
POLICY & RESEARCH BRIEF

Early Childhood & Environmental Justice Initiative
EMPOWER CHILDREN FOR SUCCESS (ECFS)

Volume 1, Number 2 | Fitchburg, MA | JULY 2026

The Case for a Statewide Calming Kit Initiative

Strengthening Child Well-Being Through Community-Based Psychological First Aid

By Marites MacLean

President & Founder, Empower Children for Success (ECFS)

Former Member, Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care Advisory Council (2015–2021)

Key Facts

- **Biological Embedding of Environmental Stress:** Children living in Environmental Justice (EJ) communities are often exposed to cumulative environmental burdens, including industrial noise, chronic stress, and fine particulate air pollution (PM_{2.5}), that may contribute to prolonged physiological stress responses and affect emotional regulation, behavior, and overall well-being.^{1,2}
- **Pediatric Behavioral Health Crisis:** Massachusetts faces significant behavioral health workforce shortages and limited service capacity, contributing to lengthy delays in access to care for children and families.^{3,6,7}
- **Severe Access Barriers:** According to the Massachusetts Health Policy Commission, 76% of households with children needing mental health services reported difficulty obtaining care.³
- **Extended Treatment Delays:** Families in Central Massachusetts may wait 20 to 26 weeks to access outpatient pediatric behavioral health services, leaving many children without timely support during periods of emotional distress.⁷
- **The Human Cost of the Treatment Gap:** When behavioral health needs go unmet, children experiencing dysregulation may encounter school disciplinary actions, crisis-system involvement, emergency department utilization, or other punitive responses rather than therapeutic interventions.⁸
- **Upstream Psychological First Aid:** The Calming Kit Project provides durable, therapeutic-grade sensory-regulation tools designed to help children reduce physiological hyperarousal, strengthen self-regulation skills, and navigate periods of emotional distress while waiting for clinical services.⁹
- **Regional Collaborative Network:** Through partnerships with behavioral health agencies, educational organizations, family-support programs, and emergency-response networks,

ECFS supports children and families across Central Massachusetts and the North Quabbin region.⁹

- **Scalable Statewide Prevention Model:** The Calming Kit Project demonstrates a low-cost, prevention-focused intervention that can be replicated statewide to support children and families experiencing behavioral health challenges during extended treatment delays.⁹
- **Health Equity Opportunity:** A statewide Calming Kit Initiative could help ensure that access to emotional-regulation supports is not determined by a child's zip code, household income, geographic location, or ability to access private behavioral health services.^{8,9}
- **Policy Opportunity:** By integrating Calming Kits into schools, early childhood programs, pediatric settings, family-resource centers, and emergency-response systems, Massachusetts can strengthen child well-being, behavioral health equity, and crisis-prevention efforts by establishing a statewide Calming Kit Initiative that provides immediate, trauma-informed supports to children and families while they await access to behavioral health services..^{5,9}

Policy Takeaway

Massachusetts can strengthen child well-being and behavioral health equity by establishing a statewide Calming Kit Initiative that provides immediate, trauma-informed supports to children and families while they await access to behavioral health services.

Executive Summary & Policy Context

How do cumulative environmental burdens, behavioral health workforce shortages, and toxic stress affect child development in Environmental Justice (EJ) communities?

This brief examines public health disparities affecting children in Environmental Justice neighborhoods across Central Massachusetts and the North Quabbin region. Particular attention is given to *The Calming Kit Project*, an initiative led by Empower Children for Success (ECFS) in partnership with regional behavioral health, educational, and emergency-response organizations. The project serves as a case study in how upstream, non-pharmacological psychological first aid can help mitigate the physiological and emotional effects of environmental stress exposure and delayed access to behavioral health care.¹

Growing evidence suggests that environmental exposures, including ambient noise, chronic stress, and fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) are not merely physical hazards; they can function as biological stressors that affect emotional regulation, behavior, and overall well-being.^{1,2}

When combined with prolonged wait times for pediatric behavioral health services, these stressors may contribute to increased behavioral crises, family distress, and greater reliance on emergency-response systems.^{3, 6, 7}

The Calming Kit Project was developed to provide immediate, practical support to children and families during periods of behavioral health distress. Through therapeutic sensory-regulation tools,

caregiver guidance, and community partnerships, the initiative seeks to strengthen resilience, reduce crisis escalation, and support emotional regulation while families await access to formal services.⁹

Beyond its regional implementation, the project demonstrates a scalable model for addressing behavioral health inequities across Massachusetts. As workforce shortages, extended treatment delays, and environmental stressors continue to affect children throughout the Commonwealth, a statewide Calming Kit Initiative could provide an equitable, prevention-focused strategy that strengthens family supports while reducing reliance on emergency departments, crisis-intervention systems, and other costly downstream responses.

