

ASSURING HUMAN RIGHTS FOR INFANTS & YOUNG CHILDREN

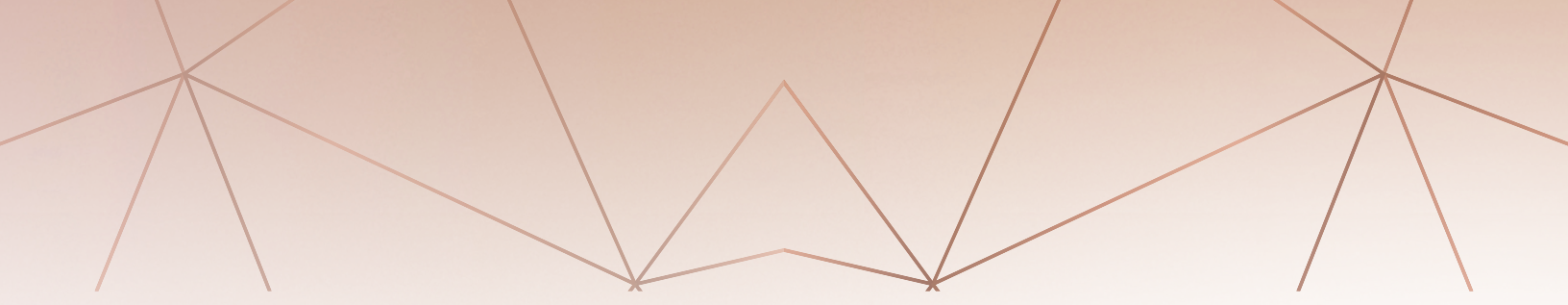


Position Paper



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*In the spirit of hope that:
“Sapati ingera”
 (“All the children are well.”)
The Maasai People*

Executive Summary

Purpose

The current political climate in the United States (US) has rapidly begun to undermine and dismiss many self-professed American principles, values, social norms, and even the US Constitution, itself. Consequently, human rights are violated, the most egregious actions being denial of the rights of infants and young children. **This position paper is a call for action to advocate for the rights of infants, young children, their families, and the early childhood professional workforce.**

Relationships, connection, and action are the simple, yet essential elements that lay the groundwork to fulfill both basic and unique human rights for all. **These human rights sustain mental health and relational wellbeing across generations.** These human rights extend intentionally to infants, very young children, and their caregivers, including parents, primary attachment figures, and early childhood professionals.

Rapid brain development in infancy demands optimal nurturing and a deep recognition of the profound vulnerability of infants and very young children. During this critical period, the quality of caregiving and early relationships plays an essential role in shaping lifelong mental, physical, emotional, and social wellbeing.

Safeguarding infants and their caregivers is essential to upholding the fundamental rights to survival, healthy development, self-determination, and freedom from discrimination. These protections must be grounded in inclusive policies and practices that recognize the **unique vulnerabilities of infants and the critical role caregivers play in nurturing their growth.** Ensuring these rights is a cornerstone for building equitable, resilient societies, and exercising justice.



Recommendation

By embracing the steadfast strategies of the Rights-Based Approach; the Diversity Informed Tenets for Working with Infants, Children, and Families; the Declaration of the Rights of Infants; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as guiding lenses, human rights can be transformed from abstract ideals into actionable frameworks that are grounded in justice and dignity. These intentional efforts will ensure that the rights of infants, young children, and their caregivers are reflected in policies, professional practices, and daily interactions across multiple sectors of society.

Human rights duty-bearers (those entrusted with the responsibility to uphold and protect the rights of others) play a critical role in advancing equitable outcomes for infants, young children, and their caregivers. Human rights duty-bearers can unite across sectors to drive systematic change by creating and maintaining innovative partnerships and leveraging the collective impact framework. This collaborative approach amplifies shared goals, ensures that individual efforts are aligned, and turns commitments to justice and equity into measurable actions that shape healthier, more inclusive societies for infants, young children, and their caregivers.

