

Grantmakers Partner to Improve Children's Development

Funders of *Healthy Steps for Young Children*

The rallying cry "Think nationally, act locally" has proven to be remarkably successful for *Healthy Steps for Young Children*. Spearheaded by The Commonwealth Fund and launched at 24 sites around the country, *Healthy Steps*' success is due in no small part to the commitment and organizational and financial support provided by a partnership of national, community, and new health foundations.

Healthy Steps for Young Children is an innovation in primary health care for children from birth to age three. With growing evidence stressing the vital importance of the first three years of life, The Commonwealth Fund saw the need to focus on developmental and behavioral issues in pediatric practice. It was timely because both pediatric and family medicine practices showed interest in new ways to offer care that better supported mothers and fathers in nurturing their young children's overall development. As a result, *Healthy Steps* emerged as a broadly based child development approach that could be implemented in a variety of practices with diverse patient populations and then rigorously evaluated. It would be a funding partnership between a national foundation and local funders.

Healthy Steps evolved under the leadership of Margaret E. Mahoney, chairman of the *Healthy Steps* National Advisory Committee, who determined that forming a national network of partners was the best approach. Acknowledging that the logistical details might prove daunting, an initial group of local funders decided that there were benefits that would far outweigh any challenges.

HEALTHY STEPS IN BRIEF

The essence of *Healthy Steps* is a change in practice – a team approach to the health and development of children from birth to age three. It is a system change that improves the care of young children through preventive developmental and behavioral services using a comprehensive, whole-child, whole-family health care model, giving mothers and fathers the child-rearing information and guidance they seek.

Healthy Steps includes the following components:

- enhanced well-child visits with a clinician and a *Healthy Steps* specialist;
- home visits by a *Healthy Steps* specialist timed for important stages in the child's life;
- a dedicated child development information telephone line for parent inquiries;
- family health checkups and child development screening;
- special printed materials focusing on prevention;
- parent support groups;
- linkages to community resources; and
- "Reach Out and Read," through which physicians give developmentally appropriate books to children and talk with parents about the importance of sharing books with their very young children.

Healthy Steps specialists (HSS) provide or coordinate these services, combining their previous training in nursing, child development, or social work with training in the *Healthy Steps* approach. *Healthy Steps* training is now typically provided on-site in order to involve all practice staff and to reinforce the team concept central to *Healthy Steps*.

To make all of this happen, local partners funded all site operating costs while national partners have paid for the national evaluation, training, management, and program development. Through this unique partnership agreement, resources have been used effectively. This partnership has lasted. Begun in 1995, local funders continue their regular meetings and have committed to do so through at least 2005.

THE VALUE OF PARTNERING

While The Commonwealth Fund was able to provide considerable intellectual and financial support for *Healthy Steps*, local involvement provided five vital attributes:

- practical knowledge of local capacity,
- funding for jointly chosen operating sites,
- oversight of operating sites,
- sustainable local leadership, and
- nationwide representation.

From the outset, representatives from possible local and statewide funders met with the national program organizers to design the partnership process. Three fundamental principles guided the effort:

- The Commonwealth Fund defined the basic scope of *Healthy Steps* and provided ongoing financial support for its

national organizational infrastructure, program training, and evaluation design and implementation.

- Local foundations sought the participation of a local pediatric provider and agreed to fund the site for three years at a total cost of about \$600,000.
- The *Healthy Steps* national staff collaborated with each local funding partner to engage and select the local health care provider. Drafts of all planning documents and agreements were provided to the local funders and providers and were approved through the interactions of local and national program staff.

The *Healthy Steps* partnership has grown steadily since the initial meetings in 1995. To date, funding partners have invested a total of \$42 million for program operations at sites; training and technical assistance; special materials, evaluation and overall management; and, of course, *Healthy Steps* services to thousands of families with young children. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, an early supporter, is now its lead national funder.

The idea of making a measurable contribution to children's health through a national initiative energizes *Healthy Steps* partners. And knowing that the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health would carefully evaluate *Healthy Steps* added another attractive feature.

THE EVALUATION REPORTS SUCCESS

Fifteen *Healthy Steps* sites participated in an independent national evaluation to assess the outcomes. The evaluation's findings were released in December 2003, with an accompanying article and editorial in the December 17, 2003 issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, and showed that the effects of *Healthy Steps* were very positive from the point of view of parents, children, and health care providers. The Johns Hopkins evaluators found that *Healthy Steps* families were more likely than nonparticipating families to:

- ensure that infants sleep on their back (which helps reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome);
- show picture books to and play with their infants daily;
- openly discuss feelings of sadness, depression, or anxiety with someone in the medical practice;
- interact with their toddlers in a more positive manner, showing a higher level of awareness and understanding of the child's needs and level of maturity; and
- avoid harsh disciplinary tactics, such as yelling, threatening, slapping, or spanking the child.

The evaluators also found that *Healthy Steps* children:

- received regular developmental screenings,
- received age-appropriate vaccinations (and were up to date by age two), and
- continued to receive care at the practice until at least 20 months of age.

Healthy Steps positively affects the medical practice, as well. Physicians noted that the *Healthy Steps* team approach

improved their understanding of families' needs and allowed more attention to child development and preventive care. Physicians also believe that the program played an important role in keeping families in their practice and promoting regular attendance for well-child checkups. The customers – parents – are also more satisfied with care, according to the evaluation. As the editorial in *JAMA* put it, "What is important about *Healthy Steps*...is that it provides important evidence that by changing the structure and process of pediatric care, performance in the delivery of pediatric developmental services can be improved significantly" (Neal Halfon, M.D. and Moira Inkelas, Ph.D.). For more information on the evaluation, please visit www.healthysteps.org on-line, and click on "Healthy Steps Evaluations."

THE RESULT

Healthy Steps' positive outcomes can be accredited to both the soundness of its design and implementation and the partners' enthusiasm and hard work. We believe that the following partnership attributes played an important role:

- Partners have been involved throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation in substantive ways.
- Being part of a national initiative lends credibility and synergy to issues that matter to local foundations.
- Setting up a national program infrastructure to ensure operating efficiencies and program quality is well worth the effort.

While establishing and operating the partnership is not without its challenges (such as the added time for coordination), all agree that *Healthy Steps* would not have achieved the success it has without the partnership. Would we do anything differently today? We would build in a focus on sustainability from day one.

At this juncture, we are delighted with the initiative we have taken forward, pleased that the number of new sites continues to grow even after the initial evaluation period has ended, and happy that the Healthy Steps Funder Network remains a vibrant structure to this date. We invite funders to join us and thereby enhance the care of young children in their communities.

This *Views from the Field* article was coauthored by Eugene Cochrane, Jr., The Duke Endowment; Karen Davis, The Commonwealth Fund; Jim Durkan, Community Memorial Foundation; Dorothy Gardner, Michael Reese Health Trust; Ada Mary Gugenheim, The Chicago Community Trust; M. Katherine Kraft, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Jan Kreamer, The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation; Ed Meehan, Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust; John Moran, The Colorado Trust; Reymundo Rodríguez, Hogg Foundation for Mental Health; and Marni Vliet, Kansas Health Foundation.

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