bcbc3bf453d9790c21c0eeaa8ab.pdf> This report describes and provides results of the work of the National Family Support Network to develop and support community-based efforts to strengthen families, primarily through the development of Family Resource Centers.

Additional information on Family Resource Centers can be located at: <https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org/resources>

Dr. William Bell, CEO Casey Family Programs. *Building, Growing, Supporting and Sustaining Communities of Hope for All of America’s Children.* March 11, 2022. <https://www.casey.org/william-c-bell-clinton-school-public-service/> In this video presentation, Dr. Bell discusses how building Communities of Hope is a solid blueprint that supports the needs and dreams for a better life for families.

Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Protective Factors, Part 1.* (Transcript of podcast), March 17, 2017

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/resource/child-welfare-podcast-protective-factors-part1> This video discusses the importance of supporting protective factors in child welfare.

Milner J., and Kelly, D. *It's Time to Stop Confusing Poverty with Neglect.* Children’s Bureau Express. December/January 2020, Vol. 20 No. 10. U. S. Children’s Bureau. <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/article/2020/december-january/its-time-to-stop-confusing-poverty-with-neglect/953840031b92c150517620efe54bcbd9> The article focuses on the harms of treating family poverty as neglect in child welfare and the risks to families of separation. The entire issue of the CBX at the link above is devoting to the confusion of poverty and neglect.

Family Integrity and Justice Journal. *Poverty is Not Abuse, Poverty is Not Neglect*. Spring 2022, Vol.1 Issue 2. <https://publications.pubknow.com/view/1055841541/2/#zoom=true> The entire issue is devoted to the differences of poverty and neglect and the harms of the policies and practices that conflate them. It includes articles by national known experts and those with lived expertise in child welfare.

Family Integrity and Justice Journal. *Investing in Communities and Families.* Summer 2022, Vol. 1 Issue 3. <https://publications.pubknow.com/view/288644440/4/> The entire issue is devoted to the need to strengthen and invest in the ability of communities to support families in preventing the trauma that arises before and during child welfare involvement. It includes articles by national known experts and those with lived expertise in child welfare.

Sims, Victor. *A Village Should Not Be a Privilege.* The Imprint. March 21, 2023.

<https://imprintnews.org/opinion/a-village-should-not-be-a-privilege/239654> This article, written by a person with lived expertise in foster care, makes the case that rather than focusing solely on removal and placement, we need to prioritize community-based solutions that support families and prevent crises before they occur.

Burton, Esq., A.O. and Montauban, A. *Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding: Repeal the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and Delink Child Protection from Family Well-Being.* Columbia Journal of Race and Law, 2021, <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3905041>. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) mandates reporting, investigation, and prosecution of allegedly abusive and neglectful parents. This article takes on the government’s police power to disrupt, surveil, control, and destroy hundreds of thousands of Black families based on conditions of poverty framed as neglect. Centering a Black mother’s five-year long ordeal with New York City’s family policing system, this Article examines the carceral roots of CPS and its destructive impacts on Black families.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html> This CDC website provides information on the CDC-Kaiser ACEs Study, and information on preventive and risk factors and prevention strategies.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Creating Positive Childhood Experiences.* <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/prevent-child-abuse/index.html> This CDC website provides information on the importance of creating positive childhood experiences and approaching to creating them.

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| 1. **Relational Health**
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In the most general of terms, relational health can be understood to include an individual’s sense of connection and belonging to other loving and caring people in their lives. A study conducted by Harvard University has identified relationships as the single most important factor for a person’s overall happiness.[[14]](#footnote-14) Connection to community and culture are also critical components of relational health. Research also indicates that relationships can prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), mitigate the negative effects of toxic stress caused by ACES and help families heal from past trauma.[[15]](#footnote-15)

There are opportunities to prevent and replace ACES by focusing on preserving and nurturing relationships. There are also great opportunities at the family and community level to create Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs).[[16]](#footnote-16) The ACES and PCEs frameworks use science to explain something that may seem like commonsense, our health is deeply affected by the strength of our relationships, opportunities for personal growth, and our sense of safety, connection and belonging. When these basic human needs go unmet it negatively affects our overall well-being and can make illness and the need for intensive and expensive health interventions more likely.[[17]](#footnote-17) For many low-income families, inequitable access to wholistic care has led to generations of poor health at great financial and human cost.[[18]](#footnote-18) Efforts to interrupt such harmful cycles are most often grounded in efforts to nurture, restore and support relationships and connections to caring people. However, too often the focus in child welfare has placed safety and permanency before social and emotional well-being. This has contributed to adverse childhood experiences for children in foster care as well as those who leave foster care without a permeant sense of connection and belonging.