Purpose & Premise

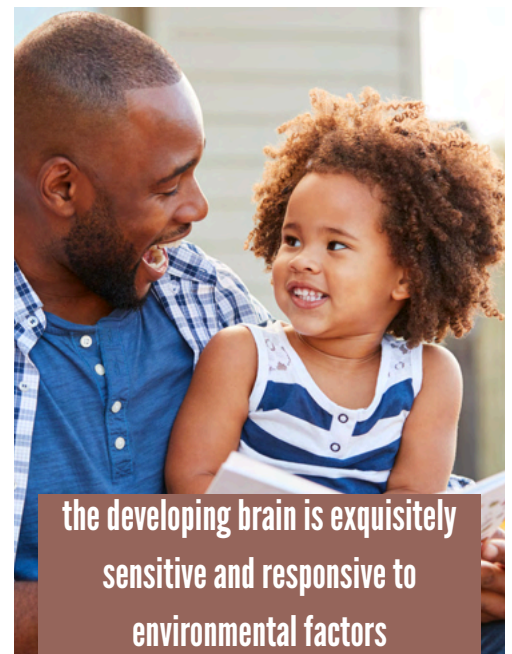
The purpose of this document is to succinctly describe the importance of assuring basic human rights for all children, with a focus on infants and young children. Mental health and relational well-being are contingent on societal protections and assurances of basic human rights. Furthermore, infants and young children, by the nature of their immaturity and inherent vulnerability, require additional special rights, including environmental protections and protections for their caregivers.

Caregivers include, first and foremost, their parents or primary attachment figures. For the purpose of this document, the term, caregivers, also includes the multidisciplinary early childhood professionals that work with and nurture the developing children under their care.

This position paper is intended to establish the basis of a formal policy position on protecting infants, young children, and adult caregivers, as related to the topic covered herein.

Infancy and early childhood are a time of unparalleled rapid brain development (Bourgeois 1994). Early brain development impacts lifelong mental, physical, relational, developmental, and behavioral health beginning in the womb and transcends generations (Davis & Thompson 2024, Glover, et al. 2014, Barker 1998). Moreover, the developing brain is exquisitely sensitive and responsive to environmental factors (Cowan 1979, Knickmeyer, et al. 2008). This period of development is a time of incredible opportunity for nurturing optimal development. It is also a time of tremendous vulnerability. It is, therefore, uniquely determinative of a child's life chances, echoing through generations.

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A safe, stable, and nurturing dyadic relationship with caregivers is essential, but is only as protective for the child as those caregivers are, themselves, insulated by societal protections from external threats, insecurities, and trauma. For optimal physical, mental, developmental, relational, and behavioral health of the child, these protections must ensure that the best interests of the child are paramount, including the right to survival and development, the right to self-determination, and nondiscrimination. In short, a society that assures basic human rights for all creates an environment conducive to the optimal development of each individual.

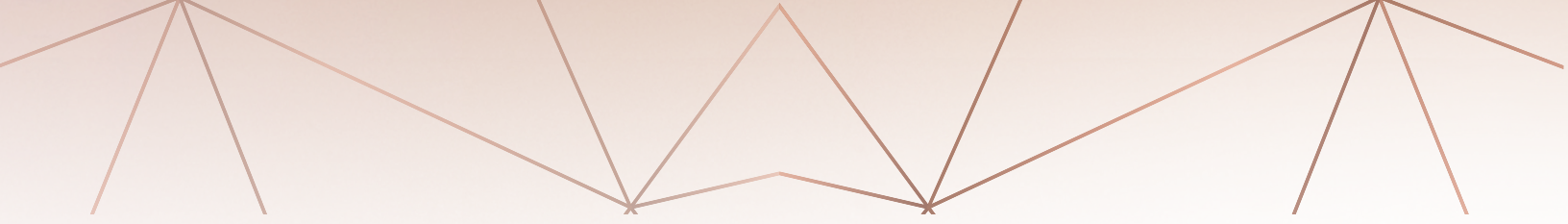
Human Rights: The Basics

Human Rights are internationally adopted standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings. Human rights are universal to every person, regardless of background, location, or status. Human rights are inalienable; they shall not be taken or given away. Human rights are indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. They are nonhierarchical; each carries equal importance. All work together and are necessary to assure the dignity of every individual human being. To assure the rights of all individuals requires active participation of both rights-holders (those who have the rights) and duty-bearers (those responsible for fulfilling the rights of others) (UNICEF, n.d.). A human rights construct transforms societal approaches to service and care to approaches that honor the dignity of all people. (Table 1)

