

Early Relational Health (ERH) Determinants of Future Health and Wellbeing

Committee

Sherin U. Devaskar

Co-Chair

Dr. Sherin U. Devaskar is a distinguished professor of pediatrics and an accomplished pediatrician-neonatologist who previously served in multiple senior leadership roles at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), including executive chair of pediatrics, physician-in-chief of UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital, and founding executive director of the UCLA Children's Discovery and Innovation Institute. She has also held major academic leadership positions at the University of Pittsburgh and St. Louis University. Her primary expertise centers on neonatal-perinatal medicine and the developmental origins of chronic diseases, with a research portfolio that has been continuously funded by the National Institutes of Health for more than four decades. She has authored more than 220 peer-reviewed papers and numerous additional books, reviews, and scholarly publications. Dr. Devaskar is an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine and has received several prestigious honors, including the 2021 Howland Award from the American Pediatric Society. She completed pediatric residency training in Detroit, followed by neonatology fellowships at the University of Southern California and the University of Cincinnati. She has previously served on several National Academies committees relevant to child health and neonatal outcomes.

Andrea Gonzalez

Co-Chair

Dr. Andrea Gonzalez is an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University, where she also serves as a tier II Canada research chair in family health and preventive interventions. Her research examines how early relational experiences and adverse childhood experiences become biologically embedded across development, shaping caregiver-child relationships, parenting practices, and long-term health trajectories. A central focus of her work is the design and evaluation of scalable preventive interventions that promote early relational health within equity-deserving populations. Dr. Gonzalez is engaged in provincial early relational health initiatives and is committed to knowledge mobilization, including through her widely viewed and internationally adopted educational video “Adverse Childhood Experiences: Impact on Brain, Body and Behaviour.” She is a cochair of the Public Health Agency of Canada’s Child Maltreatment Surveillance Working Group, a committee member for the Early Relational Health Community of Practice for Public Health Ontario, and a committee member for the Infant and Early Years Mental Health Initiative, Clinical Task Group, Lead Agency Consortium, Ontario. She was inducted into the Royal Society of Canada in 2022 and has served on the National Academies’ Board on Children, Youth, and Families. Dr. Gonzalez earned her Ph.D. in Psychology and Neuroscience from the University of Toronto and completed postdoctoral fellowships at McMaster University.

Louis P. Appel

Member

Dr. Louis Appel is the director of pediatrics at People’s Community Clinic (PCC), a federally qualified health center in Austin, Texas, where he provides primary care and leads initiatives to strengthen early relational health. At PCC, he has championed programs focused on strengthening caregiver-child relationships, group pediatric well child visits, postpartum depression screening, lactation support, and obesity prevention during the prenatal and immediate postpartum periods. Dr. Appel previously served for twenty years as PCC’s chief medical officer. He serves on the Medicaid Provider Advisory Group for BlueCross BlueShield of Texas and is a member of the Texas Pediatric Society Executive Legislative Committee. His professional leadership includes serving on the executive committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Council on Early Childhood and co-chairing the Texas Pediatric Society’s Early Childhood Committee and its Task Force on Connection, Healing, and Trauma-Informed Care. Dr. Appel also spent ten years as part of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child’s Pediatric Innovation Initiative, contributing to efforts to develop a panel of biomarkers of chronic stress activation in children, and has served on several state and local advisory committees focused on early childhood health systems. Dr. Appel received his M.D. from Harvard Medical School, his M.P.H. from the Harvard School of Public Health, and completed pediatric residency training at the University of Washington. He was a member of the National Academies committee on Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Children and Youth through Health Care System Transformation.

Randall Baylor

Member

Mr. Randall Baylor is a project manager for Community Mental Health at Children's National Hospital and Executive Director of Hope and Healing Incorporated, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization focused on advancing equity and opportunity for underserved communities. His work focuses on the intersection of pediatric healthcare, behavioral health, and community advocacy, leading initiatives that connect institutional systems with community-based solutions. Mr. Baylor's areas of expertise include systems redesign & strategic partnerships: unifying public, private, and healthcare sectors to build sustainable, citywide infrastructure; clinical resource logistics: optimizing complex care coordination, pediatric parent navigation, and specialty medical referral networks; and community-centric innovation: designing non-traditional informational models that equip historically underserved residents with life-enhancing skills. He has led efforts to improve care coordination and resource navigation for children and families, including managing the redesign of Washington, D.C.'s early intervention referral system, which unified stakeholders across healthcare, government, and community organizations to create a more integrated framework for early childhood development. His additional expertise includes clinical resource logistics, behavioral health services, strategic coalition building, and community-centered innovation. Mr. Baylor earned a B.B.A. in Computer-Based Information Systems and Decision Sciences from Howard University in 2006 and completed an Executive Leadership Certificate at Harvard Kennedy School in 2025.

