

# Building Back Better for Children & Families:

Recommendations to the New Administration to  
Address Child Trauma and Prevent Violence



**FUTURES**  
WITHOUT VIOLENCE

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## Recommendations to the New Administration to Address Child Trauma and Prevent Violence

The events of 2020 have brought pain and hardship to almost everyone living in the United States. For many, the pandemic has laid bare the undeniable fact that, for large numbers of children and families, security and stability as well as healthy child development has either eroded or never existed. A national survey found that parental mental health is worsening, children's behavioral health is declining, and families have diminished access to foundational supports, including food, health insurance, health care services, and child care.<sup>i</sup> Clearly, children, families, and communities need a strong economic recovery that addresses racial injustice and the negative impacts of adversity, and cultivates resilience. If the federal government's response is not comprehensive or sustained, the country's recovery will not result in the outcomes needed to build back better.

Futures Without Violence (FUTURES) sees that its organizational vision and values align well with the incoming Administration's likely approach to economic recovery, COVID-19, and racial equity. FUTURES recommends the Administration focus on **systems**, **science**, and **settings** in its governing plans so that every child, family, and community can contribute to the nation's economic recovery today and in the future.

## 1. SYSTEMS

**Focus public systems on achieving outcomes that build and reinforce child, family and community well-being.**

Too often public systems are focused on individual program outcomes rather than an overarching, holistic goal of improving overall well-being. Programs that are intended to provide help and support are often fragmented, siloed, insufficient, confusing, inaccessible, and delivered within an under-resourced public-private human services ecosystem. The sudden onset of the pandemic underscored the need to transform a tattered, beleaguered "safety net" into a structure that supports the fundamental building blocks of equitable child, family, and community well-being.

**Suggested Approach:**

- ***Establish a White House Office on Children and Youth and a White House Conference on Children and Youth.*** FUTURES recommends the establishment of a White House Office on Children and Youth and development of a White House Conference on Children and Youth. FUTURES believes a White House entity focused on children and youth that coordinates and aligns the resources of federal agencies and systems would create transformational change. The Office would usher in a new era of federal agency collaboration, integrate data sets, link funding streams, and ensure federal resources improve outcomes for children and their families, particularly those who have not been helped by policies that put systemic barriers in place. FUTURES also would propose that the Office take a multi-generational approach and focus on the challenges single mothers face, given the disproportionate economic impact of the pandemic on mothers and children and the long-term effects it can have on families.<sup>ii</sup>

- ***Invest in child and family well-being through the Administration's budget priorities.*** President-elect Biden has long said if you really want to know what policy-makers care about then make them show you their budget. Following that insight, we suggest a budget and COVID-response package that makes significant investments in the human services and violence prevention programs that benefit women, children and the most vulnerable, many of whom are also the frontline workers needed to rebuild our economy. For example, investments that are targeted to economic recovery should include a comprehensive set of supports that women need – housing, child care, transportation, health care, recovery support, educational opportunities, workforce development, etc. -- so they can access or maintain employment that results in financial security and be protective against domestic violence and child abuse. To this end, FUTURES recommends:

  - \$1 billion for Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA).
  - \$250 million for the Family Violence and Prevention Services Act (FVPSA).
  - \$1 billion for the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), with the increase going toward programs that support a public health approach to violence prevention such as helping children exposed to violence heal; reducing burden and stress for families; strengthening core life skills for children, youth, and the adults who care for them; supporting positive adult-child interactions; and helping to prevent domestic and sexual violence.
  - Bold investments in child care, housing, educational opportunities, and workforce development.
  
- ***Include community-based nonprofit human service organizations in any economic recovery effort.*** Community-based organizations (CBOs) and first line responders are essential when personal or community-level catastrophes strike. As trusted members of the community, who can often most effectively address language access issues, they can reach individuals and families who are more likely to be left behind by public systems. FUTURES suggests that the new Administration prioritize CBOs alongside corporations, small businesses, and entrepreneurs as part of an economic ecosystem that supports our current and future workforce.
  
