The Foundation to Thrive

Connecting The Importance of Safe, Stable Homes with the Health and Wellbeing of Families and Children

A Practical Toolkit for Children’s Health Advocates and Practitioners

Prepared by Children’s HealthWatch in collaboration with Mission Partners
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1. SETTING CONTEXT

Every child should have the opportunity to thrive. To build resiliency early in life, children need stable, affordable homes to prevent and heal from physical and mental health challenges. Yet, too many children encounter barriers that prevent them from growing strong, and achieving their optimal physical, emotional, and mental health.

Unstable housing can be one of the greatest barriers to good health. Research shows that children who experience housing instability for longer periods of time are more likely to experience mental and physical health challenges and developmental delays.\(^1\) Research also shows that one in five children currently has a diagnosable mental health condition, and housing instability only exacerbates their challenges.\(^2\)

Through evidence-based research, in-depth conversations with experts, and patient stories, Children’s HealthWatch discovered a need for messaging this undeniable link between housing and children’s health and wellbeing. These issues are complex, complicated, and flooded with jargon—making it difficult to simply communicate the need for change.

Layer on top of those complexities the false information, racial bias, and long held stereotypes that have further complicated conversations on housing and health. Blame is often placed on parents and individuals instead of the systems in which these issues are rooted. The issue of housing and its direct link to a child’s mental health and wellbeing has nothing to do with a person’s personality, race, income, ethnicity, country of origin, sexual orientation, or gender identity, but rather how inequities push people through gaps in the systems. These systems can create an “us vs. them” mentality, which leads to biases that worsen disparities and prevent holistic approaches to care.

We all want safe, stable, and affordable homes and strong, healthy children. We all benefit when everyone has a stable home. To get there, however, we must understand that this isn’t someone else’s issue, for another day or another generation. It’s everyone’s issue, now.

BRINGING THE ISSUE HOME

Eighteen-month-old Angelov and his mother, 23-year-old Neslie were living in a cramped home in South Boston with Neslie’s mother and sister. There wasn’t enough room for the baby to lie on his tummy or to crawl. He developed allergies, he was underweight, and he had trouble lifting his head. After a few months, Neslie and her son moved to a clean, quiet space, with room for Angelov to wander and spread out his toys, and to sleep in his own crib in his own bedroom. Neslie no longer had to stress about a safe, stable home, allowing her to be a more joyful, engaged mom. On just their second day there, Angelov started walking. He’s getting bigger now, and his development is catching up, keeping him on track to be school ready.

By moving into a stable, affordable home, Angelov had the opportunity to grow physically strong. And though not as visible, his mental and emotional health had a foundation to thrive.
2. ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Many believe that issues like housing instability and homelessness are so widespread that they are unsolvable issues. However, data show that comprehensive investment centered on the long-term wellness of children and families can deliver a far better result for their own lives and for their communities. This toolkit is a call to think differently about the connectivity between housing issues and the mental health and wellbeing of our children and our communities.

Through original research at Children’s HealthWatch, we know that safe, stable homes nurture healthy development, allowing children to grow strong mentally and physically. And, when children grow strong socially and emotionally, healthcare expenses decrease and our entire economy benefits.

Whether you are a health advocate, health provider in a local community, or a policymaker, this toolkit is designed to help you connect issues of housing with children’s health and wellbeing. Specifically, the messages and tools throughout this kit are designed to equip you with actionable resources to meaningfully engage city and state government officials and public health leaders as partners and allies on children’s health and wellbeing. This set of materials is also intended to support communicators in explaining many of the central issues in housing and mental health including intergenerational stress, adverse childhood experiences, and community supports.

We hope you use this toolkit to drive and deepen conversations around the connection between housing and children’s health. To support your efforts, at the end of this document we have included several additional resources such as talking points, social media content, a one-page fact sheet, and an op-ed outline to help you make the case for action and investment.

