



BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS: Advancing Comprehensive Policies for Infants, Toddlers, and Families



Health Care Services: Critical Supports for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

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Infants, toddlers, parents, and pregnant women should receive appropriate health screenings, preventive primary care, and medically necessary treatment services. Development occurs rapidly in the first few years of life, and infants and toddlers need comprehensive health care services to ensure their minds and bodies are healthy and strong. Preventive primary care services, such as well-child visits, developmental screenings, and immunizations, ensure that development is on track and help prevent dangerous diseases during these formative years. Even with preventive care, infants and toddlers are prone to minor illnesses as they build their immune systems, so they also need access to diagnostic services, medical treatments, and prescription medication when they are ill. Some children with chronic conditions and special health care needs also require more specialized care, potentially over extended periods of time. Health in early childhood has a lasting effect on development, which affects future educational attainment, employment, and health in adulthood.¹

Parents of infants and toddlers similarly need appropriate preventive and treatment services, both to avoid health problems and to treat them when they arise. Good health is necessary for parents to be effective caregivers and provide for their families financially.² Moreover, parents' and children's health are inextricably linked: parents who report they are in good health are more likely to have children who are in good health, too.³ Parents who engage in healthy behaviors such as regular visits to a physician are more likely to promote those behaviors among their children.⁴ Moreover, parents of healthy children experience less stress related to their children's wellbeing, which in turn reinforces their own good health. Conversely, parents of children with chronic illness report high levels of stress and are more likely to have mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.⁵

A critical component of health services for young children and their parents is the care they receive before, during, and after birth. Prenatal, maternity, and newborn care is vital to monitor mothers' own health as well as the development of their babies. Routine care during pregnancy ensures that treatable but serious complications, such as gestational diabetes and preeclampsia, are identified and treated immediately. Prenatal care services also identify any problems with fetal development and ensure that pregnant women are getting the right nutrition to promote healthy growth. Adequate prenatal care is associated with reduced incidences of low birth weight, lower rates of infant and maternal mortality, and reduced risk of avoidable maternity complications.⁶

Ideally, these services are provided to infants, toddlers, parents, and pregnant women in the context of a medical home. The medical home model offers coordinated, high-quality services that meet most of families' health care needs, including preventive primary care, acute care, and chronic care services.⁷ In a medical home, a team of physicians and nurses coordinates with pharmacists, social workers, care coordinators, and other health and developmental specialists to ensure that care is high-quality, responsive to families' unique needs, and coordinated with other members of the health care system, including hospitals, home health care providers, and community services. Research suggests that the medical home model can offer higher quality health care services at lower costs, leading to better health outcomes.⁸ Specifically, access to a medical home is associated with increased preventive care visits, fewer sick visits, fewer emergency room visits, and a lower likelihood of having unmet care needs for children and adults.⁹ In one national survey, children who had a medical home were more likely to be rated as being in excellent or very good health.¹⁰ Evaluations of pregnancy medical home models suggest that participation is associated with better birth outcomes for high-risk expectant mothers and their newborn babies.¹¹

The health care system in the United States is complex and includes a variety of public and private entities. While there is no single federal program that supports and implements the provision of comprehensive health care services, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) play an important role. Medicaid and CHIP provide comprehensive health insurance to low-income children, and Medicaid also provides coverage for low-income parents and pregnant women.¹² The ACA raised the standards for private health insurance plans by requiring them to cover certain "essential health benefits," which include maternity and newborn care, preventive services, and pediatric services.¹³ Affordable, comprehensive health insurance plans help remove financial barriers and increase the likelihood that parents and children will get medical care.¹⁴ But health insurance coverage alone isn't enough to ensure access to necessary services and treatment.

Title V of the Social Security Act, also known as the Maternal and Child Health Services Block Grant Program, is a federal-state partnership that aims to improve the health of women and children.¹⁵ The federal government gives states funding to provide health care services, help families access and use health care services, and bolster states' public health services and systems.¹⁶ States vary widely in how they choose to direct their funding. Traditionally, Title V funds filled the gaps for underserved populations, offering low- or no-cost services to low-income people.¹⁷ However, as publicly financed health insurance programs are reaching more low-income women and children, states have placed less emphasis on direct service and are shifting to focus on enabling access and improving systems at the state level. This may include initiatives to increase breastfeeding rates, increase the number of newborns and young children receiving screening and developmental assessments, expand the capacity of pediatric specialists, and improve care coordination through the medical home model.¹⁸

The federal Health Center Program also funds community health centers in low-income and underserved communities, providing a medical home model to more than 24 million people, including 7 million children.¹⁹ Community health centers are equipped to serve people regardless of their ability to pay, which reduces hospitalization rates, increases access to health care services, and improves health outcomes for medically underserved populations.²⁰ Research shows that community health centers have been particularly effective in increasing pregnant women's access to prenatal care, leading to lower incidences of low birth weight.²¹ A number of other federal grant programs provide additional support to community health centers as well.²²

Despite increased health insurance coverage, many parents and children continue to lack access to the health care services they need.

While the number of children with unmet health care needs has decreased over time—thanks largely to historic gains in health insurance coverage through the ACA—many children still face barriers to care.²³ National surveys suggest that 10 percent of young children did not receive preventive medical care in the last year, while an estimated 1.2 million children under the age of 5 have an unmet care need.²⁴ Of those who required care from a specialist, 30 percent had difficulty accessing it.²⁵ These challenges were more common among children whose care did not meet the criteria for a medical home, which comprises approximately 42 percent of children under age 5.²⁶ Meanwhile, 1 out of every 5 adults reports less than good mental and physical health, and 23 percent lack access to a regular care provider.²⁷ Roughly one-quarter of pregnant women do not initiate prenatal care until their second or third trimester, if at all.²⁸

Families report a variety of barriers that prevent them from getting necessary health care services. First, despite historic increases in health insurance coverage, 4 percent of young children and 13 percent of parents are uninsured.²⁹ But even with health insurance, some families are unable to pay their premiums, deductibles, and co-pays, and health insurance coverage is not always adequate to meet families' needs.³⁰ Families may also struggle to find physicians nearby who accept their insurance.³¹ Poor, rural areas often have a shortage of providers, causing families to travel long distances or experience long wait times for appointments.³² As the population grows increasingly diverse, a shortage of multilingual, culturally competent providers creates additional barriers for families of infants and toddlers.³³ Parents and children of color are more likely to face these barriers to health care services, leading to greater risk for a host of poor health outcomes.³⁴

Importantly, the gains in health insurance coverage achieved by the ACA must be preserved and expanded in order for all children and families to get the care they need. States can take additional steps to improve children's, parents', and pregnant women's access to critical health care services as well. For example, states can use federal Title V funds—and supplemental state funds—for initiatives that improve children's and pregnant women's access to medical homes, support providers that practice in underserved communities, and promote a culturally and linguistically diverse health care workforce. States also have considerable flexibility to promote access to health care services through their Medicaid and CHIP eligibility, benefit, and reimbursement policies.

Good health is of utmost importance for families' wellbeing. Healthy babies and toddlers are better able to learn, grow, and develop strong bonds with their caregivers and peers. Healthy parents are more equipped to provide the sensitive, responsive care necessary to support their children's development. And healthy pregnant women are more likely to have safe, healthy births and healthy babies. While increased insurance rates are a step in the right direction, there is much more to do to ensure that all children and families have access to the health care services they need.

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