



External Peer Review

A Child's Road to Resilience:

The Science Behind the Importance of Nurturing Relationships in Child and Youth Development

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Peer Review authored by Dr Bridget Kearney and Dr Lacey McNary, McNary Group; January 2026

This review affirms *A Child's Road to Resilience: The Science Behind the Importance of Nurturing Relationships in Child and Youth Development* as a credible, accurate, and ethically framed contribution to the field. The report reflects current understandings of neuroplasticity, stress regulation, attachment, and resilience, while avoiding deterministic or deficit-oriented narratives. Of particular strength is its consistent emphasis on nurturing relationships as a protective and reparative force, along with accessible language and applied examples that shift the narrative away from individual blame and toward family-centered, trauma-informed approaches. The report's holistic focus on supporting whole families, rather than children in isolation, aligns well with contemporary family-systems and relational frameworks. This peer review validates these core contributions while identifying opportunities to further strengthen global relevance, evidentiary depth, and applied impact.

This peer review was conducted by two external reviewers affiliated with McNary Group, a Louisville-based research and evaluation firm specializing in equity-centered, community-informed evaluation, strategic planning, and applied research for nonprofit and government partners. Brief reviewer biographies are provided in Appendix B.

Description of the Report and Scope of Review

A Child's Road to Resilience was published by SOS Children's Villages International, a global organization with more than 75 years of experience in child protection, alternative care, and family strengthening. The report synthesizes research from neuroscience, psychology, psychiatry, and social work to demonstrate why nurturing relationships are foundational to child and youth development and how such relationships support healing and resilience across the life course. The authors, Tyko Granberger and Mary Brezovich, effectively leverage SOS Children's Villages' extensive organizational experience across diverse cultural and geographic contexts, grounding the synthesis in practice-informed understanding of child well-being.

The publication focuses on several interrelated domains, including brain development and neuroplasticity, attachment theory and caregiving, serve-and-return interactions, caregiver mental

health, intergenerational trauma, and resilience. The stated purpose of the report is not to generate new empirical findings, but to translate and synthesize interdisciplinary research for a broad audience that includes practitioners, policymakers, advocates, funders, and others working in child- and family-serving systems.

This peer review evaluates the report's scientific accuracy and use of evidence, clarity and coherence of synthesis, transparency of methods and limitations, practical relevance for intended audiences, and ethical framing and accessibility. It does not reanalyze primary data or assess implementation fidelity.

Authority and Credibility

SOS Children's Villages International is well positioned to commission and disseminate a synthesis of research on nurturing relationships given its global mission and extensive practice experience in child protection, family strengthening, and alternative care. The authors demonstrate familiarity with core bodies of literature in neuroscience, developmental psychology, attachment theory, and trauma research. Institutional credibility is further supported by an extensive bibliography that includes landmark longitudinal studies, meta-analyses, and foundational texts widely cited in the field.

The manuscript generally avoids overstatement and appropriately situates emerging areas of research, reinforcing trust among policy, practice, and funding audiences. Overall, the organization and authors are credible and appropriately situated to produce a synthesis-oriented publication of this nature.

Methodology and Transparency

The report is based on an extensive desk review of peer-reviewed and academic literature spanning neuroscience, psychology, psychiatry, and social work. The authors are explicit that this publication does not constitute a systematic review, which is an important and appropriate clarification given its purpose and scope.

The authors also transparently acknowledge that many relevant contextual factors, such as nutrition, education systems, community infrastructure, and broader economic and policy conditions, remain largely out of scope in order to maintain focus on relational dynamics. This clarity helps readers understand the report's boundaries and analytic focus, though several sections would benefit from more consistent attention to how these structural conditions shape and constrain relational caregiving.

One area where transparency could be strengthened relates to the case stories included in the report. While these narratives are ethically anonymized, the methodology underlying their selection and documentation is not fully described. Clarifying whether these stories are illustrative examples drawn from practice, qualitative case studies, or composites would strengthen methodological clarity.

