

EARLY CHILDHOOD



From before birth to age eight, early childhood experiences pave the way for lifelong health and resilience. However, the pressing challenges of climate change, from resource scarcity to pollution, are posing risks to young children and their caregivers, particularly in underserved communities. Given the importance of the early childhood sector to community well-being and economic growth, it is evident that these years cannot be overlooked in climate action plans.

Negative environmental factors amplified by climate change can significantly impact child development. Prenatal exposure to pollution, for instance, can result in lower lung volume in early childhood and impaired neurodevelopment in children. As climate change intensifies, these harmful outcomes and others, from preterm birth and developmental delays to long-term cardiovascular and respiratory issues, will become increasingly likely.

With a vast network reaching children and their families, including services like center-based child care, pediatric clinics, home-visiting, and early intervention programs, the early childhood sector is uniquely positioned to integrate climate solutions into its framework. Solutions such as access to green space and sustainable transportation options not only promote children's development but also contribute to climate resilience.

By integrating an early childhood perspective into climate action plans, cities can ensure that policies support the healthy growth and development of our youngest citizens while also addressing the pressing challenges of climate change. This dual focus can drive positive outcomes for children, caregivers, and the environment, setting the stage for a sustainable future.

FINDINGS

OVERALL 28 of 35 CAPs reviewed included some reference to young children, families, or child- and family- facing programs, most commonly in framing the impact of climate change on children

- **Development:** 6 CAPs noted the early childhood sector role as part of the development of the climate action plans
- **Framing:** 28 CAPs specifically named children in the framing of the climate action plans
- **Substance:** 6 CAPs included the early childhood sector in the substance of the climate action plans



Development: Only 6 cities explicitly included early childhood in the development of climate action plans

Early childhood professionals, including educators, caregivers, and healthcare providers, hold critical insight into the unique challenges climate change presents to their communities. They can help ensure climate adaptation and mitigation strategies meet the needs of families with young children, particularly under the strain of extreme weather and other climate-related threats. Their on-the-ground perspective can be instrumental in creating strategies that support children's health and well-being in a changing climate.

Despite their expertise, early childhood professionals frequently weren't recognized as key contributors to the development of city CAPs. Out of 35 climate action plans, Austin's stood alone in noting that the city explicitly sought out the perspectives of early childhood professionals during the planning stages. Moreover, the City of Austin also included child care at climate planning sessions to ensure such opportunities were accessible to the greatest number of people. The CAPs of five other cities — Houston, Indianapolis, Boston, Washington, D.C., and Kansas City, MO — noted the inclusion of early childhood professionals on advisory boards, but did not refer to the specific ways in which these individuals contributed to the plan's development.



The City of Austin Texas Sustainability Office, Austin Climate Equity Plan.

Framing: 28 cities referenced children in the framing of their climate action plans; 11 made a distinction between the needs of children in general and those of young children

Children often featured prominently as reasons for drafting climate action plans. Twenty-eight plans referred to the importance of preserving the future and ensuring the well-being of children, especially given their sensitivity to the effects of climate change.

Of those 28 plans, only 11 made a distinction between the relative risk of climate change to children in general and to young children. Of these 11 plans, four went on to describe the health and quality of life concerns of children under the age of eight as being different from those of other vulnerable communities, including those of older children.

Six plans (Milwaukee, WI, San Antonio, TX, Chicago, IL, Sacramento, CA, Washington, D.C., and Kansas City, MO) acknowledged pregnant people and/or developing fetuses as being especially sensitive to the effects of climate change.



BRIGHT SPOT: AUSTIN, TX

In the CAP planning process, Austin established a panel of Community Climate Ambassadors, a group that included high school students, community organizers, nonprofit leaders, educators, and representatives from [Mama Sana Vibrant Woman \(MSVM\)](#), a grassroots organization promoting access to quality prenatal and postnatal care for people of color. This paid, six-month [program](#) focused on those often overlooked in climate change discussions, particularly low-income communities, and communities of color.

During their tenure, the MSVM-affiliated ambassadors worked to identify the most pressing climate equity issues in their neighborhoods, ensuring their inclusion in the city's CAP. They also provided educational programming on topics such as the role of in-home air quality during the prenatal period.

Substance: 6 CAPs leveraged the early childhood sector in the substance of climate action plans

Despite the frequent reference to young children's futures to stress the urgency of climate action, most CAPs lacked strategies that directly addressed the early childhood sector. Only six cities recommended strategies that acknowledged the role of the sector in addressing climate change. Six cities — Houston, Dallas, Austin, Denver, Washington, DC, and Louisville — explicitly addressed child care in their CAPs.

