

Flourishing children, healthy communities, and a stronger nation: The U.S. early years climate action plan ^[1]

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Introduction

We must align our efforts on early years and climate change

In the earliest stages of life—from before birth through age 8—children develop rapidly and have a distinct biology that makes them uniquely sensitive to their environments and exposures. As the effects of climate change intensify, so do the risks to children. It is hard to overestimate the potential impacts on children’s health, well-being, and opportunities. In turn, it is hard to overestimate the potential impacts on the trajectories of their families and the nation.

To fulfill our responsibility to ensure that all children can flourish, we must reckon with the reality that our climate system has been disrupted by the emission of heat trapping gases into our atmosphere and oceans. Recent years have dramatically demonstrated this disruption, and few areas of the country have been spared. Wildfire smoke and excessive heat have driven children indoors, for example, while historic flooding has damaged homes, child care programs, and pediatric health clinics. Our systems and infrastructure are designed for how our planet once was, not how it is now, and not how it will be if we fail to act.

Individuals and groups working to support children in their earliest years are committed to safeguarding the well-being of children and families. Individuals and groups working to take action on climate change are committed to protecting the health of all people and the environment we depend on. Although caring for the future of our people and caring for our planet are inextricably linked, connections between the two areas are rarely present in policy or practice. What possibilities are we missing as a result?

We are a group of early years leaders, climate leaders, researchers, medical professionals, parents, philanthropists, and others who came together to learn about the intersection of early childhood and climate change. We found a profound opportunity to align efforts on climate change and the early years and developed a plan for change. The recommendations in this action plan are intended to help policymakers at all levels of government and other key stakeholders ensure that young children—and all of us—can thrive in a changing climate.

Our changing climate increases the frequency and intensity of storms, flooding, extreme heat, drought, wildfires, and more. This will expose nearly all children across the globe to at least one major climate hazard. Yet, while every child and child-serving system will be impacted by climate change, not all will be affected equally.

The same children and families who have unequal access to early childhood services and support are also the children and families who will be disproportionately harmed by climate change: Black, Latino, Indigenous, and other communities of color, low-income urban and rural families, and other historically disenfranchised populations.

If we take appropriate actions, however, we will do more than fulfill our responsibilities to future generations. We will also vastly improve our nation’s prosperity and advance the ideals of equality and justice. Investments in young children and families are investments in resilience, community cohesion, positive relationships, and the emotional and cognitive skills we need to prepare for an uncertain future. Healthy, resilient children and families are the foundation of healthy, resilient communities. Ensuring child-centered action on climate change will create cleaner air and water, more green space and shade, healthier buildings, communities better prepared for extreme weather events, and much more: all benefits that ripple out far beyond the individual child and family.

To advance an equitable America that works for all and builds a more sustainable and resilient tomorrow, we cannot continue to address climate and the early years separately. Climate change is not simply another issue to consider alongside early childhood development; it is the surrounding context for all aspects of childhood and every child- and family- serving system. We can’t afford to indulge in zero-sum thinking. Supporting the early years requires us to prepare for climate change, and addressing climate change requires us to support children in their earliest years.

Our choices today will shape families across the country who are already living with the effects of climate change. Our choices will also lay the foundation for millions of young children and future generations who will participate in and lead our democracy, economy, and civil society and carry forward the efforts to curb climate change and respond to its effects.

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