To change the experiences that children have in foster care and promote their whole health and well-being, we must change our approaches. This includes how we view, anticipate, and meet their needs. It also calls all system partners to recognize that relationships and a child’s sense of connection and belonging affect all aspects of their health and well-being. A whole health approach requires that we recognize that children exist within the context of their families and communities and that a child’s health is directly affected by the health and well-being of their parents, family members and caregivers.

Children depend on the adults in their lives and those adults must have access to the knowledge, skills and resources to meet their needs. They also benefit from connections to community. Equipping parents and caregivers with vital knowledge and skills about what is available to help their children and how to access it must be viewed as a critical component of healthcare. Likewise, efforts to provide support to parents and caregivers for their own well-being are also critical. Insufficient attention to these components of a child’s well-being can leave them vulnerable to the escalation of preexisting physical and mental health needs that can lead to more trauma and the need for increasingly intensive and expensive treatments, services, and interventions.

**Annotated Bibliography for Relational Health**

***Federal guidance***

*ACYF-CB-IM-20-02, Family time and visitation for children and youth in out-of-home care,* February 5, 2020. *(*<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-20-02>) This Information Memorandum provides information on research, best practices, resources and recommendations for providing children and youth in out-of-home care safe, meaningful and high frequency family time that strengthens the family, expedites reunification and improves parent and child well-being outcomes. It emphasizes the importance of family time and visitation in reducing the trauma of removal and placement of children in out-of-home care, maintaining the integrity of the parent-child relationship, healthy sibling relationships and overall child and family well-being. It also provides information on best practices and highlights some state statutes on the topic.

*ACYF-CB-IM-20-06, Foster care as a support to families, April 29, 2020.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/im2006.pdf> This Information Memorandum discusses best practices, resources, and recommendations for using foster care as a support for families in a way that mitigates the trauma of removal for the child and parents, expedites safe and successful reunification, and improves parent and child well-being outcomes*.* It emphasizes the importance of state and tribal child welfare communities building and supporting relationships between resource families and parents1 to facilitate improved engagement of parents, promote timely reunification, build protective capacities in parents, and strengthen overall child and family well-being, while ensuring child safety.

*ACYF-CB-IM-20-08, Use of Title IV-E Programmatic Options to Improve Support to Relative Caregivers and the Children in Their Care*, December 29, 2020. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-20-08> This Information Memorandum (IM) encourages title IV-E agencies to make use of flexibilities and options within the title IV-E program to improve support for relatives and kin caring for children in foster care. These options include making use of waivers of non-safety related foster care licensing standards for relative foster care providers and participating in the federal title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP).

*ACYF-CB-IM-21-01****,*** [*Achieving Permanency for the Well-being of Children and Youth*](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-21-01)*, January 5, 2021.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/im-21-01> This Information Memorandum discusses best practices, resources, and recommendations for achieving permanency for children and youth in a way that prioritizes the child’s or youth’s well-being. Using an analysis of child welfare data. The IM also outlines typical patterns in exit outcomes for children and youth in foster care. This IM reviews the permanency goals of reunification, adoption, and guardianship and emphasizes the importance of state and tribal child welfare agencies and courts focusing on each child’s unique needs, attachments, and connections when making permanency decisions.

***Resources, Articles, and Links***

Sankaran, V., Church, C., and Mitchell, M. *A Cure Worse Than the Disease? The Impact of Removal on Children and Their Families*. *Marq. L. Rev.* 102, no. 4 (2019): 1163-94. <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3055&context=articles> This article focuses on how children and parents interacting with the child welfare system experience the removal process, the genesis of a foster care case. It analyzes the gaps and emergent issues in practice, research, and policy related to child removal. The article concludes with specific policy and practice recommendations aimed at curbing child welfare's reliance on removal to foster care as its predominant safety intervention.

Fong, K. *Investigating Families: Motherhood in the Shadow of Child Protective Services.* Princeton University Press, 2023 (Forthcoming – Add link when available). This research follows the stories of how the child protective service system adversely affects mothers, particularly mothers of color living in poverty and the resulting marginality, lack of voice, difficulty maintaining relationships with their children, and threatens the integrity of their motherhood.

Milner, J. and Kelly, D. *Everyone Needs Relationships.* Children’s Bureau Express, 2020, Vol. 21, No. 4. <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/article/2020/may/everyone-needs-relationships/113880031b92c150517620efe54bcba9> This article highlights the needs of children in foster care and parents in child welfare to have strong relationships to sustain them, and how foster can support those relationships by being a support for the entire family.