BRINGING THE ISSUE HOME

Yvonne is a mother of three young children. She was working part time and attending nursing school when she separated from her partner and found herself unable to pay her rent. Yvonne was four months behind on rent when her youngest child had to go to the emergency department for a viral illness. While there, she enrolled in the Housing Prescriptions as Health Care intervention group at Boston Medical Center. When Yvonne entered the program, she received resources to avoid eviction, including an attorney and access to a homelessness prevention flex fund. Thanks to cooperation from her landlord and other supports, the family was able to stay in the unit for three more months, avoided entering a shelter, and kept the kids in their school. Six months later, the family moved into an affordable apartment appropriate for their family size and needs. Yvonne was able to graduate from nursing school and pass the exam to receive her RN license. Not only did her stress subside, her kids were also able to grow strong in their home, school, and community.
3. THE POWER OF METAPHORS

Met·a·phor /ˈmedəˌfôr,ˈmedəˌfər/ a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.

Decades of research, across multiple studies and sources, show that people make sense of the world around them—especially complex social problems—using metaphors to “attach meaning to unfolding events and new information,” according to the Frameworks Institute.

The use of metaphor in daily life is common. A second-grade teacher, for example, may compare her classroom to a zoo to describe the cacophony leading up to the lunch bell. Or perhaps a volunteer at the local hospital is described as having a “heart of gold” to explain his generous and kind nature.

While those examples are simplistic, they also simply illustrate how using metaphor helps explain a concept.

Why Metaphors Matters

» People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.
» Incoming information provides cues about where to “file” it mentally.
» People get most information about public affairs from the news media which, over time, creates a framework of expectation, or dominant frame.
» Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation and configure incoming information to conform to this frame.
4. THE NEW NARRATIVE AT A GLANCE

Below are compelling and tested messages that connect housing with mental health and wellbeing. Within this section, you will find key messages as well as a helpful metaphor and supporting points.

A HELPFUL METAPHOR:
Comparing a Developing Child’s Mental Health to a Growing Tree

A child’s physical and mental health and wellbeing is like a tree seedling whose soil, roots, and environment must be regularly nurtured throughout its life to establish solid roots and grow strong. A child’s mental health, similar to a tree seedling, requires nutrients, a stable location and limited moves, displacement, and stressors that might slow his or her growth and ability to thrive. By investing in safe, affordable homes with access to community resources, we can ensure our children grow strong socially and emotionally, which builds resilience.

CORE MESSAGE:
The Foundation For Mental Health And Wellbeing Is Built Early In Life

SUPPORTING POINTS:

Safe, Stable Homes are a Predictor of Better Health
Studies show that unstable housing undermines emotional, psychological, and behavioral health and development. If one member of the household is experiencing a mental health challenge, it may also lead to mental health challenges in other family members. Because so many critical developmental periods are concentrated in early childhood, young children—regardless of skin color or socioeconomic status—need safe, stable homes.

A Shared Concern
Many people are increasingly unable to pay their rent or afford a mortgage—and that has damaging impacts on health and the health of our next generation. This can cause stress and trauma that is passed down from grandparents to parents to children, despite their best efforts to shield their children from these challenges. This stress can cause or exacerbate children’s depressive or behavioral issues — in turn affecting their peers, contributing to teacher burnout, reducing school performance ratings, and leading to behavior-based calls that pull parents out of work and hinder productivity. Ensuring affordable, safe, and stable housing supports children’s healthy development — helping them succeed in their schools and in life, strengthening their ability to contribute to the economy, and reducing current and future healthcare costs.
An Economic Imperative
Unstable housing is not only deepening health disparities in communities already facing challenging statistics and financial strain, it is also draining dollars from the U.S. healthcare system.\[^{10}\]

- Evidence shows that psychological problems experienced during childhood can reduce adult earnings by 25 percent by age 50 and decrease one’s chances of establishing long-term, stable relationships.\[^{11}\]

- Additionally, anxiety, depression, and aggression in children can lead to lifelong mental health conditions. The economic burden of mental illness is large: the World Health Organization estimated that by 2030, the global cost of mental illness will be over $6 trillion.\[^{12}\]

If we could provide safe, stable homes for all children, we would experience greater economic opportunities for everyone across our country to thrive. But, to get there, we must stop thinking about housing improvements and safe housing as one business transaction, one company, or one client at a time and instead see the critical link between housing, health, and the economy.