Courtney K. Blackwell

Member

Dr. Courtney K. Blackwell is an associate professor in the Department of Medical Social Sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. Her research focuses on identifying malleable psychosocial risk and resilience factors that shape positive child development and early relational health. She has mixed methods expertise in the development, validation, and implementation of patient-reported outcome measures, performance-based assessments, and cumulative risk indices related to early childhood wellbeing, social-emotional functioning, and relational health. Dr. Blackwell serves as multiple principal investigator for the Measurement Core of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes Program, where she co-chairs the Positive Health Outcome Working Group. She is a member of the American Psychological Academy, the Society for Research in Child Development, the Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System Health Organization, and is a faculty affiliate of the Northwestern University Institute for Innovations in Developmental Sciences and the Institute for Adolescent Mental Health and WellBeing. Her national service included scientific advising roles for Zero to Three, the Maternal and Child Health Measurement Research Network, and the NIH Pediatric Common Data Element Initiative's COVID19 Neurodevelopmental, Mental Health, and Psychosocial Working Group, which received the 2021 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Director's Award for Collaboration. She previously served as a children's media research consultant with Google, as a consultant for the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, and as a pediatric patient reported outcome measurement consultant with YourCareChoice/Johnson & Johnson Vision, Inc. Dr. Blackwell earned her Ph.D. from Northwestern University and an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Nicole R. Bush

Member

Dr. Nicole Bush is the Lisa and John Pritzker distinguished professor of developmental and behavioral health at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), where she holds joint appointments in the Departments of Pediatrics and Psychiatry and serves as affiliate faculty in the Institute for Health Policy Studies. She is the director of the Division of Developmental Medicine and of the Intergenerational Developmental Health Program at UCSF, and she is also a senior fellow at the Harvard Center for the Developing Child. She is also a pro bono advisor on the Luminary Impact Fund, a 501c3 focused on family mental health. As a licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. Bush is an international expert on the social drivers of health and wellbeing across the life course, with deep expertise in perinatal and early childhood adversity, resilience science, maternal and child wellbeing, neurodevelopment, relational health, and mental health. Her multidisciplinary research integrates experimental, population-based, and intervention science to advance understanding of disease etiology and identify protective factors and targets for prevention across generations and communities. Dr. Bush received her Ph.D. and M.S. in Child Clinical Psychology from the University of Washington, Seattle, her B.A. from Gonzaga University, Spokane, and completed postdoctoral fellowships in Developmental Stress Biology and Health Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, followed by a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholars fellowship at the UCSF-UC Berkeley Joint Program, where she trained in public health and epigenetics.

Alison E. Cuellar

Member

Dr. Alison Cuellar is a professor of health administration and policy at George Mason University. She has extensive research experience in health care systems, payer innovations, Medicaid policy, mental health, and justice involved populations. Her contributions include work on evaluating new organizational forms, such as hospital systems and physician alliances and their effects on quality, efficiency, costs, and prices. She is currently engaged in research related to Medicaid perinatal care, care to children in community clinics and Medicaid payment. In other work she has examined the intersection of behavioral health and the justice system; Medicaid policies and their impact on justice-involved youth and youth with behavioral health problems; on mental health courts as an innovative alternative for justice-involved juveniles; and on health care services for incarcerated youth and adults returning to the community. Dr. Cuellar serves as chair of the Community Preventive Services Task Force to which she was appointed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Cuellar is a Research Associate in the National Bureau of Economic Research and is affiliated with the Mason Center for Micro-Economic Policy Research and a consultant for Casey Family Programs. Dr. Cuellar received her Ph.D. in health services and policy analysis with an economics concentration from the University of California, Berkeley and her M.B.A and B.A. from University of Texas at Austin. She has also served on the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Committee Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Children and Youth through Health Care System Transformation and Committee on Community-Based Solutions to Promote Health Equity in the United States.