Kelly, D. *Family is Essential.* Children’s Bureau Express, June 2020, Vol. 21 No. 5. U.S. Children’s Bureau. <https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/article/2020/june/family-is-essential/e53880031b92c150517620efe54bcbfb> This article focuses on the essential of all people for family relationships and the importance of supporting families and mobilizing around their needs in child welfare.

Testa, M. *Disrupting the Foster Care to Termination of Parental Rights Pipeline: Making the Case for Kinship Guardianship as the Next Best Alternative for Children Who Can’t Be Reunified with their Parents.* Family Integrity and Justice Quarterly, Winter 2022 Edition. <https://publications.pubknow.com/view/752322160/74/#zoom=true> The article makes the case that there is little advantage to prioritizing termination of parental rights and adoption over kinship guardianship.

Family Integrity & Justice Quarterly. *The Harm of the Adoption and Safe Families Act.* Winter 2022, Vol. 1 Issue 1. <https://publications.pubknow.com/view/752322160/#zoom=true> The entire issue is devoted to the harms of ASFA and the threats it poses to family integrity and unity. It includes articles from nationally known experts in the field and the voices of lived expertise in child welfare.

Family Integrity & Justice Quarterly. *Family is Best Interest.* Fall 2022, Vol. 1 Issue 4. <https://publications.pubknow.com/view/26984367/2-3/> The entire issue is devoted to the preference for children to remain with families in their own communities, with several articles making the case for kinship care when placement is needed. It includes articles from nationally known experts in the field and the voices of lived expertise in child welfare.

Family Justice Group. *The Harm of Disconnection.* Family Justice Journal (Forthcoming July 2023 – Add link when available). This entire issue of the Family Justice Journal is devoted to the harms of disconnection and the importance of relational health. It includes articles from several nationally known scholars and individuals with lived expertise in child welfare.

Garner, A. and Yogman, M. *Partnering with Families and Communities to Promote Relational Health.* Pediatrics. 2021 Aug;148(2):e2021052582. doi: 10.1542/peds.2021-052582. PMID: 34312296.

<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/148/2/e2021052582/179805/Preventing-Childhood-Toxic-Stress-Partnering-With?autologincheck=redirected> This revised policy statement for the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) on childhood toxic stress acknowledges a spectrum of potential adversities and reaffirms the benefits of an ecobiodevelopmental model for understanding the childhood origins of adult-manifested disease and wellness. The statement focuses on the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships (SSNRs) that buffer adversity and build resilience, pediatric care is on the cusp of a paradigm shift that could reprioritize clinical activities, rewrite research agendas, and realign our collective advocacy.

Meyer, Amelia Franck. *The Human Need for Belonging.* You Tube: Tedx Talks. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nlcpVAAZ0k> In this video of a Tedx Talk, the author describes the human need to belong and to be claimed. When we are disconnected from our tribe, and we feel as though we must make it on our own, it can have devastating life-long impacts. Listen to Amelia share the profound power of human connection.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html> This CDC website provides information on the CDC-Kaiser ACEs Study, and information on preventive and risk factors and prevention strategies.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Creating Positive Childhood Experiences.* <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/prevent-child-abuse/index.html> This CDC website provides information on the importance of creating positive childhood experiences and approaching to creating them.

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| 1. **Conclusion**
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This document identifies and includes a summary of the need for and benefits of supporting four critical investments to improve conditions for families that face the highest likelihood of reports to child abuse hotlines (often inappropriate or unwarranted), intervention by child protective services and family separation. A strong and sustained commitment to parent, youth, and community voice; civil legal advocacy; community-based family-strengthening prevention and support; and relational health helps improve parent, family and caregiver engagement, access to and participation in programs, services and supports that help keep families strong and together. Research clearly shows that commitments to each of these areas of focus help create and sustain individual, family and community health and well-being and other positive outcomes. Each are critical contributors to creating positive environments, community connections, and opportunities for children, families, and individuals so that they may reach their best potential.

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2. Raleigh’s Place. *A Child is Placed in Foster Care Every Two Minutes*. <https://www.raleighsplace.org/a-child-enters-foster-care-every-2-minutes/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert B. Hill, PhD. *An Analysis of Racial/Ethnic Disproportionality and Disparity at the National, State, and County Levels.* Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare. 2007. <https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-AnalysisofRacialEthnicDisproportionality-2007.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gypen, L., et al. *Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic review.* Children and Youth Services Review, 76, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. #  Williams, S.C. *State-level Data for Understanding Child Welfare in the United States*. Child Trends, February 28, 2022. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/state-level-data-for-understanding-child-welfare-in-the-united-states>

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