The Calming Kit Model: A Scalable Prevention Strategy

While initially implemented through partnerships across Central Massachusetts and the North Quabbin region, The Calming Kit Project was intentionally designed for replication.⁹ The model leverages existing community infrastructure including schools, behavioral health providers, family resource centers, early childhood programs, hospitals, law enforcement agencies, and emergency-response networks to efficiently distribute evidence-informed sensory-regulation tools to children and families experiencing emotional distress.

Each Calming Kit contains durable, therapeutic-grade sensory supports designed to help children regulate stress responses, reduce sensory overload, and strengthen emotional self-regulation.⁹ The kits are intended for use in homes, schools, early childhood programs, crisis-response settings, and community-based family-support initiatives.

The project consists of three integrated components:

Sensory Regulation Tools

Children receive sensory supports designed to reduce physiological hyperarousal, promote self-regulation, and restore emotional balance during periods of stress or crisis.^{1,5}

Caregiver and Community Training

Parents, caregivers, educators, and community partners receive guidance on co-regulation strategies and practical approaches for supporting children experiencing emotional or behavioral distress.^{5, 9}

Regional Collaborative Distribution

Through partnerships with behavioral health providers, schools, family-support organizations, and emergency-response networks, Calming Kits can be rapidly distributed to households experiencing crisis situations.⁹

Together, these components offer a practical, low-cost approach to strengthening behavioral health supports while helping bridge the gap between environmental stress exposure and access to clinical care.

Why Massachusetts Needs a Statewide Calming Kit Initiative

Behavioral health workforce shortages, prolonged treatment wait times, environmental stress exposure, and inequitable access to care affect children and families across Massachusetts, not only in Central Massachusetts. Families throughout the Commonwealth face substantial barriers to timely behavioral health services, particularly in communities experiencing economic hardship, environmental burdens, or provider shortages.^{3,6,7}

A statewide Calming Kit Initiative would provide Massachusetts with a practical, prevention-focused strategy for supporting children during periods of emotional distress and behavioral crisis. By equipping families, educators, healthcare providers, schools, and first responders with sensory-regulation tools and trauma-informed resources, the Commonwealth could strengthen early intervention efforts while reducing dependence on emergency and crisis-response systems.^{5,9}

Potential statewide benefits include:

- Providing immediate support during extended behavioral health treatment delays.⁷
- Strengthening prevention and early intervention efforts.⁵
- Expanding access to practical, evidence-informed sensory-regulation tools.⁹
- Supporting Environmental Justice communities and historically underserved populations.⁸
- Reducing reliance on emergency departments and crisis-response systems.^{2,3}
- Leveraging existing schools, healthcare providers, family resource centers, and community-based organizations.⁹
- Advancing health equity by ensuring that access to emotional-regulation supports is not determined by a child's zip code.⁸

A statewide initiative would also strengthen collaboration across education, healthcare, public health, public safety, and community-based organizations, creating a more coordinated and responsive support network for children and families.

Addressing environmental stress and behavioral health disparities requires coordinated action across education, healthcare, public health, and community systems. The following policy recommendations provide a framework for statewide implementation.

Actionable Policy Roadmap

To address the intersection of environmental health, behavioral health equity, and childhood stress, state, municipal, healthcare, and philanthropic leaders should consider the following policy strategies:

Establish a Statewide Calming Kit Initiative

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts should establish a statewide Calming Kit Initiative to provide children, families, educators, childcare providers, and first responders with immediate access to evidence-informed sensory-regulation tools during periods of emotional distress and behavioral health crisis. Distribution should prioritize Environmental Justice communities, high-poverty neighborhoods, and regions experiencing significant behavioral health workforce shortages.⁸

Expand Public and Philanthropic Investment in Community-Based Prevention

State agencies, healthcare systems, municipalities, and philanthropic organizations should support the expansion of Calming Kit programs as part of broader prevention, resilience-building, and trauma-informed care strategies. Modest investments in sensory-regulation resources can help stabilize families, reduce crisis escalation, and improve access to behavioral health supports.⁹

Integrate Calming Kits into School, Early Childhood, and Emergency-Response Systems

Schools, early childhood programs, pediatric practices, police departments, emergency medical services, and community organizations should incorporate Calming Kits into crisis-response and de-escalation protocols. Consistent training can establish a shared framework for supporting children experiencing emotional and behavioral distress.⁹