Other Approaches	Rights-Based Approaches
Action is voluntary	Action is mandatory
People have needs	People have claims and entitlement
Poor people deserve help	Poor people are entitled to rights
Some may be left out	All people have the same rights
People invited as passive beneficiaries	People are active participants
Some cultures do not recognize some needs	Rights are universal and inalienable
Need to be pragmatic and work within the power structure	Power structures that block realizing rights must be changed
Development is technocratic, led by “experts”	Development process must empower rights-holders and involve them in public decision-making
Hierarchy of needs	Rights are indivisible and interdependent

Table 1: Rights-Based Approach vs. Other Approaches
Source: Save the Children (2005). Child Rights Programming, 2nd Edition

While international human rights remain aspirational, it can and should be used by all governments, policymakers, and civil society actors at every level as a benchmark to guide decisions around resource allocation, prioritization of competing interests, and evaluation of outcomes.



Since children are, in very real terms, the embodiment of our collective future, it is incumbent upon us to employ a longer-term rights-based approach when considering policies affecting children and families, especially in times of economic, political, and climatic uncertainty.

Infant and Child Rights

Children are not little adults. They have special physical and mental health needs and vulnerabilities. Recognizing this fact, the United Nations (UN) conducted a multi-national effort of collectively engaging in a decade-long process of considering what special rights in addition to basic human rights shall be recognized and assured for children. The result of this work was the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC). The CRC has been ratified by all State members of the UN with one exception, the United States (US). Nonetheless, by the nature of human rights and by the universality of ratification, the CRC has the force of customary international law and, as such, confers on all children in the US the rights spelled out in the CRC.

The CRC promotes and protects the rights of all children to:

- » Participation in family, cultural, and social aspects of life
- » Identity, name, and nationality assigned from birth
- » Life and development
- » Protection against abuse, neglect, and exploitation
- » Education, health care, and juvenile justice
- » Protection from discrimination

Similarly, infants are not little children. They, too, have special physical and mental needs and vulnerabilities. Even though the CRC is the most comprehensive and widely ratified human rights document in history, it does not include a focus on what is unique about infants and toddlers during the first three years. In recognizing this gap in human rights, the World Association of Infant Mental Health (WAIMH) formulated the [Declaration of the Rights of Infants](#) (DRI) (WAIMH 2016). The DRI is divided into two parts, (1) infants' basic rights applicable worldwide and (2) principles for health policy more specific to western wealthy countries, with an appendix endorsing the 10 principles of the CRC.

Basic infant rights declared in the DRI include a right to:

1. Special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection
2. Sensitive and responsive caregiving relationships
3. Identity from the moment of birth, registered citizenship, recognition as a vital member of his/her family
4. Physical and emotional safety, adequate nutrition and sleep, and promotion of normal development
5. Protection from abuse and neglect
6. Professional help when directly or indirectly exposed to traumatic events
7. Access to palliative services when life-limiting conditions exist



Infant and Child Rights Within Professions, Organizations and Systems

A more recent advancement is the creation of the [Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants and Children](#) developed by the Irving Harris Foundation. These Tenets are 10 aspirational principles for professionals, organizations, and systems that serve infants, children, and families. The Tenets, in part, call for the early childhood profession to champion children's rights globally as citizens of the world, work to acknowledge privilege and combat discrimination, and advance policy that supports all families (Thomas, et al. 2019, Irving Harris Foundation 2018).

Social and Economic Background

Children's rights do not exist in a vacuum; they are deeply shaped by the social, economic, and historical conditions into which children are born. Across the globe, vast disparities in wealth, health, education, and environmental stability mean that many infants and young children are denied even the most basic rights to safety, nutrition, clean air and water, and responsive caregiving. These disparities are often the result of long-standing colonial legacies, intergenerational poverty, structural violence, and inadequate investment in early childhood systems. In the US, a nation often portrayed as a land of opportunity, the promises of freedom and prosperity remain unequally distributed. **Systemic racism and discrimination continue to shape the living conditions of marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous,**

and immigrant families. These inequities directly impact the wellbeing of infants and young children, whose earliest experiences are inextricably linked to the conditions and treatment of their caregivers.