April Joy Damian

Member

Dr. April Joy Damian is the chief scientific officer and director of the Weitzman Institute, a national practice-based research network within the Moses/Weitzman Health System focused on evidence-based, stakeholder informed primary care innovation serving more than two million patients across all U.S. states and territories. She also holds an affiliate faculty appointment in the Department of Mental Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, where she collaborates with faculty and mentors doctoral students in community-engaged and applied research. Her expertise spans psychiatric epidemiology, health services research, mixed methods inquiry, and the integration of social determinants of health into clinical and policy settings, with a longstanding focus on improving mental health and social needs outcomes for historically underserved populations. Prior to her current role, she served as director of quality innovation at the National Quality Forum and as a senior scholar in residence at AcademyHealth, where she led major initiatives to advance Social Determinants of Health integration into health care policy, payment, and practice. She is a member of the AcademyHealth Methods and Data Council and serves on the board of ActivePlus, a child and adolescent health promotion nonprofit. Dr. Damian received her Ph.D. in public health with a concentration in psychiatric epidemiology from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, an M.Sc. in medical sciences from Harvard Medical School, and a B.A. with highest honors in ethnic studies from the University of California, Berkeley, followed by research fellowships supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institute of Mental Health, and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. She also currently serves as co-chair of the National Academies Forum for Children's Well-Being.

Elizabeth S. Erickson

Member

Dr. Elizabeth S. Erickson is an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Duke University School of Medicine and a leading innovator in redefining pediatric care through the lens of early relational health. She is the co-founder of the THRIVE Family Health and Education Center, the faculty associate director of the Community Partnered Research Network, and the medical director for Family Connects Durham. She is the North Carolina lead for the Carolinas Collaborative, and coordinates for Duke's Reach Out and Read program. As a specialist in infant and early childhood mental health, Dr. Erickson's work is rooted in the principle that emotional connection is a vital clinical indicator and focuses on building sustainable, community-led frameworks that bridge pediatric practice, relational health, and social justice. Her scholarship emphasizes equity-centered, prevention-oriented models that support families from the earliest stages of development. Dr. Erickson serves on the Board of Directors of the North Carolina Pediatric Society, is a member of the EarlyWell Coordinating Team, is part of the executive committee for the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Early Childhood. She is a consultant for the North Carolina Infant Mental Health Association. She was also a ZERO TO THREE fellow with an Infant Family Associate Endorsement. Dr. Erickson earned her M.D in medicine from the Wake Forest University School of Medicine and graduated cum laude from Davidson College with a major in Spanish and a concentration in medical humanities.

Andrew Garner

Member

Dr. Andrew Garner is a primary care pediatrician who has practiced with University Hospitals of Cleveland for more than twenty-five years and is widely recognized for his advocacy, scholarship, and national leadership in child health. His professional expertise spans pediatric neuroscience, early brain and child development, and the lifelong impacts of childhood adversity, with a focus on translating developmental science into clinical practice and policy. He serves as a member of the expert leadership team for the National Center for Relational Health and Trauma-Informed Care at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and as a member of the Zero to Three Board of Directors. He was previously president of the Ohio AAP Chapter and a member on three national AAP leadership workgroups addressing poverty, epigenetics, and early brain and child development. Dr. Garner coauthored the AAP's policy statements on childhood toxic stress (2012, 2021) and is the coauthor of the AAP-published book "Thinking Developmentally: Nurturing Wellness in Childhood to Promote Lifelong Health". He has been recognized locally and nationally for his contributions to child advocacy. Dr. Garner earned his Ph.D. and M.D. in neuroscience from Case Western Reserve University, his B.A. in psychobiology with distinction from Swarthmore College, and completed his pediatric residency at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He has also served on the previous National Academies consensus committee on Early Relational Health.

Karin A. Garver

Member

Ms. Karin Garver is an early childhood education policy specialist at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), following nearly 16 years with the New Jersey Department of Education where she served as chief of staff, deputy chief academic officer, and in multiple leadership roles within the Division of Early Childhood Education. Her prior work focused heavily on early childhood funding, data systems, and the implementation of federal early learning grants. Her expertise includes national and state early childhood education policy trends, preschool inclusion for children with disabilities, data system development, systems integration, and public program finance. She contributes to several NIEER projects supporting the expansion of high-quality preschool programs nationwide. Ms. Garver has been recognized for her leadership in early childhood systems development and has held memberships in several professional organizations aligned with early learning policy and research. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. with a focus on early childhood education policy and holds an M.A. in education policy.

