

Defining, Creating and Sustaining Optimal Maternal Health



A Statement from the Raising the Bar Expert Advisory Group

Defining Optimal Maternal Health

Optimal maternal health encompasses the health and well-being of a birthing person and infant. It involves physical, mental, and social well-being and applies before, during, and after the physiologic process of childbearing. Furthermore it encompasses reproductive justice, personal agency, and bodily autonomy of all birthing people, and freedom from bias, racism, and discrimination.

- **Physical health** is not merely the absence of disease, but overall wellness and ability to thrive, including contributing to one's family, community, and society as desired.
- **Mental health** encompasses emotional and psychological well-being and resilience, and may include, among other things, freedom from violence, trauma, and conditions such as chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and alcohol and other substance-use disorders.
- **Social well-being** means individuals and families are born, grow up, live, learn, work, play and age in communities with socioeconomic structures and conditions that support their physical and mental health and promote their agency, autonomy, resilience, and ability to thrive.

Resilience is an indispensable component of optimal maternal health as it enables people to safely survive and thrive, and enhances their ability to cope in the face of chronic and episodic physical, emotional, and social stressors and trauma.

Optimal maternal health contributes to safe, nurturing, warm, responsive infant-caregiver relationships that are crucial for the child's lifelong well-being. The birth parent is the child's first environment and often the most essential infant caregiver. The pregnancy, birth, postpartum, newborn, and infant periods are all crucial foundations for lifelong well-being and involve a number of conditions that can contribute optimal health.

For optimal maternal health, future childbearing people and parents must be born, grow up, live, learn, work, play and age in health-generating conditions

Optimal maternal health involves honoring and respecting the cultural practices, beliefs and traditions of individuals, families, and communities and meets the social needs that include, but are not limited to: economic security; safe workplaces, neighborhoods, and homes; nourishing food; accessible and reliable transportation; strong social networks; and quality education, including health literacy.

Optimal maternal health is rooted in good health status prior to pregnancy, anchored in healthy communities and healthy families, and enabled by health-supporting structures, policies, programs, and practices.

Conditions for Optimal Maternal Health

Optimal maternal health requires **reproductive justice**, which posits that every person has the right:

1. To decide when or if to become pregnant, or continue a pregnancy;
2. To determine the conditions under which they will birth and create family; and
3. To parent any children they have with dignity, with the necessary social supports, in safe environments and healthy communities, and without fear of violence from individuals or the government.

Optimal maternal health requires the elimination of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which often lead to lifelong trauma of childbearing people and parents. Pathways to prevent ACEs can include improving the conditions and environments that reach back to before a person is born, including the impact of intergenerational trauma and historical policy decisions that either suppressed or denied opportunities to live a healthy life.

Optimal maternal health requires dismantling the toxic effects of the various levels of racism (including structural, systemic, institutional, and interpersonal), physical and emotional abuse, and other oppressive structural inequities and forms of bias

Communities of color and others adversely affected by intersecting structures of disadvantage must be included and prioritized when designing, implementing, and evaluating the research, education, practices, and policies needed to achieve equity in maternal health.

Centering the lived experiences and expertise of those most affected must drive these efforts.

Achieving optimal maternal health requires truly accessible, high-quality, affordable, culturally congruent, and comprehensive health care, in addition to solving the broader structural inequities that undermine health

Health care must be person-centered, affirming, respectful, supportive, and confidence-building and must provide the information and the options people need to make informed decisions about their health and health care, based on the best available and applicable evidence that recognizes deep historical biases and gaps in evidence generation and analysis.

To truly raise the bar in health care and achieve optimal maternal health, the health care system must center and prioritize maternal and infant care given its long-term impact across the life course.

Health care that supports optimal maternal health must encompass longitudinal primary care before and after giving birth, including comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care, first-line primary preventive maternity care, more specialized maternity care for those with higher risks and complications, and mental health and substance use disorder services and support. It must also take on a more expansive and concrete role in ensuring that the social needs of birthing people and infants are met and fully integrated within health care.

We thank [Sister Song](#) and the many Black women leaders who have worked to create, refine, and promote the Reproductive Justice framework, which was foundational to the work of the Expert Advisory Group in developing this definition of optimal maternal health.

About the Raising the Bar Project and Its Expert Advisory Group

Raising the Bar: Health Care's Transforming Role was launched by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to help clarify and transform health care's role in achieving optimal well-being for all the people and communities it serves. The Expert Advisory Group includes about 20 individuals who have a diverse set of competencies and perspectives from relevant sectors and vantage points to develop robust, visionary, and comprehensive guidance that advances maternal and newborn care. The group reflects and represents multiple identities: race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, geographic region and lived experiences. In addition, members serve as ambassadors for important constituencies, such as rural health, maternal mental health, social services, public health, core clinical groups, and safety-net health systems. The positions in this statement do not necessarily reflect the positions of members' organizations.

Learn more at RTBhealthcare.org/committee-members.