Historical trauma and systemic oppression have created deeply rooted disparities in the caregiving environments available to many families. In the US, for example, centuries of enslavement, forced migration, family separation, and discriminatory policies have produced cumulative and enduring effects on the mental health and economic stability of Black and Indigenous communities. Globally, children in low-income countries face heightened risks due to extractive economic systems, environmental degradation, and weakened public infrastructures. While the US has the resources and knowledge to support every child's development, access to these resources remains stratified by race, class, geography, and immigration status. If the rights of infants and young children are to be upheld in any meaningful way, global and national efforts must prioritize the dismantling of structural inequities and the active promotion of environments where all children, and the caregivers who nurture them, can thrive.

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Clearly, world leadership has spoken. Every infant and child has basic human rights and special rights that should be respected, honored, and assured throughout the world, including the US. This is everyone's responsibility.

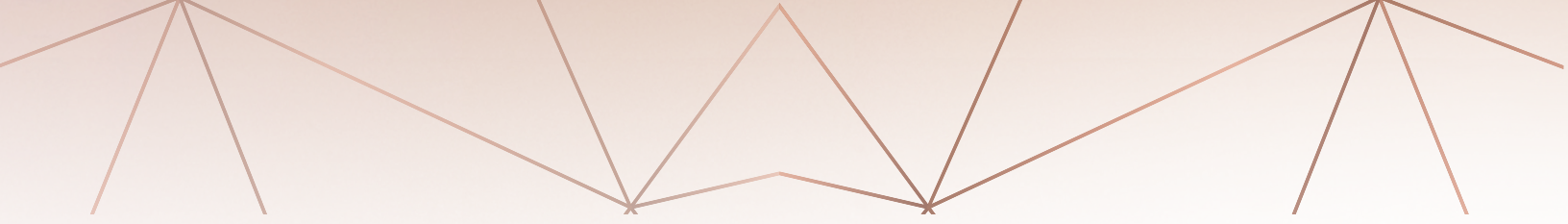


“How we care for our children is how, at last, we take charge of our destiny.”

Laurence Frank, 1939

Infant and Child Rights in the Current US Political Climate

While there is a longstanding history of unacceptable social and economic conditions in the US, the current US political climate has rapidly begun to undermine and dismiss many self-professed American principles, values, social norms, and even the US Constitution, itself. Consequently, human rights are violated, the most egregious actions being denial of the rights of infants and young children.



Infants' and young children's rights are being attacked directly and indirectly. Directly, infants and young children are being denied protection from discrimination (racist language, policies, and agendas); access to nutritional programs is threatened (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children [WIC]); health care insurance is being stripped away (Medicaid); financial assistance to low-income parents is being reduced, denied, or contingent on onerous work requirements (Temporary Aid for Needy Families [TANF]); and access to safe and nurturing early care and education experiences. In violation of Article XIV of the Constitution, infants and young children are being denied registration as a citizen immediately after birth, denying them of their nationality and identity. Deportations of parents by government authorities, increasingly without constitutionally-guaranteed due process, are violating the infant and young child's right to continuity of attachment to their primary caregiver(s). And deportations of infants and young children who are, themselves, US citizens, are becoming more common.

Indirectly, these politically motivated actions are denying an infant or young child's right to develop physical and mental abilities to their fullest potential, respect for their own cultural identity, language, and values, and through positive experiences, developing understanding, peace, tolerance, friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national, and religious groups, and other civic responsibilities.

The result is that the growth and development of infants and young children are being stymied. Not surprisingly, the poor, marginalized, and minoritized infants, young children, and their caregivers are most impacted by these human rights violations, including early childhood professionals.

Consequences

The consequences of human rights violations are far reaching and often profoundly consequential for both individuals and society, as a whole.

