

Early Childhood Development: The First Five Years

Early investment in the development of children prevents academic, social, and health problems later in life. Within a short window of time – the first five years of a child’s life – there is opportunity for an enormous payoff. Children’s early environment and experiences and their relationships with their families and their caregivers can either enhance or delay their development. Healthy development is key to children’s physical health, behavioral and social development, and cognition and later academic success. Child development is also an important determinant of health and success in adult life.

For many families, though, the challenges of balancing work and evolving family structures affect the quantity and quality of time spent with young children. Missing this window of opportunity puts children at risk for being behind emotionally, socially, and in school. The risks are particularly acute for low-income families, families with teen parents, or those with substance abuse and mental health problems. Such family situations are less likely to provide the activities that foster healthy development, such as reading to children and establishing daily routines. And children in low-income families are the least likely to have a usual source of medical care – which is often key to providing assessments and recommending interventions.

A 1998 RAND publication, funded by The Commonwealth Fund, documented evidence that programs to support early childhood development actually work. The review of programs, which included a variety of approaches, revealed improvements in educational outcomes and health-related indicators, increased economic self-sufficiency, and reduced levels of criminal activity.

THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE

Health care professionals are uniquely positioned to help provide families with information and guidance on early childhood development. During those first critical years – long before children have started school – primary care providers offer an opportunity for continuous interaction and intervention. Pediatric providers often see children for up to 10 well-child visits during their first two years of life.

For women in their childbearing years, health care providers also play a role in promoting healthy child development. Through their role in educating women of childbearing age about proper nutrition and by providing prenatal care, women’s health care providers work to lower their risk of having low-birthweight infants – a risk factor for delayed development. Primary care providers can also focus on health of the family – identifying issues that affect children, like maternal depression or family violence.

Many primary care providers, however, are not trained in developmental screening and assessment tools. Sixty-five percent of pediatricians have reported having inadequate training in these areas. Moreover, there is usually not adequate insurance reimbursement for such services, and competing priorities for children’s health care mean that development services can get overlooked. Further challenges arise when children are referred outside of the health care setting – when community resources are insufficient and linkages between providers and community agencies are inadequate.

Child development services provided in the health care setting can be categorized into four areas:

- **Screening and Assessment** services, which include gathering information from parents, screening for developmental problems, and assessing child development and behavior;
- **Health Promotion and Education** services, which include parent education that addresses such things as sleep patterns, discipline, language development, learning, and injury prevention;
- **Interventions** to support services to families outside of the health care setting – for example, problem-focused counseling and therapies for children who are developmentally delayed; and
- **Care Coordination** to monitor the care of children and link their families to agencies and services not provided in the health care setting.

SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Much of the support for early childhood development programs comes through federal government funding streams, largely through programs that support health services. Title V of the Social Security Act provides block grant funding to states to offer preventive and primary care services for children and comprehensive care for women before, during, and after childbirth. Flexibility provided through the block grant program allows states to include such activities as parental education and coordinating home visitation programs. The Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment Program (EPSDT), a package of preventive services covered by the Medicaid program, supports well-child visits and referrals for families in need of developmental services. Some states are also using Medicaid funding to support public health nurses to conduct home visits

to families enrolled in the Women, Infants, and Children nutrition program. And Bright Futures, an initiative of the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration, offers a set of guidelines for providing health supervision for children to families and health care providers. There is also significant federal funding for child care, nutrition programs, and school readiness programs. The Head Start program, for example, provides funding to local agencies to offer educational services, nutrition, and parental assistance to increase children's readiness for school. Early Head Start supports similar services, focusing on pregnant women, infants, and toddlers.

States, too, have made important contributions in this area – with state public health agencies supporting such activities as folic acid campaigns, home visiting programs for at-risk parents, improving reimbursement for health and child care services, and providing training for child care providers.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS

There are many opportunities for grantmakers to work with health care providers, community-based organizations, and families to promote and support programs that encourage early childhood development.

- ***Grantmakers can raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development.*** An important role that grantmakers play in many areas has been raising the public visibility of important issues, and many have played this role for early childhood development. The Paso del Norte Health Foundation in Texas, for example, has developed a media information campaign to increase the knowledge base in child development and to raise public awareness about how children learn. In addition to TV, radio, and print media, the foundation is supporting a hotline to provide information to parents, providers, and social service agencies. The Kansas Health Foundation has also been active in this area. Over the past several years, the foundation has conducted several educational campaigns to increase the awareness of the importance of adult involvement in children's lives.
- ***Grantmakers can support families who need help.*** Another important area for foundations has been to support programs that encourage effective parenting. The Skillman Foundation in Michigan, for example, is providing grants to community-based agencies to expand parent education and support services and to coordinate with other agencies to provide a continuum of services for families. Through the grants, the agencies have also developed home visitation programs for families with very young children. The Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation is also supporting a major initiative in this area that includes a Welcome Home visit by nurses to every first-time or teen mother, a home visiting program for high-needs families, and ongoing parenting education.
- ***Grantmakers can fund programs to improve children's readiness for school.*** The Saint Luke's Foundation of

Cleveland, Ohio, for example, is supporting an Early Head Start program to enhance school readiness. The Foundation for Child Development has supported a statewide public education campaign to increase awareness of New York's universal pre-kindergarten program. At the national level, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has just launched a national initiative to help communities get vulnerable children ready for school and schools to get ready for children. The SPARK program, currently in the planning phase, will help communities meet children where they are, provide each child with a learning champion, and link child care providers and caregivers with schools.

- ***Grantmakers can expand the capacity of health care providers to play a role in early childhood development.*** Efforts to improve early childhood development start in the primary care setting, and grantmakers can support providers to fill this role. Through its Healthy Steps program, for example, The Commonwealth Fund has placed child development specialists in family practice settings to work as part of the medical team to conduct well-child visits. The specialists are also responsible for identifying family health risks, such as maternal depression, household smoking, substance abuse, and domestic stress. The program, implemented in partnership with local funders, supported 24 sites with more than 150 clinicians, and practitioners outside of those sites have started to use the approach. Several teaching hospitals have also integrated it into their pediatric training programs.
- ***Grantmakers can affect policy changes that support early childhood programs.*** For grantmakers who work at the state level, there are opportunities to expand the delivery of child development services by supporting policy changes that improve the coordination of systems of care and maximize reimbursement of services under Medicaid and SCHIP programs. The Commonwealth Fund, for example, is complementing its work on the Healthy Steps program by identifying policy changes to Medicaid and other state programs that would help expand childhood development services.

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SOURCES

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