### 5. WORDS TO USE VS. WORDS TO AVOID

Based on plain language research and best communications practices, the guide below lists words to use, and avoid, when talking about the connection between mental health and housing. The words to use are equity-based, simple to understand, and relevant across all demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words to Avoid</th>
<th>Words to Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good housing, secure housing, affordable housing</td>
<td>Consistent homes, stable homes, affordable homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness, disorder</td>
<td>Mental health challenge, condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A child suffering with/ victim of mental health</td>
<td>A child experiencing mental health challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentrification</td>
<td>Displacement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering a child’s development</td>
<td>Strengthening a child’s development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk children/families</td>
<td>Children at risk of homelessness, People experiencing illness, homelessness, etc.</td>
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</tbody>
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Tool 1: Talking Points

The Situation:
» 1 in 3 families with young children interviewed by Children’s HealthWatch are currently facing housing instability or homelessness.¹
» On top of this, nearly 39 million households (more than one-third of U.S. households) still find themselves choosing every month between paying rent or paying for health-related expenses for their children.²
» 1 in 5 children experience mental health challenges.³ Studies show that mental health problems and developmental delays are more severe among children who experience housing instability for longer periods of time.⁴

The Anecdote/Metaphor:
We know that a child’s health and wellbeing is like a tree seedling whose soil, roots, and environment must be regularly nurtured throughout its life in order to establish solid roots and grow strong.
» A child’s mental health, similar to a tree seedling, requires a stable location and limited moves, displacement, and stressors that might slow its growth and ability to thrive.
» By investing in safe, affordable homes with access to community resources, we can ensure our children grow strong physically, socially and emotionally.

The Urgency:
» In order to build resiliency early in life, it is important to provide stable, affordable homes as a preventative strategy for mental health challenges. At the same time, we must also address disparities and inequities that can lead to housing instability or unaffordability for some people over others.

The Logic:
» As pediatricians and pediatric researchers, we know that all children need access to a healthy environment, stable homes, and services to thrive — but no one solution to health, housing, or environment in isolation can create long-term health and wellbeing.
» Research shows that safe and stable housing is the first step on a path toward economic opportunity. And, a person’s access to opportunity is intrinsically linked with that of the community where they live.

The Reward:
» When we provide affordable, stable homes early in life, we support children’s healthy long-term development, by helping them succeed in their schools and classrooms, strengthen their ability to thrive throughout life, and reduce current and future healthcare costs.
» By focusing on safe, stable, affordable homes first, there is a stronger chance of affecting other elements of the child’s and parent’s health and wellbeing.
» The foundation for mental health and wellbeing is built early in life, and we have the opportunity to help children grow up strong.

The Call to Action:
» Together, we must prioritize and invest in stable, safe homes and supportive community resources that reduce the risk factors leading to mental health challenges in children, and instead strengthen the overall health, wellbeing, and resiliency of children throughout their lives.

Tool 2: Sample Social Media Posts

Copy and paste the text in the Tweets or Facebook posts to use on your social media account.

#MentalHealth can’t be addressed in isolation. We must prioritize stable, safe homes, as well as community resources, to serve as a solution to strengthen the overall health and wellbeing of our children. #healthyhomes

1 in 3 families with young children interviewed by Children’s HealthWatch are currently facing housing instability or homelessness. By prioritizing stable, safe housing conditions, we can ensure that children have the opportunity to grow mentally, socially, and developmentally stronger. #healthydevelopment #housingfirst
The foundation for #mentalhealth and wellbeing is built early in life. Just as a tree seedling must be nurtured to help it grow strong, we must create an environment for child’s mental health to grow strong, too. #healthyhomes

Unstable and unaffordable homes can create stress for children in spite of a parent’s best efforts to shield them. Safe, stable, and affordable homes, on the other hand, can support parents in accessing community resources to help their children grow stronger. #affordablehousing #housingfirst #healthydevelopment
A Foundation to Thrive
Ensuring Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Issue:
One in five children across all income levels have a diagnosable mental health condition.¹ Further, studies show that mental health problems and developmental delays are more severe among children who experience housing instability for longer periods of time.² As such, addressing housing as a preventative strategy early in life builds long-term resilience.