Iheoma U. Iruka

Member

Dr. Iheoma U. Iruka is a tenured professor in the Department of Maternal and Child Health at the Gillings School of Global Public Health and a fellow at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her work centers on advancing the wellbeing of minoritized children and families, particularly those from low-income households, by attending to their sociocultural contexts, strengths, and assets. She has authored more than 100 publications and delivered over 300 presentations addressing systemic inequities and promoting equity-focused research, policy, and practice in early childhood. Dr. Iruka has served on numerous national and local boards and committees, including those convened by the American Psychological Association, the National Science Foundation and the Lancet Commission on Racism and Child Health. She has an LLC through which she serves as an advisor to the National Urban League, provides subject-matter expertise to organizations such as Mathematica, and acts as a content advisor to Fred Rogers Productions. Her honors include the 2022 American Psychological Association MidCareer Award for Outstanding Contributions to Benefit Children, Youth, and Families; the 2023 Association of University Centers on Disabilities Leadership for All Award; and election as a 2023 APA Fellow. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Miami and her B.A from Temple University. She has previously served on multiple National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine committees including the Committee on Applying Neurobiological and Socio-Behavioral Sciences from Prenatal through Early Childhood Development: A Health Equity Approach.

Thomas S. Weisner

Member

Dr. Thomas Weisner is a retired distinguished professor of anthropology in the Departments of Psychiatry and Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he also directed the Center for Culture and Health. His research and teaching have focused on culture and human development, ecocultural theory, and the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods to inform medical, psychological, and cultural studies of children and families at risk. He is co-founder of Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis platform. Dr. Weisner's fieldwork includes long-term research in Kenya on rural-urban migration, children's development, and sibling caregiving, as well as longitudinal studies of children and parents in nonconventional and countercultural family systems. He has contributed to research on supports for working low-income families and on developmental outcomes for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, ADHD, and autism. Dr. Weisner is the coauthor of *Higher Ground: New Hope for the Working Poor and Their Children* and editor of *Discovering Successful Pathways in Children's Development*. His honors include a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and the Interdisciplinary Research Award from the Society for Research in Child Development. He received his PhD in Anthropology and Social Relations from Harvard University and previously served on National Academies panels reviewing research on school-age children and child development policy.

Chelsea A. Wesner

Member

Dr. Chelsea Wesner is an assistant research professor at the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health and in the Department of Community and Behavioral Health at the Colorado School of Public Health. As a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, she has partnered with Tribal nations and communities for nearly twenty years through public health research, practice, capacity building efforts across the University of Colorado Anschutz, the University of South Dakota, the University of Oklahoma, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Her research focuses on advancing Indigenous early relational wellbeing, family economic wellbeing, and home visiting by co-creating culturally grounded frameworks, measures, and interventions. This collaborative and intergenerational work has been implemented in Indigenous communities across the United States, Canada, and Australia, and is currently being adapted for Tribal Head Start and Child Care programs. Dr. Wesner is an Aspen Institute Ascend fellow and a Native Children's Research Exchange Scholar, and she serves as an advisor on national initiatives related to child, family, and economic wellbeing. She is a member of the Tribal Head Start Community Workgroup for the American Indian and Alaska Native Family and Child Experiences (AIAN FACES) Study of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation and a workgroup member for the Next Steps for Tribal TANF Research and Data project for the ACF Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. She holds a DrPH from the University of Colorado, dual MPH/MSW degrees from the University of Oklahoma, and a BA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Barry Zuckerman

Member

Dr. Barry Zuckerman is professor and chair emeritus at Boston University School of Medicine and former medical director of Boston Medical Center. Throughout his career, he has been a national leader in pediatrics, child development, and maternal and child health, with a particular focus on the effects of maternal mental health, including depression and substance use during pregnancy, on newborn and child developmental outcomes. His research was among the first in pediatrics to document the impact of maternal depression and children's exposure to violence on child health and development. Dr. Zuckerman developed and helped disseminate several nationally recognized innovations in pediatric care designed to improve outcomes for children and families, particularly those from low-income and underserved communities. These include Reach Out and Read, which provides books and literacy guidance to families during pediatric visits; Medical-Legal Partnership, which integrates legal services into healthcare to address social determinants affecting child health; HealthySteps, which embeds child development and behavioral health specialists within pediatric practices; and Small Moments Big Impact, an early relational health initiative that supports parent-infant relationships during the first months of life. Together with other initiatives, these programs serve approximately seven million children annually. He has received numerous honors, including the Joseph W. St. Geme Jr. Leadership Award in Academic Pediatrics, the Robert F. Kennedy Embracing the Legacy Award, the C. Anderson Aldrich Award from the American Academy of Pediatrics, an honorary degree from Wheelock College, and a fellowship at Stanford University's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. His professional service has included leadership and advisory roles with Zero to Three, the National Commission on Children, the Carnegie Commission on Young Children, the Massachusetts Public Health Council, and UNICEF. He currently serves as Vice Chair of the Board of Parenting Journey and is a member of the Board of Gift Connect. Dr. Zuckerman received his M.D. from Georgetown University School of Medicine and his undergraduate degree from Rutgers University.