

NORTH STAR POLICY AGENDA:

2026 FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN PRENATAL TO AGE 5

First 5 California’s North Star Policy Agenda guides the organization’s state and federal policy advocacy to advance trauma-informed, healing-centered, and culturally responsive systems that support children prenatal to age 5 and their families. This agenda aligns with First 5 California’s Mission, Strategic Plan, and Audacious Goal, and centers the importance of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments (SSNREs) in early development. To sustain this work, the agenda supports braiding and leveraging funding to provide fiscal resiliency to the First 5 Network—including the State Commission, the First 5 Association, and all 58 county commissions—ensuring every family has equitable access to critical services that help children thrive.



DETAILED POLICY PRIORITIES

STRENGTHENING SAFE, STABLE, NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS AND ENVIRONMENTS (SSNREs)

Policy Focus: Prevent toxic stress in early childhood by increasing awareness, strengthening systems, and expanding access to resources that support safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments.

Policy Priorities:

- Support efforts that **increase understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress**, recognizing their impacts on brain development, physical health, and long-term well-being.
- Advance **education and outreach efforts** that make information about ACEs and toxic stress engaging and accessible to families, caregivers, and communities.
- Champion **systems change** that embeds prevention and healing approaches into California's family-serving systems.
- Expand access to **resources for families**, including ACEs screenings in health care settings and training for providers.
- Promote strategies that strengthen **safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments (SSNREs)** as a buffer against toxic stress and intergenerational trauma.
- Support statewide efforts, such as **Stronger Starts**, that increase awareness of toxic stress and encourage families to take action to manage and reduce its effects.
- Promote balanced, developmentally-appropriate approaches to technology use in early childhood that support healthy routines, relationships, and overall well-being.
- Support science-driven, non-judgmental guidance, media literacy, and parent education that help families navigate technology in ways that prioritize connection and child development.

ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL CHILDCARE

Policy Focus: Advance affordable childcare as a universal necessity and economic imperative that supports families, children's development, and California's economy.

Policy Priorities:

- Champion **public investment** in childcare to reduce or eliminate cost barriers for families across the income spectrum, prioritizing marginalized families first.
- Support policies that promote **universal access**, ensuring every family can enroll in a setting that meets their family's needs without income-based exclusions.
- Advance a childcare system emphasizing **safe environments, supportive relationships** with families, and care that **meets children where they are**.
- Promote **choice and mixed delivery**, allowing families to access centers, family childcare homes, community-based programs, or friend and family neighbor care, that meet diverse cultural and work-schedule needs.
- Treat childcare as **essential infrastructure** that supports workforce participation, family economic stability, and statewide economic growth.
- Build public understanding of the **economic and social benefits** of affordable childcare, including improved child outcomes, family outcomes, and state economic returns.

PROTECTING VULNERABLE FAMILIES

Policy Focus: Protect young children, including immigrant and mixed-status families, from fear, instability, and misinformation that compromise healthy development.

Policy Priorities:

- Address barriers created by **misinformation about eligibility** for services and programs that impact low-income families.
- Reduce **fear of accessing programs or resources** due to immigration or income status.
- Support strategies that overcome **language and cultural barriers** that isolate parents and children from community and programs.
- Advance the First 5 California initiative, **Children FIRST, (Children, Families, Immigrants, and Refugees: Support and Tools)** to ensure children feel safe, supported, and included regardless of background or status.
- **Invest in trusted, community-led programs and partnerships with local leaders and family resource centers** to provide accurate information, resources, compassion, and opportunities to ensure services meet families where they are and respond to local needs.

SUPPORTING MATERNAL, PRENATAL, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH

Policy Focus: Ensure children prenatal through age 5 and their families have equitable access to comprehensive, culturally-responsive health care and services to support healthy development, prevention, and long-term well-being.

Policy Priorities:

- Support policies that **expand screenings, prevention, and early identification of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**.
- Strengthen access to **behavioral and mental health supports** for young children and caregivers.
- Advance **prenatal and postpartum care**, including home visitation programs and doula services.
- Support **preventive and intervention-based care**, including increased access to oral health services for underserved families.
- Protect and expand access to **nutrition programs** and services that support healthy early development.

How Will We Do This?

First 5 California will advance its policy pillars by strengthening partnerships across state agencies, community-based organizations, the First 5 network, and the private sector, and by **advancing and supporting state and federal legislation** that prevents toxic stress, expands affordable and accessible childcare, protects vulnerable families, and strengthens maternal, prenatal, and early childhood health. When federal actions directly impact children prenatal through age 5, First 5 California will engage to strengthen early childhood systems and defend against policies that harm young children and their families.