The Opportunity:
Stable, safe housing with access to health-related services can yield significant cost savings and improve families’ health outcomes. A recent study showed that costs to healthcare systems were lower after people moved into stable, safe, high-quality, and affordable homes.³ Interventions related to housing have the most significant long-term impacts because there is a stronger chance of affecting other elements of the child’s and parent’s health and wellbeing. Studies show that affordable, stable, and safe housing conditions support children’s healthy development (i.e., preventing mental health challenges or lessening their severity), help them succeed in their schools, communities, and in life, and reduce current and future healthcare costs.⁴ The foundation for mental health and wellbeing is built early in life, and we have the opportunity to help children grow strong through stable and safe housing.

Why it Matters?
Ensuring safe and affordable housing for all people can have a significant impact on physical and mental health as well as creating healthier communities. If we focused housing resources in a way that led to health improvements, we would experience greater economic opportunities for everyone across our country to thrive. To get there, we must stop thinking about housing improvements and safe homes as one business transaction, one company, or one client at a time and instead see the critical link between housing, health…and the economy. Investing in stable, safe, affordable housing has benefits across a range of issues important to our children’s futures:

» EDUCATION: A child’s development does not only happen in the classroom, it also happens at home. When children experience chaos in a neighborhood, constant moving, and exposure to pollutants and unsafe environments, it profoundly impacts their behavioral and social development, creating barriers to achieve educational success. Prioritizing safe, stable, and health-promoting homes is a high-return investment in a child’s educational attainment and in our future as a country.⁵
THE ECONOMY: Investing in stable, affordable, safe homes for children has long-term economic benefits. Children's ability to access and stay in good K-12 schools has a direct implication for their future college, training, and job prospects. Moving three or more times in childhood—and especially between ages six and ten—lowered later earnings by nearly 52 percent.⁶ To ensure a healthy economy, we must ensure that families have access to housing options that are stable, affordable and health-promoting for all.⁷

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING: A child’s mental health and wellbeing is like a tree seedling whose soil, roots, and environment must be regularly nurtured throughout its life in order to establish solid roots and grow strong. A child’s mental health, similar to tree seedlings, requires a stable location and limited moves, displacement, and stressors that might slow their growth and ability to thrive. By investing in safe, affordable homes with access to community resources, we can ensure our children grow strong socially and emotionally which builds resilience.⁸

PUBLIC HEALTH: Stable, affordable, safe homes allow families to make healthier choices and live a healthier life. If a home is consistently affordable, it is easier to pay doctors’ bills, buy food, and take care of other typical and unforeseen costs. If a home is near a grocery store, it is easier to buy fresh fruits and vegetables instead of convenience stores or fast food restaurants leading to a healthier nutrition. If a home is close to a park, it is easier to exercise and walk leading to better physical and mental health. Housing is an effective tool for good health, and by not investing in access to health-promoting homes, we’ll soon find ourselves with even higher healthcare costs, due to the downstream effects of housing instability.⁹

What Can We Do?
If we prioritize investments and policies that protect safe, stable homes—homes with access to community services and benefits that remove barriers to work and create opportunity—we can strengthen the overall physical and mental health and wellbeing of our children and help shape their future.

The place we call home has a profound impact on children’s lives. Together, we must invest in stable, safe homes AND community resources that reduce risk factors and strengthen the overall health, wellbeing, and resiliency of our children throughout their lives.

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Tool 4: Op-Ed Outline

The following template is an example of how to write your own op-ed supporting investments in safe, stable and health-promoting homes. The template provides guidance and notes on the structure when crafting an op-ed, and is designed to serve as a basis for customization, with your own personal experiences, local data, and initiatives.

