

Rhode Island Chapter

INCORPORATED IN RHODE ISLAND

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



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March 18, 2025

House Health and Human Services Committee

Dear Chairperson Donovan and Members of the Committee,

The Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (RIAAP) would like to offer full support of H5497. The RI AAP represents 200 pediatricians practicing in primary and subspecialty care across the state.

It is accepted throughout the medical and psychological community that toxic stress – prolonged activation of an individual's physiologic stress response – can disrupt the normal development of a child's brain and other organ systems and alter the body's own "set points." This can lead to a cascade of physical and mental health diagnoses. Emerging research has demonstrated that the "antidote" to toxic stress is early relational health. The American Academy of Pediatrics has updated its policy statement in 2021 emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in pediatric care that emphasizes safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between children and caregivers that buffer adversity, build resilience, and promote health.

The number of young children enrolled in Medicaid presenting with Serious Emotional Disturbance has grown from 12% in 2017 to 20% in 2022. Many young children, both with Medicaid and Commercial insurance, are experiencing significant mental health challenges that interfere with their development, relationships, and learning. While payors will pay for mental health services for young children, RI lacks trained therapists and the systems needed to develop and support a workforce to work with very young children and their families.

The RI General Assembly previously passed legislation creating a much-needed task force on Infant and Child Mental Health. The Task Force recommends that RI builds therapeutic capacity by developing a hub to train and support professionals to use appropriate and culturally responsive tools and therapies to better screen, evaluate, and treat mental health challenges of infants and young children. House Bill 5497 would develop a budget and seek funding for a 3-year pilot program to fulfill the Task Force's recommendations. It calls for PROMOTION of wellness and positive early relational experiences for the PREVENTION of physical and mental health diagnoses. The antidote to toxic stress and these early adverse childhood stressors is early relational health and the development of positive relationships between infant/young child and caregiver. It is critical that the RI legislature invest in children by supporting H5497, the Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub. The health of our children – our future – demands it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allison W. Brindle".

Allison W. Brindle, MD, FAAP

Past President, American Academy of Pediatrics, Rhode Island Chapter

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gregory Fox".

Gregory Fox, MD, FAAP

Advocacy Chair, American Academy of Pediatrics, Rhode Island Chapter