

Children's Mental Health

It is the position of the American Academy of Pediatrics that health care reform should:

- ★ Ensure access to the full range of mental health services for children and adolescents, including screening, early intervention and management, along with appropriate supportive services for parents and families.
- ★ Encourage the integration of mental health care into the primary care medical home.
- ★ Recognize the importance of appropriate payment to primary care providers who provide mental health services to children.
- ★ Increase collaboration between health care providers and community-based programs funded by the Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant.

The Issue

One in ten children have a diagnosable mental health disorder and one in five have a significant mental health impairment. Yet, despite an ever increasing evidence base of effective mental health treatment, less than 25 percent of these children receive treatment. Without appropriate care, childhood mental illness can continue into adulthood, resulting in an increased need for adult mental health services and higher health care costs. If children receive needed mental health screening, identified disorders can be cost-effective and successfully treated. Unfortunately, there are significant barriers that prevent children from receiving adequate and accessible mental health care. These obstacles include insufficient mental health coverage, a shortage of child mental health care providers, payment, and administrative barriers to treatment.

Current Status

No reform of the health care system will be complete without addressing the need to improve mental health care, particularly for children. Reform proposals must ensure that health insurance for children covers the full range of mental health services children need, with a special emphasis on preventive care, early screening and identification, and appropriate intervention. The proper implementation of the recently enacted mental health parity law and CHIP reauthorization are essential in this effort.

Policies must recognize the importance of primary care pediatric providers in filling the gaps in the availability of mental health care for children. Primary care pediatricians should be encouraged to provide more and better mental health services to children, and they should receive sufficient training and adequate payment to become competent providers of mental health services. This care should be provided in a child's medical home, or, if necessary, through coordinated specialty care.