



Testimony in Support of HB 6664, SB 839 and SB 840

Respectfully Submitted by Dr. Darcy Lower, Founder & CEO of Child First &
Ann Pratt, Director of Policy and Partnerships, Child First
Committee on Children
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Good afternoon, Senator Bartolomeo and Representative Urban, and members of the Committee on Children. My name is Ann Pratt, Director of Policy & Partnerships at Child First. I am submitting this testimony jointly with Dr. Darcy Lowell, Founder & CEO of Child First, an evidence-based, two-generation, early childhood intervention serving Connecticut's most vulnerable young children and their families.

We are in full support of HB 6664 - An act to study the health of children in the state; SB 839 - An act to study the various mental, emotional and physical issues that are faced by children in the state; and SB 840 - An act to study the effects of the programs offered by Department of Children and Families that address the well-being of children in the state.

Child First supports the thorough and comprehensive study of children's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable young children from birth through 5 years of age, who are experiencing multiple challenges in their environments, such as **maternal depression, child trauma, domestic violence, substance abuse or homelessness**. We know from the research on "toxic stress" and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that this type of chronic stress damages the developing brain leading to long term disability in child mental health, learning, and physical health. Finding these children and **intervening early** can prevent these very negative outcomes, saving our state millions of dollars.

It is our hope and strong recommendation that, as a result of the studies recommended in these bills, the following concrete benefits can be produced for Connecticut's young children and their families:

- 1) A clear strategy is created for screening of risk conditions in the environment which lead to significant mental health, health, and cognitive problems, as articulated above
- 2) If unmet social-emotional/mental health needs for young children are discovered, a clear commitment is made to expand the capacity for evidence-based, trauma-informed early childhood mental health interventions
- 3) Informed by these studies, the state increases its commitment to implement mental health treatment for young children that is developmentally appropriate and focuses on the relationship between children and their primary caregivers
- 4) The state develops an early childhood mental health system, which includes a continuum of evidence-based interventions from low to high intensity, to efficiently meet the level of family need, delivered in a variety of family-friendly settings
- 5) In order to ensure adequate intervention and treatment for the mental, social, and emotional needs of our young children, early childhood, evidence-based mental health services in the home are covered by Medicaid and commercial insurance

- 6) The state ensures that interventions include addressing parental challenges – like depression, substance abuse, and domestic violence – because this adversity is proven toxic to the emotional, cognitive, and physical development of young children

We strongly recommend that all of these study mechanisms created through this legislation include early childhood, developmental, and mental health experts from both within and **outside** of the state system to evaluate and assess the efficacy and developmental appropriateness of interventions for young children.

We encourage members of this committee to ensure that this legislation helps to strengthen and **expand the capacity** of the high quality and successful early childhood mental health interventions that currently serve Connecticut’s youngest and most vulnerable children and their parents.

I want to thank you most sincerely for this opportunity to provide support for HB 6664, SB 840 and SB 839.