- ***Transform the TANF Program into the Child and Family Well-being Grant Program.*** FUTURES believes that it is time to transform the Temporarily Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program into a family well-being grant program. The current program remains difficult to access for many families, is entirely closed off to others, and has not sufficiently reduced child poverty or put single mothers back on the road to self-sufficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the inadequacies of this system to support low-income families during times of crisis or unemployment. We recommend a transformation of TANF. We think its success should be measured not by how many families have been removed from the program but by how many families are living safely with enough resources to meet their daily needs. We reimagine a Family Well-being Grant program that addresses families' basic needs and serves as a resource for innovation to test the effectiveness of anti-poverty strategies (such as universal or targeted basic income) and one that taps into the creativity of entrepreneurs, foundations, and state and federal leaders.

## 2. SCIENCE

### **Build a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive federal human services infrastructure grounded in neuroscience about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and resiliency.**

FUTURES believes that trauma-informed and trauma-responsive policies and practices should be part of the new Administration's plans. The landmark CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACE Study<sup>iii</sup>) provides convincing evidence that addressing sources of toxic stress, such as overwhelming burden and trauma, and creating and cultivating the conditions that promote resilience, are necessary for individual and community well-being. Research also has demonstrated that the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences on the workforce lead to enormous human and economic costs that are preventable.<sup>iv</sup> Resilience science indicates the negative effects of toxic stress on health, learning, and behaviors can be buffered by supportive, positive relationships, social connections and supports, and strengthening core life skills. Moreover, the science suggests that the ability to respond well to overwhelming stress can be built or re-built even in the face of adversities.<sup>v</sup> Thus, we must apply what we know about ACEs and resiliency science to federal programs and policies, work to prevent ACEs and address their effects on adults and children, and build or reinforce resilience across the population.

#### **Suggested Approach:**

- ***Apply the tenets of The Biden-Harris Plan to Beat COVID-19 and ensure decisions on all child and family policy are informed by neuroscience.*** The Administration should ensure that ACES and resilience science experts influence policy developments as advisors in the White House and federal agencies so that they can offer perspective on the impacts the pandemic, racial inequities and injustices, and environmental disasters have on individual and family well-being. In addition, the Administration should conduct an impact assessment of Executive Branch policies or actions through the lenses of an integrated science framework – looking at intersections and convergence in findings from neuroscience, ACEs research, the science of building resilience and adversity, and research on racism and social determinants of health, economic, and education disparities.
- ***Elevate the work of the SAMHSA-led Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care and act on its findings.*** FUTURES supports the Biden-Harris promise to review federal programs directly serving communities likely to experience violence, then invest significant federal funds to expand and improve the federal government's support. We recommend broadening this review to all communities, in response to the experience of severe adversity or toxic stress associated with the pandemic, systemic racism, large-scale weather disasters, and other situations that elevate trauma and its effects. The existing Interagency Task Force, established by the bi-partisan SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act of 2018, may offer a valuable vehicle for this work. The Task Force is charged to “lift up best practices with respect to children and youth, and their families as appropriate, who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing trauma; and ways in which federal agencies can better coordinate to improve the federal response to families impacted by substance use disorders and other forms of trauma.”

## 3. SETTINGS

**Support child development and our future workforce by ensuring that all home- and community-based settings that serve children, youth, and their families are trauma-informed, equipped to build, strengthen, and sustain resilience, and promote social emotional development.**

The infants and toddlers born during the tail end of Generation Alpha (2010-2025), specifically those born in 2020 and after, will only ever know a post-COVID-19 world. On a global scale, this age group is losing developmental ground<sup>vi</sup> upon birth due to the negative effects on maternal mental health, even more widely spread poverty, and disconnection from loved ones and caregivers. Furthermore, millions of school-age children have experienced disruptions to their educations and to the school-based health and mental health services that help them thrive. For the United States to bounce back from 2020, we must propel our children forward by ensuring a strong early start and foundation, and sustained support across their developmental trajectory. It is imperative that children of all ages have access to high-quality, trauma-informed, resilience enhancing, safe- and supportive-environments in communities, learning settings, and future workplaces. *This is especially critical for those who have experienced trauma and opportunity gaps because of exposure to violence, child maltreatment, poverty, racism, gender discrimination, and the impacts of the pandemic.*