Incorporate Emotional Regulation Supports into Environmental Justice Planning

Municipalities and regional health coalitions should incorporate emotional-regulation supports into Environmental Justice planning and remediation efforts. Environmental health initiatives should recognize the relationship between environmental conditions, toxic stress, and child well-being.^{1, 8}

Strengthen Community-Based Behavioral Health Infrastructure

Federal, state, and local policymakers should continue investing in community-based behavioral health services while expanding prevention-focused interventions that support children and families before crises require costly emergency or institutional responses.^{3, 6, 7}

Future Empirical Research Agenda

As Massachusetts considers broader implementation of prevention-focused behavioral health supports, additional research will be needed to evaluate effectiveness, equity, cost savings, and long-term outcomes.

To better understand the effectiveness of sensory-regulation interventions and inform future policy development, researchers should prioritize the following areas of study.

- **Longitudinal Child Well-Being Outcomes:** Conduct longitudinal studies examining whether access to Calming Kits contributes to improvements in emotional regulation, behavioral functioning, school engagement, and overall child well-being over time.
- **Crisis Reduction and Service Utilization Analysis:** Evaluate whether access to sensory-regulation supports reduces reliance on emergency departments, behavioral health crisis

teams, law enforcement interventions, school disciplinary referrals, or other crisis-response systems.

- **Environmental Stress and Regulation Research:** Investigate the relationship between environmental stressors, including noise exposure, heat, housing instability, and air pollution and the effectiveness of sensory-regulation interventions in mitigating stress responses among children living in Environmental Justice communities.
- **Cost-Benefit and Return-on-Investment Studies:** Examine the economic impacts of statewide Calming Kit deployment by comparing program costs with potential reductions in emergency healthcare utilization, crisis intervention services, school disciplinary actions, and other publicly funded systems.
- **Caregiver and Educator Effectiveness Studies:** Assess how caregiver training, educator implementation, and community-based coaching influence the effectiveness of Calming Kits and child outcomes across home, school, and community settings.
- **Statewide Implementation and Equity Evaluation:** Study how a statewide Calming Kit Initiative could be implemented across diverse communities, with particular attention to Environmental Justice populations, rural regions, multilingual families, and historically underserved communities.

Conclusion

The Calming Kit Project demonstrates how relatively modest investments in prevention-focused supports can generate meaningful benefits for children, families, schools, healthcare providers, and communities.⁹ While expanding access to clinical behavioral health services remains essential, children and families need practical supports today, not months from now.^{3,7}

A statewide Calming Kit Initiative would provide Massachusetts with a scalable, trauma-informed strategy for strengthening emotional regulation, supporting resilience, reducing crisis-system utilization, and improving outcomes for children across the Commonwealth. By pairing behavioral health equity with Environmental Justice priorities, Massachusetts has an opportunity to build a more responsive, preventive, and family-centered system of care, one that ensures every child has access to tools that support safety, emotional regulation, resilience, and well-being, regardless of income, geography, language, or zip code.^{8,9}

Works Cited

1. **National Institutes of Health (NIH) & ScienceDaily.** (2024). *Biological embedding of stress: Cortisol, fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), and HPA-axis regulation in children*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
2. **Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.** (2025). *Environmental exposures, air pollution, and pediatric mood-affective surges in emergency care settings*. Harvard University.
3. **Health Policy Commission (HPC).** (2025). *Annual Health Care Cost Trends and Care Access Barriers Report*. Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

4. Donzelli, G., Peraita-Costa, I., Linzalone, N., & Morales-Suárez-Varela, M. (2025). *Systematic review of prenatal exposure to PM_{2.5} and its chemical components and their effects on neurodevelopmental outcomes in neonates*. *Atmosphere*, 16(9), 1034.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/atmos16091034>

5. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (n.d.). *Toxic Stress*. Harvard University.

6. Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association (MHA). (2025). *Statewide Behavioral Health Workforce Vacancy Report*.

7. MassHealth & Children's Behavioral Health Advisory Council (CBHAC). (2025). *Annual Report on Pediatric Outpatient Therapy Wait Times and Capacity in Central Massachusetts*. Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

8. Pellow, D. N., et al. (2025). *Critical Environmental Justice and the Criminalization of Dysregulation in Disadvantaged Communities*. *Critical Environmental Justice Review*, 18(2), 88–104.

9. MacLean, M. (2026). *The Calming Kit Project: Building Emotional Resilience for Children in Moments That Matter*. Empower Children for Success (ECFS).