The most important elements to remember when developing an op-ed are:

1. **Present the problem and give it a human touch.** Supporting data is important but it will fall flat if you don’t demonstrate what it means for readers. Do you have an experience with a patient, a pediatrician or community member that you can share? Providers have a powerful voice and can contribute to personalizing advocacy issues for the readers that data alone may not be able to do.

2. **Offer a solution.** What local policies, programs, or initiatives are you supporting? What can still be done to help? Be sure to show why these solutions are effective.

3. **Include a call to action.** Success is a community effort.

**STRUCTURE AND GUIDANCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading</th>
<th>Connecting Health and Housing So All Children Can Thrive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Opener</strong></td>
<td>With summer in the air, many are turning their attention outdoors. Yards are being tidied up and trees are being planted with visions of future afternoons stretched out under their shade. But first, they must be tended to—lovingly, caringly, and patiently—so their canopies can bloom. Indeed, tree saplings can’t grow strong enough to provide shade if they are constantly being uprooted and replanted in new environments. It stresses their systems, prevents their roots from grabbing hold, and leads to scraggly trees that ultimately do not thrive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Body</strong></td>
<td>Believe it or not, the same goes for kids and mental health. A child’s mental health, like a tree sapling, requires a stable location. Moves and other stressors or displacements must be limited, studies show, or their growth and ability to thrive are weakened. In other words, they may not grow up to be strong, resilient, and productive adults. According to recent research by Children’s HealthWatch, 1 in 3 families with young children interviewed by the Boston-based nonprofit are currently facing housing instability or homelessness. But the issue goes far beyond their sample set. In fact, 39 million households—more than one-third of U.S. households—find themselves choosing every month between paying rent or paying for health-related expenses for their children. The effects of that housing instability can have detrimental effects on the long-term health and wellbeing of children. In fact, research by the Centers for Disease Control showed that moving three or more times in childhood—and particularly between ages six and ten—lowered later work earnings by nearly 52 percent. That’s a primary reason why Children’s HealthWatch places a strong emphasis on investing in safe and affordable homes with access to community resources — to ensure a healthy economy and improve public health—and why here in [insert city/state], we need to prioritize the same.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here in [INSERT CITY OR METRO REGION], [PARAGRAPH DESCRIBING LOCAL/REGIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING/PUBLIC HEALTH SITUATION]

The Rationale

Stable, affordable, and safe homes, with access to health-promoting related services can yield significant healthcare cost savings and improve a family’s health outcomes.

For example, if a child’s home is near a grocery store, it is easier for their caregivers to access fresh fruits and vegetables instead of relying on convenience stores or fast food. If a home is close to a park, it is easier to exercise and walk. One study showed that costs to healthcare systems were lower after people moved into stable, safe, high-quality, and affordable homes.

Housing is a key first step on a path toward economic opportunity, for all families. But it is also the pathway for children and their families to build optimal health.

The Call To Action

If we prioritize investments and policies that protect safe, stable homes—homes with access to community services and benefits that remove barriers to work and create opportunity—we can strengthen the overall physical and mental health and wellbeing of our children and help shape their future.

The place we call home has a profound impact on children’s lives. Together, we must invest in stable, safe homes and community resources that reduce risk factors and strengthen the overall health, wellbeing, and resiliency of our children throughout their lives.

That’s why I challenge [community/elected official/policymaker] to support [policy/bill/legislation] designed to support health-promoting homes, that can lead to the strongest version of our community overall.
Endnotes


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

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ABOUT CHILDREN’S HEALTHWATCH

Children’s HealthWatch is a nonpartisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children’s health and policy experts. Our network is committed to improving children’s health in America. We do that by first collecting data in urban hospitals across the country on infants and toddlers from families facing economic hardship. We then analyze and share our findings with academics, legislators, and the public. These efforts help inform public policies and practices that can give all children equal opportunities for healthy, successful lives.

For additional information, please contact:
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