Failure to adhere to a rights-based approach has an adverse impact on the physical, and mental health, and relational wellbeing of infants, children, their parents/caregivers, and the early childhood professionals who care for and nurture the growth and development of infants and young children.



Early childhood professionals are also the human rights duty-bearers charged with honoring and respecting the rights of every infant and young child.

When human rights are violated, infants and young children vicariously experience the deep emotions of fear, anger, and anxiety that their parents and caregivers are experiencing. **During their formative years, the child learns from and internalizes the environment surrounding them. Repeated violations of human rights instill hatred, suspicion, loneliness, and loss. These feelings can overpower and displace tolerance, friendship, kindness, trust, acceptance of those different from oneself, and a sense of common good.** Then, without reversal and repair, the consequences of this environment will carry forward through the lifespan and into the next generation.

Early childhood (EC) professionals are not only the caregivers of infants and young children but also the professionals that parents/caregivers look to as a trusted source of information and advice. Early childhood professionals are also the human rights duty-bearers charged with honoring and respecting the rights of every infant and young child.

In parallel with the environmental impact on parents' capability to protect and nurture the infant or young child's health and wellbeing, the EC professional must also live in a social and political environment that honors human rights for all. Without such protections, environmental conditions present insurmountable challenges and optimal mental health and relational wellbeing are impossible goals to achieve. These conditions go even further as they adversely impact the EC professional's health and safety and amplify moral distress and deep discouragement when rights are violated or threatened.

Such conditions call for special consideration of how human rights are being violated, what rights exist that can counter the violations and be protective, and what actions and repairs can be taken to bring circumstances back to a human rights-informed environment. Advocating for establishment of policies and practices that assure basic human rights and special rights for infants and young children is the call for action.

Call for Action

Advocating for the rights of infants and young children includes a call for the rights of parents/caregivers and EC professionals, too.

Parents/caregivers have responsibility for providing safe, stable, and nurturing care. Early childhood professionals serve families in promotion of physical, mental, developmental, and behavioral health and relational wellbeing. Accomplishing these commendable goals is contingent on realizing basic human rights. The goal is advocating not for a return to past circumstances but rather advocating for change that is an even more robust realization of rights for all, including infants and young children.

The concept, thinking globally and acting locally, applies to promotion of human rights. As human rights duty-bearers, we EC professionals are well positioned to see what change is necessary, how change can occur, and where change can start. Work can happen at the international, national, state, local, and agency levels. Working together through innovative partnerships and using a collective impact framework can produce desired change.

Knowing our rights and the special rights of infants and young children is a starting point. Using a rights-based approach can set into motion a paradigm shift that lays the foundation for change and a means for building a societal environment that is more justly serving and supportive of all individuals than has ever existed before. Acting together can realize this goal (Henry 2023)



Using a rights-based approach can set into motion a paradigm shift that lays the foundation for building a societal environment that's more just and supportive for all.



Next Steps

1. Define your scope of advocacy, whether international, national, state, local, or organizational
2. Build knowledge about human rights, including the rights of infants and young children
3. Reflect on how you see yourself as a human rights duty-bearer
4. Embed reflective practice in all convenings and work to navigate and process moral distress when rights are violated or threatened
5. Identify opportunities within your reach for advancing the rights of infants and children
6. Explore current professional relationships you have that would resonate with a human rights approach
7. Challenge yourself to think about potential innovative partners and reach out to them
8. Collectively define what the collective impact goal will be and identify a backbone entity, such as the state's infant mental health association acting independently or in partnership with state government and/or philanthropic organizations
9. Form a diverse group of fellow early childhood professionals encompassed within your identified scope of advocacy, including family voices, to form a strong coalition
10. Document and share stories about experiences where human rights were supported or violated
11. Collectively identify a starting point for advocating and/or implementing change
12. Consider potential barriers to change and how you might address them
13. Hold tight to a supportive environment, hardy communication channels, and keeping the baby in mind
14. Celebrate successes, however small

Human rights are critically important for all individuals. Special rights are essential to the survival and mental, physical, developmental, and behavioral health and relational wellbeing for infants and young children. Through relationships, connections, and action, we can realize the basic and special human rights for all that will promote mental health and relational wellbeing now and for future generations.

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