

How the Health Care System Can Improve Outcomes and Promote Health Equity for Children and Families

Findings from *Vibrant and Healthy Kids: Aligning Science, Practice, and Policy to Advance Health Equity*



Chronic disease and disability among adults often begins in infancy and childhood. In the United States, a person's odds of reaching positive health outcomes throughout their lifespan are better or worse based on many factors.

These disparities stem from varied life circumstances and opportunities, such as poverty, as well as systemic causes, such as racism. Despite the high quality of clinical care in America, the health of children and young families here is far worse than in comparable developed nations.

Key changes to the U.S. health care system could ensure better health for all people — in childhood and throughout their lives.

A FRAGMENTED SYSTEM

The U.S. health care system addresses the many factors influencing health in highly variable ways. Nationwide, there is little alignment between partners in the health care system and other sectors that affect one's health. Too often the health care system attempts to cram the health care women should have been getting over the course of years into a single preconception visit. Prenatal and pediatric care is primarily based on sporadic, short visits for a narrow range of clinical services that do not meet the needs of all patients

Instead, the U.S. health care system should ensure all children and their families have access to well-timed, high-quality, and well-coordinated health care throughout their lives.

4 GOALS FOR THE NATION

1. Increase access to preconception, prenatal, postpartum, and pediatric care.
2. Improve the quality of care.
3. Improve the delivery of care and how it is paid for.
4. Address the root causes of poor health and well-being for children and families.

SCIENCE-DRIVEN POLICIES TO PROMOTE HEALTHY LIVES

Policy makers and public and private payers — including Medicaid — should adopt policies and practices that ensure universal access to high-quality health care, such as patient- and family-centered care, preventive services, and culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and services.

Public and private payers should use new metrics of child and family health and well-being that assess quality using a holistic view of health and health equity. This includes social determinants of health such as food security and housing stability.

Policy makers, health system leaders, and public and private payers — including Medicaid — should adopt policies and practices that improve the organization and integration of care systems, such as multidisciplinary team-based care that integrates preconception, prenatal, and postpartum care with a whole-family focus.

Recognizing these opportunities for early prevention and intervention during the sensitive and important life period of early childhood can help the nation achieve more positive and equitable lifelong health outcomes for children and their families.

Read about the science behind early childhood development and find more policy recommendations related to the health care system at nationalacademies.org/VibrantHealthyKids.