### Suggested Approach:

- ***Embed an equitable, systems-level response to trauma and re-building resilience in home-and community-based settings.*** FUTURES supports the new Administration's plan to expand community school models, embed resource navigators, and stand up family resource centers across the nation to deliver the right supports to families at the right time. It is critical to pair these concepts, and the individuals delivering these supports, with the development and implementation of a plan to ensure that each of these resources is nestled within systems that are trauma-informed, trauma-responsive, anti-racist, and healing and well-being focused. The benefit of these programmatic resources will not be fully maximized unless there is a commitment to, and training for, ensuring everyone in a given system can recognize and respond to trauma appropriately, and create, design, and sustain a service and support infrastructure that promotes healing and well-being as sustainable outcomes of intervention. Federal programs should support and/or allow training of every adult in schools and early childhood settings to be trauma-responsive and able to build, strengthen, promote, and sustain resilience. This systems-level response focus should also encompass health and mental and behavioral health care settings, workforce development boards and programs, law enforcement departments, workplaces, court rooms and judicial systems child welfare systems, community-based resource centers, and juvenile and criminal justice systems.
- ***Convene a White House national conference on childhood and family healing, resilience, and well-being.*** Bring together practitioners, policymakers, and researchers who are well-versed in the science of trauma, adversity, and resilience to deeply and accurately assess the impact of the pandemic and systemic racism on children by developmental ages and stages, and host the conference annually to accelerate the generation of necessary solutions to promote healing, strengthening resilience, and support well-being sustainably.

- ***Ensure the developmental needs of the nation’s youngest children are fully addressed to help prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences.*** FUTURES supports the Biden-Harris Plan for Mobilizing American Talent and Heart to Create a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Caregiving and Education Workforce and hopes that every element of this campaign becomes part of the concrete plans of the new Administration. To build on it, FUTURES suggests the Administration go beyond the frame of childcare as an economic good and consider the broader developmental needs of young children that must be met regardless of what setting they are in. The social and emotional abilities of infants and toddlers, as well as their health and well-being, are established in the earliest years, with lifelong personal and societal benefits associated with positive early experiences. For this reason, investing in early childhood is a proven strategy to reduce inequities in health, economics, and education.

For particularly vulnerable children, including those whose parents work irregular shifts and experience domestic violence, 24-hour high quality childcare is even more essential as a tool to prevent child fatalities from neglect and abuse. Resources envisioned by the new Administration, like community schools and family resource centers, must be specifically equipped to reach and welcome all families with infants and young children, whether or not they participate in childcare and early childhood programs.

- ***Expand SAMHSA’s Mental Health Programs of Regional and National Significance to reach all communities demonstrating high needs due to the effects of the pandemic, natural disasters, and systemic racism.*** This existing program supports local coordinating and action bodies to prevent and mitigate the impact of trauma by collecting data, building skills and awareness, and developing, then enacting, a strategic community plan. The Administration should allow flexibility for local, state and tribal entities to pool federal grants from multiple agencies and focus the funding on creating trauma-informed systems and increasing trauma-informed services. As an example, Chicago was granted the flexibility from a pilot program to braid Head Start and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding to target at-risk young mothers.

## CONCLUSION

As a nation, we are coping with a global pandemic, economic distress, a racial justice reckoning, polarization, and a federal leadership vacuum. With the Biden-Harris Administration, we have a new and exciting opportunity to invest in and support our children and families. Now is the time to take steps to prevent childhood trauma and promote family and community resilience and well-being. Working together, we can build a better America.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/146/4/e2020016824>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women/>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8/abstract](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(98)00017-8/abstract)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4690705/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/15/03/science-resilience>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-children-hardest-hit-by-covid-19-pandemic-are-regressing-in-basic-skills-and-learning>.