



PEDIATRIC CARE • SUPPORTING • PARENTING  
A Program of ZERO TO THREE

## Early Relational Health: HealthySteps Theory of Change

HealthySteps, a program of ZERO TO THREE, promotes improved outcomes for young children and families, including early relational health. This document describes early relational health and its effects—and how support to families can yield positive changes in a child's first three years and beyond. It includes a theory of change that illustrates the connection between HealthySteps services for Tier 3 families<sup>a</sup> and potential improvements in early relational health.

### Early Relational Health at a Glance

To ensure healthy development, children must consistently experience positive, responsive interactions with caregivers. Early relational health is a framework that describes the importance of positive early relationships and experiences in healthy development across a child's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships improve children's social-emotional, cognitive, and language development.<sup>2</sup> They are also associated with long-term indicators of health and well-being.<sup>3</sup> Responsive and nurturing relationships are most critical during the first three years of life, when attachment relationships form and parental care shapes the foundations of children's neurobiological, social-emotional, and psychological health.<sup>4</sup>

Many factors impact a caregiver's ability to provide safe, stable, and nurturing relationships. There is a wide spectrum of adversity, from discrete threatening events (e.g., abuse) to ongoing, chronic hardships (e.g., poverty, racism), that can inhibit the formation of positive early relationships.<sup>5-7</sup> In addition, parent capacities such as self-regulation and positive mental health can affect their ability to provide sensitive, nurturing care.<sup>8</sup> Mothers with higher levels of depression, for example, have been found to be less sensitive to their infants than have mothers with lower depression levels.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>a</sup> This document focuses on how HealthySteps can potentially influence early relational health for Tier 3 families; it does not address the potential influence on Tier 1 and Tier 2 families.

## How HealthySteps Can Help

HealthySteps sites are well positioned to promote early relational health. Although HealthySteps sites cannot prevent some of the adversities that families may experience, they can promote the development of positive early relationships by establishing trusting and supportive relationships with caregivers, offering guidance, and helping facilitate access to supports. HealthySteps team members provide universal support to families, including screening for family needs (e.g., food insecurity, maternal depression) to identify families who may benefit from the extra support of a HealthySteps Specialist. The HealthySteps Specialist is also available to all families via the Family Support Line to answer questions about caregiving and other family needs.

HealthySteps team members also provide tailored supports related to early relational health to families enrolled in Tier 3 services. These supports include:



***Ongoing, Preventive Team-Based Well-Child Visits***—During visits, the HealthySteps Specialist develops rapport with families, positioning the HealthySteps Specialist to discuss screening results and monitor family concerns over time. The HealthySteps Specialist can also observe the caregiver–child dyad, reinforce positive interactions, and determine when a caregiver may need support interacting with their child.



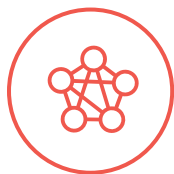
***Child Development & Behavior Consults*** – The HealthySteps Specialist can offer family consults outside of well-child visits to discuss a variety of topics related to early relational health, such as engaging in serve and return interactions and strengthening attachment.



***Positive Parenting Guidance & Information***—The HealthySteps Specialist can provide guidance about responding to infants' cues and helping children feel secure. They can also share What's Up Newsletters, which include tips for supporting responsive caregiving from birth to age 3.



***Early Learning Resources***—The HealthySteps team can provide families with early learning handouts on topics such as language development and managing feelings. These handouts follow the well-child visit schedule and suggest low- and no-cost activities that can promote positive parent-child interaction.