In addition to peer-reviewed academic sources, the report would benefit from more explicit acknowledgment of how practitioner knowledge, grey literature, and community-based evidence inform the synthesis. Given SOS Children's Villages' engagement with global practitioner networks and field-building organizations such as the Better Care Network and ISPCAN, recognizing these practice-informed sources would further enhance credibility. The report could also be strengthened through the inclusion of additional qualitative evidence collected through more systematic methods, allowing for triangulation with existing sources.

Quality of Evidence and Analysis

The evidence base supporting the report's conclusions is generally strong. The authors draw on well-established studies such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, and the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, alongside more recent meta-analyses and longitudinal research. These sources are appropriately used to support claims about the importance of secure relationships, responsive caregiving, and the potential for healing across the lifespan.

The analysis follows a logical and accessible progression, moving from brain development to attachment, caregiving practices, trauma, and healing. This coherence is a notable strength of the publication.

However, several areas would benefit from further refinement. While the bibliography is robust, some sections, particularly those summarizing neuroscience concepts, would benefit from more frequent in-text citations or brief quotations to strengthen credibility and avoid statements that may appear overly generalized. Cultural scope is another area for improvement. The authors acknowledge that much of the research reviewed originates from North American and European contexts. Given SOS Children's Villages' global mission, this limitation is very significant and could be more consistently foregrounded throughout the report rather than primarily confined to introductory sections. Finally, while Western research dominance is a real constraint in many fields, there is relevant scholarship on attachment, caregiving, and resilience from non-Western contexts and global majority authors (some of which is referenced in the broader literature section below). More intentional inclusion of this work would strengthen the report's global relevance.

Connection to Broader Literature and Identified Gaps

The manuscript aligns closely with foundational and contemporary developmental scholarship emphasizing the relational foundations of emotional regulation, resilience, and long-term well-being. Its framing of secure relationships as central to development is consistent with attachment theory and includes early cross-cultural observational work conducted in East Africa that informed the field prior to its widespread Western application (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). The report's relational framing of resilience similarly reflects a broader shift away from trait-based models toward developmental and ecological perspectives that emphasize the role of supportive relationships and context over time, including community-rooted framings in majority world settings (Bakaraki et al., 2024; Theron et al., 2013).

At the same time, the manuscript draws primarily on scholarship produced in North American and European settings, despite the global scope of SOS Children's Villages' work. Cross-cultural research from non-Western and global majority contexts highlights that secure attachment and resilience are supported through culturally specific pathways, including communal caregiving, extended kin networks, collective responsibility for childrearing, and more (Alavi et al., 2020; Angwenyi et al., 2024; Bakaraki et al., 2024; Nsamenang, 1992; Theron et al., 2013).

Although the report appropriately narrows its scope to relational dynamics, structural determinants such as poverty, displacement, and systemic inequities could be more consistently carried as a thematic throughline. These conditions are not simply background context; they often shape caregiver stress, stability, and access to support, and therefore materially influence the relational environments in which attachment forms and resilience is cultivated. Returning to this thread at key moments would strengthen the manuscript's explanatory power and intersectional grounding without requiring a full structural analysis.

Accuracy of Neuroscience and Trauma Claims

Overall, the neuroscience and trauma-related claims presented in the report are accurate and consistent with current scientific understanding. The manuscript avoids deterministic or pathologizing language and emphasizes that healing and growth remain possible across the life course. Claims are generally well supported, and emerging areas of research are presented with appropriate caution. In this context, deterministic framing refers to interpretations that present early adversity or attachment patterns as fixed, inevitable, or irreversible outcomes, a framing the report consistently avoids.

Structure, Clarity, and Accessibility

One of the strongest features of the report is its clarity and accessibility. It was obviously written with accessibility as a guiding principle and intended to reach audiences who may be less familiar with child development research. The report is well organized, with a clear chapter structure and summaries that reinforce key takeaways. Technical concepts are explained using accessible language and effective metaphors, such as serve and return, which are likely to resonate with practitioners and policymakers.

