

Place Matters: How the Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Early Childhood Development

A wide range of conditions in the places where children live, grow, play, and learn can get “under the skin” and affect the developing brain and other biological systems. Beginning before birth, these environmental conditions shape how children develop, which shapes their lifelong physical and mental health.

The built and natural environments that surround children and families are shaped by and deeply rooted in historic and public policies, such as redlining, that influence where people are able to live and what resources they can access. As a result, levels of exposure to hazards and access to opportunity are not distributed equally. In short, place matters.

All communities have aspects of their built and natural environments that have been designed through decisions made over time—including decisions being made today—and they can be re-designed to support healthy development. Working together across policy domains within and beyond the early childhood sector—including areas like urban planning, environmental protection, and anti-discrimination policies—we can re-shape environmental influences with a science-informed lens so that all children can grow up in homes and neighborhoods free of hazards and full of opportunity.

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ISSUE IN FOCUS

The Importance of Safe, Accessible Green Space

Science tells us that access to safe green space may reduce stress and boost physical activity levels within a community, while also improving air quality and reducing extreme heat events, particularly in dense urban areas.

Considerations for Adding & Improving Green Space

Understand the ways that political and social history have shaped your community.

As a result of historic and present-day policy decisions, neighborhoods populated predominately by people of color are far more likely to have high levels of air pollution, excessive noise, and higher temperatures. By finding creative ways to add green space in these neighborhoods—and by prioritizing input and participation from community members—policymakers can help reduce these adversities and better support the healthy development of children and the wellbeing of their caregivers.

Consider complimentary policies and community needs to support equitable use of green space.

Science tells us that a web of interconnected environmental conditions impact child development. When creating policies and programs aimed at adding green space, policy makers should consider complimentary policies to ensure all children can fully benefit. Such considerations include:

URBAN HOUSING POLICIES

Adding green space often increases property values in a neighborhood, driving out many families and leaving those children excluded from the benefits. Anti-gentrification policies, including those that safeguard and expand affordable housing, can mitigate “green gentrification.”

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Green space often reduces community violence, but for this to occur, leaders need to promote healthy use of the space. For example, when leaders respond to community feedback on what to include in the space, the likelihood of healthy engagement increases.

→ Policy in Action:

Washington D.C. is building an elevated, recreational 11th Street Bridge Park that will cross the Anacostia River. The bridge itself will be a park, providing playgrounds, an environmental education center, urban agriculture, opportunities for families to use kayaks and canoes, and more vegetation to an area with a high heat vulnerability index. By boosting opportunities for physical activity, learning, and relief from the heat, the park stands to have a considerable positive impact on children in the surrounding areas.



Washington, D.C.'s 11th Street Bridge Park. Credit: OMA+OLIN.

Early on in the project, however, residents of the predominately Black, low-income community near the bridge raised concerns that the park would gentrify their neighborhoods and, as a result, their families would never benefit. In response, project managers and community leaders developed strategies to mitigate green gentrification, including the creation of a community land trust to safeguard and expand affordable housing. They are also providing direct support to small business, workforce development programs for community members, and installations by local artists. The 11th Street Bridge Park is a partnership between the east of the river non-profit Building Bridges Across the River and the District Department of Transportation. You can read more about their work [here](#).

SPOTLIGHT ON SOLUTIONS

Inspired Policies & Programs that are Improving Young Children's Environments



Reducing Air Pollution

Air pollution impacts young children's developing lungs and immune system, which can sometimes be a trigger for asthma and certain neurodevelopmental outcomes, including autism. The best way to reduce pollution is to cut emissions, but other solutions that will benefit children include: installing air filtration systems in highly polluted areas and building schools and housing developments farther away from highways and other significant sources of pollution.

→ Policy in Action:

The city of Madison, Wisconsin won a federal grant from the EPA to install air pollution monitors across the city and spread awareness about the link between air quality and health. With the monitors, the city will be able to understand who is being impacted most severely by air pollution and then directly address this health inequity with targeted air pollution mitigation efforts. To ensure that affected communities have input into solutions and decision-making, the city is partnering with many community organizations, including The Foundation for Black Women's Wellness, The Latino Health Council of Dane County, and The Hmong Institute. [Learn more.](#)



Increasing Access to Nutritious Food

When young children experience over- or under-nutrition, including during prenatal development, it elevates their risk of obesity, hypertension, and heart disease in adulthood. However, in many communities, access to affordable, nutritious food is limited. Policymakers can support the healthy development of children by addressing transportation gaps that limit access to stores with nutritious foods, creating community gardens, providing incentives that encourage grocery stores to open in low-income neighborhoods, and more.

→ Policy in Action:

As part of a broader CDC-funded community health initiative, the Boston Public Health Commission, the Boston Housing Authority, and others partnered with a local health center to increase access to nutritious food for public housing residents. Working with Fresh Truck—a non-profit mobile market created in response to community concerns about the challenges of shopping for healthy food in their neighborhood—health centers provided residents with vouchers to shop at Fresh Truck, initially serving nearly 3,000 customers in a nine-month span. Today, Fresh Truck continues to bring nutritious food to public housing residents and health centers across Boston each week, reducing food insecurity and helping health center providers connect their patients to a healthy, affordable food resource. [Learn more.](#)



Reducing Lead Exposure

Exposure to lead during early periods of development can lead to negative health outcomes for children, including learning and behavioral difficulties. Taking action to remove lead from water delivery systems and support the replacement of lead paint in older housing developments can help prevent such outcomes.

→ Policy in Action:

In Vermont, the state mandated that all schools and childcare centers test for lead in their drinking water. Results showed that one out of five drinking water taps had elevated lead levels. To ensure transparency and support community engagement, schools were required to inform parents, caregivers, and staff about the results, and the state provided resources for community members on lead safety. Now, the state is reimbursing schools to replace contaminated infrastructure and increase the safety of drinking water for thousands of children. [Learn more.](#)

Additional Resources

[2022 Prenatal-to-3 State Policy Roadmap](#)

[Policy Equity Assessments – diversitydatakids.org](#)

[Impact Stories – diversitydatakids.org](#)

[The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development - UNICEF](#)

[Health and Learning are Deeply Interconnected in the Body: An Action Guide for Policy Makers – Center on the Developing Child](#)

[State of the Air: Recommendations for Action – American Lung Association](#)

[Campaign Toolkit – Voices for Healthy Kids](#)

[Office of Environmental Justice – United States Environmental Protection Agency](#)

→ Read the full paper

For the full paper on which this Solutions Spotlight is based, see [Place Matters: The Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Healthy Development here.](#)

Additional sources consulted in the creation of this Solutions Spotlight include:

[10 Policies to Prevent and Respond to Childhood Lead Exposure - Pew Trust](#)

[Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing – Boston Housing Authority](#)

[Can Anacostia Build a Bridge Without Displacing Its People? – New York Times](#)

[Green gentrification in European and North American cities – Nature Communications](#)

[Greening Without Gentrification: Learning from Parks-Related Anti-Displacement Strategies Nationwide – The University of Utah, UCLA, and Green Info Network](#)

[Healthy Food Environments – Improving Access to Healthier Food - CDC](#)

[The Impact of Green Space on Violent Crime in Urban Environments: An Evidence Synthesis – International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#)

[The Nutrition Source: Healthy Food Environment– Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Policies to reduce pollution and protect health – Environmental Defense Fund](#)

[Vermont Lead in School and Child Care Drinking Water Progress Report - Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation & Department of Health](#)