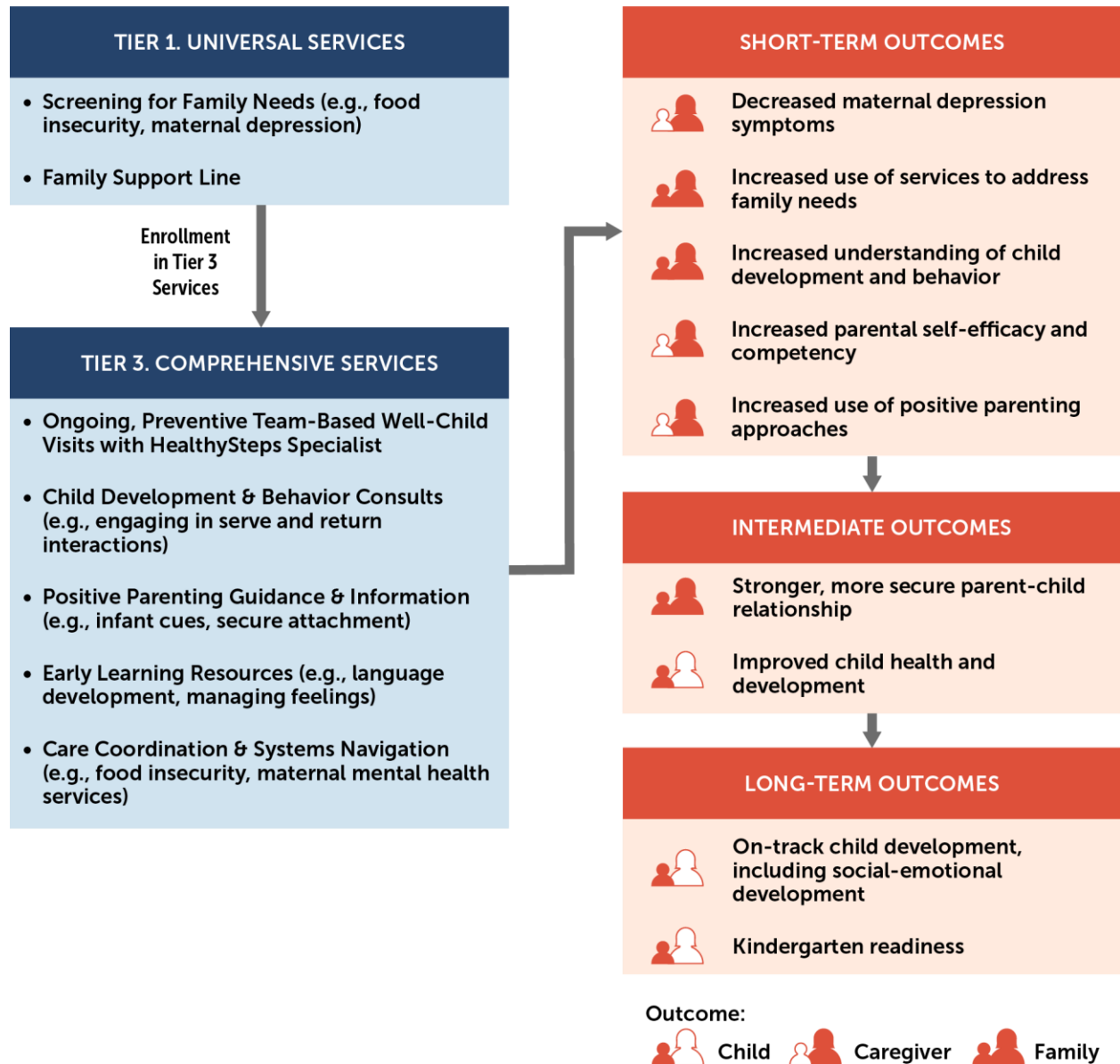


***Care Coordination & Systems Navigation***—The HealthySteps Specialist can connect families to community supports (e.g., food assistance, housing services) when needed and connect caregivers at risk of depression with mental health services. The HealthySteps Specialist can also follow up with families on the receipt of services and offer support if referral barriers occur.

## Theory of Change

The theory of change exhibit summarizes how HealthySteps can influence early relational health for Tier 3 families. It omits factors related to early relational health that HealthySteps has less influence on, such as financial stress. The exhibit also assumes that families regularly attend well-child visits and that HealthySteps is implemented with fidelity to the model.

**Exhibit 1. Early Relational Health Theory of Change**



## References

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