The use of case stories humanizes the research without overstating anecdotal evidence, and the visual design supports readability. Additional graphics or visual summaries, particularly in neuroscience-heavy sections, could further enhance comprehension for non-academic audiences, depending on format and length constraints.

Contribution, Implementation, and Practical Relevance

The report makes a meaningful contribution by translating complex interdisciplinary research into a form that is usable for practice, policy advocacy, and funding decisions. Rather than prescribing rigid program models, it articulates evidence-informed principles such as secure relationships, responsive caregiving, and caregiver support that are adaptable across cultural and organizational contexts. By translating interdisciplinary research into a coherent relational framework, the manuscript offers a shared evidence base that can be used across child- and family-serving systems to align language, priorities, and approaches.

In practice, the report is well suited for organizations designing or strengthening trauma-informed and prevention-oriented programming, including family strengthening initiatives, alternative care, foster care, and mentorship models. To elaborate on its applied usefulness, the report could also be particularly well suited for systems leaders and administrators in child welfare and related public systems who are responsible for shaping organizational priorities, standards of care, and accountability frameworks. Beyond the child development field, the synthesis may also support community leaders and practitioners working in adjacent domains because it informs prevention and resilience-oriented approaches without requiring deep disciplinary expertise.

Overall, the report balances scientific rigor with applied clarity, positioning it as a practical framing document for policy dialogue, program design, workforce development, and funding strategy.

Ethics and Transparency

Ethical considerations are handled appropriately throughout the report. Case stories are clearly anonymized, and lived experiences are presented respectfully, without sensationalizing trauma or positioning individual hardship as illustrative evidence in place of research. The authors demonstrate

care in how vulnerability is represented, maintaining a focus on systems, relationships, and support rather than individual deficit or pathology.

In addition, the report reflects ethical attentiveness in its avoidance of deterministic framing and its emphasis on possibility, repair, and agency. By consistently highlighting the role of nurturing relationships and supportive environments, the manuscript avoids reinforcing narratives of blame directed at children, caregivers, or families. While broader structural inequities are largely outside the report's stated scope, the authors' relational framing supports an ethical orientation that recognizes responsibility as collective rather than individual. Overall, the report demonstrates a thoughtful and responsible approach to ethical representation, transparency, and audience impact.

Overall Assessment and Recommendations

Strengths: The publication offers a strong interdisciplinary synthesis grounded in credible research. It provides clear translation of evidence into practice and policy relevance, uses accessible language, and demonstrates thoughtful structure and ethical framing. Accessibility is a particular strength. The report is written in a way that is usable not only for child development specialists, but also for practitioners and systems leaders outside the child development field (for example, in housing, immigration, education, and justice) who need a clear, evidence-informed framework to their practice.

Areas for Additional Context or Caution: The report would benefit from more prominent acknowledgment of cultural and geographic limitations of published research, greater intentional inclusion or discussion of non-Western, global majority scholarship, continued research regarding epigenetic claims, and stronger citation density in select sections, especially those pertaining to neuroscience.

Recommendations: A Child's Road to Resilience effectively communicates the central importance of nurturing relationships in child and youth development. Readers and implementers are encouraged to use it as a shared evidence base and framing document, while remaining mindful of its scope and limitations. Future iterations or companion publications might deepen its global relevance by more fully engaging diverse cultural perspectives and structural determinants of caregiving and resilience. Additionally, more intentionally incorporating SOS Children's Villages' global experience, including the insights of practitioners across contexts, would strengthen future publications and further leverage SOS's practice-informed evidence base.

Appendix A: Chapter-Level Analysis

This section provides a brief chapter-by-chapter synthesis and analysis of the manuscript, highlighting key strengths as well as areas where additional clarity, sourcing, or contextual framing would strengthen the report's overall rigor and relevance.