Some cities linked their early education and care systems to sustainable zoning policies or community-centered land use regulations. For instance, they emphasized the potential benefits of high-density, mixed-use, mixed-income developments in increasing access to critical infrastructure like child care facilities, particularly

for low-income families. However, in most cases, the reference to child care access was indirect or incidental, with Austin and Houston being exceptions. For instance, Austin's CAP calls for workforce development initiatives to also include childcare to expand the potential pool of clean jobs training program candidates. Houston's CAP presents two unique strategies focused on the structural and mental health needs of very young children and parenting families.

Four cities — Dallas, Phoenix, Washington, D.C., and Detroit — discussed the importance of lead testing in child care facilities, public housing where pregnant people reside, and health care facilities, respectively. While the relationship between lead and climate change is indirect, lead emissions can contribute to air pollution, affecting air quality and potentially leading to the formation of particulate matter.



BRIGHT SPOT: KANSAS CITY, MO

Recognizing nuanced understandings of vulnerability, the Climate Action KC Equity Committee developed a glossary to detail the unique needs of different sensitive populations, including children and pregnant individuals. This glossary informed a supplemental 'equity guide' to help ensure businesses, organizations, and municipalities protect these populations in their climate action strategies.

The glossary explicitly defined 'Children' and 'Pregnant People,' acknowledging their distinct sensitivities. For instance, it highlighted children's sensitivity due to their developing bodies, unique interactions with their environment, and dependency on caregivers. For pregnant individuals, the glossary noted the health impacts of pregnancy and their increased susceptibility to factors like heat intolerance. Such specificity in identifying sensitivities can guide more targeted, effective action.



BRIGHT SPOT: HOUSTON, TX

Following the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, Houston has proactively engaged various partners to identify and fortify critical facilities, including child care centers. Their strategies included flood and power loss mitigation strategies and rainwater harvesting systems, all of which would allow these facilities to continue operations during extreme weather events.

Moreover, Houston's CAP outlined a plan to provide child care professionals with trauma-informed training from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. This 'train-the-trainer' model equipped professionals to provide social-emotional support to young children after extreme weather events and natural disasters, and to further train parents and early childhood caregivers in vulnerable Houston communities.

Opportunity

Given the heightened sensitivity of young children and pregnant people to the impacts of climate change, cities have an opportunity to further include their needs and perspectives in climate action plans by prioritizing the early childhood sector in mitigation and adaptation strategies. By actively engaging and amplifying the voices, experiences, and expertise of those closest to young children and their families, cities can cultivate more just and equitable communities that are well-equipped to navigate the challenges posed by a changing climate.

EARLY CHILDHOOD IN CITY CLIMATE ACTION PLANS	DEVELOPMENT	FRAMING	SUBSTANCE
New York, New York		✓	
Los Angeles, California		✓	
Chicago, Illinois		✓	
Houston, Texas	✓	✓	✓
Phoenix, Arizona		✓	
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania		✓	
San Antonio, Texas		✓	
San Diego, California			
Dallas, Texas		✓	✓
San Jose, California		✓	
Austin, Texas	✓	✓	✓
Jacksonville, Florida			No finalized city CAP at the time of the review
Fort Worth, Texas			No finalized city CAP at the time of the review
Columbus, Ohio		✓	
Indianapolis, Indiana	✓	✓	
Charlotte, North Carolina			
San Francisco, California		✓	
Seattle, Washington		✓	
Denver, Colorado		✓	✓
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma		✓	
Nashville-Davidson, Tennessee		✓	
El Paso, Texas			No finalized city CAP at the time of the review
Washington, District of Columbia	✓	✓	✓
Boston, Massachusetts	✓		
Las Vegas, Nevada			
Portland, Oregon		✓	
Detroit, Michigan		✓	
Louisville/Jefferson County, Kentucky		✓	✓
Memphis, Tennessee		✓	
Baltimore, Maryland		✓	
Milwaukee, Wisconsin		✓	
Albuquerque, New Mexico		✓	
Fresno, California			
Tucson, Arizona		✓	
Sacramento, California		✓	
Mesa, Arizona			
Kansas City, Missouri	✓	✓	
Atlanta, Georgia			
Omaha, Nebraska			No finalized city CAP at the time of the review
Colorado Springs, Colorado			No finalized city CAP at the time of the review