Chapter 1: Brain Architecture and Development: The opening chapter provides an accessible overview of brain development, neuroplasticity, and the role of early experiences in shaping neural architecture. The authors effectively use plain language to explain complex concepts, including network-based understandings of brain function and the malleability of the developing brain. This accessibility is a clear strength given the report's intended audience. However, several claims related to emotional regulation and caregiver capacity are introduced without sufficient explanation or citation, and the chapter would benefit from greater citation density overall. Additionally, while adverse childhood experiences are discussed, greater attention to cultural context would strengthen the chapter's global applicability..

Chapter 2: Attachment: The chapter on attachment is one of the more clearly articulated sections of the report. Key attachment concepts are explained, and the authors consistently avoid deterministic framing, emphasizing the possibility of change and healing over time. The chapter appropriately acknowledges cultural variation in parenting and attachment practices. That said, the discussion would benefit from more specificity when referencing early attachment research and greater engagement with existing cross-cultural attachment scholarship, particularly given the global scope of SOS Children's Villages' work.

Chapter 3: Responsive Caregiving and Serve-and-Return: This chapter is among the most practically useful in the manuscript. The "serve-and-return" framework is clearly explained, highly transferable, and well suited for practitioner training, workforce development, and policy communication. The extension of responsive caregiving beyond early childhood to adolescents and young adults is particularly effective, broadening the chapter's relevance. While the framing is strong, additional acknowledgment of culturally diverse caregiving norms and communal child-rearing practices could further strengthen the analysis.

Chapter 4: Mental Health of Parents and Other Caregivers: Chapter 4 stands out as a particular strength of the manuscript. The authors clearly articulate the relationship between caregiver mental health and child well-being, using applied examples that shift the narrative away from individual blame and toward family-centered, trauma-informed approaches. The holistic emphasis on supporting whole families, rather than children in isolation, is well aligned with contemporary family-systems frameworks. Areas for strengthening include clearer definition of "self-concept," as well as more consistent acknowledgment of how structural factors such as poverty, material insecurity, and race intersect with caregiver stress. While these factors are noted as beyond the report's primary scope, their centrality to parenting stress suggests they warrant more consistent reference throughout the chapter.

Chapter 5: Intergenerational Trauma and Epigenetics: The chapter on intergenerational trauma presents a distinction between established behavioral transmission pathways and emerging epigenetic research. The authors appropriately caution readers regarding the evolving nature of epigenetic science. However, the prominence of this chapter relative to the current strength of the evidence base raises questions about whether epigenetics might be more appropriately framed as a subsection or future research direction rather than a standalone focus. Greater emphasis on non-Western and Indigenous healing frameworks would also enhance inclusivity. As noted in the broader literature, emerging findings

related to epigenetic mechanisms warrant continued caution and proportional framing, particularly given the field's ongoing development (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

Chapter 6: Healing Through Secure Relationships: This chapter offers some of the strongest empirical grounding in the report, drawing on comparative literature and international examples, including research from alternative care and conflict-affected contexts. The use of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project is particularly effective in demonstrating the potential for healing through stable, nurturing relationships. The chapter has clear implications for foster care, alternative care, and mentorship models and serves as a compelling section for policymakers and advocates.

Chapter 7: Resilience: The final chapter provides a useful synthesis that reinforces the report's central thesis. The authors clearly frame resilience as relational and developmental rather than inherent or trait-based, aligning with contemporary resilience scholarship and avoiding individual-blame or "grit" narratives. While the chapter could benefit from brief contextual framing of this conceptual shift, it effectively bridges earlier chapters and connects relational development to policy and practice implications. Its emphasis on collective and relational protective factors enhances the manuscript's relevance in current social contexts. This framing aligns with contemporary resilience scholarship that conceptualizes resilience as an ordinary, relational process shaped by social context rather than a fixed individual trait (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011).

Appendix B: Reviewer Biographies

M. Lacey McNary, DSW, MSW is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of McNary Group and an Associate Professor at the University of Louisville. Her work focuses on child welfare policy, systems reform, and equity-centered evaluation.

Bridget Virginia Kearney, PhD is Director of Research and Evaluation at McNary Group and a community-based researcher specializing in qualitative and participatory methods related to education, trauma, and community resilience.

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