
Susan True and Salem Magarian: Children's health care requires more than check-ups and vaccinations

In this hot, sunny, summer weather, differences in gardening styles are easy to spot. Here's a garden bursting with healthy plants, sprouting up from moist and nourished soil. Right next door is a dry patch with some struggling plants trying to poke their way through the cracked earth.

What happened? Both gardens started out with the same potential, but they received different degrees of care, attention and nourishment along the way -- and it shows.

Kids are more complicated than plants, but the same principles apply: their infant brains and bodies respond to different types and amounts of care and nourishment. To help level the playing field and ensure that all Santa Cruz County children benefit from the most nourishing, healthy environments possible, First 5 of Santa Cruz County has joined forces with other partners and local pediatricians to broaden definitions of health beyond check-ups and shots.

The goal is to create a "pediatric medical home" -- a place where medical care, child development, mental health, learning and play all come together to help families create the healthiest possible "soil" in which their children will thrive.

Santa Cruz County already has several programs focused on the health of our youngest residents. Many of these are the result of community partners collaborating together, often through a unique local mechanism called the Health Improvement Partnership HIP. For example, the Healthy Kids program enrolls eligible low-income children in a local insurance coverage program that has helped thousands of local children gain access to health care.

Improving access to health care is crucial, but it's only part of the story. After all, being healthy involves much more than check-ups and vaccinations as important as these may be. For very young children, it also means acquiring language skills through reading, interaction and conversation -- not just the TV baby sitter. As children get older, being healthy means gaining some social and emotional skills, too -- such as empathizing with others, controlling emotions, solving problems, and bouncing back from setbacks and frustrations. These qualities help children learn in school, but they also make kids healthier overall -- not just during childhood but throughout their lives.

With training and support from First 5, pediatricians are incorporating the science and insights of child development into routine visits in more systematic ways, such as using standard developmental screening tests at 9- and 18-month well child visits. These assessments increase the chances that common developmental problems such as autism or delays in motor skills and language acquisition are detected as early as possible, so that doctors and parents can intervene.

Another program helps pregnant women who are or have been addicted to drugs, helping to counter the effects of drugs on fetal and infant development. The damage that drugs and neglect cause to children can be devastating, but healthier pregnancies and supportive environments for infants can do wonders. It's never too late to try to intervene in a child's life, but the sooner we do so, the better.

A broader definition of health, collaborations across organizational walls, and partnerships and information-sharing between doctors and parents -- all of these are part of the formula for nourishing healthy children. That's a garden in which we all have a stake!

Susan True is executive director of First 5 of Santa Cruz County. Salem Magarian is a First 5 commissioner and serves as medical director of the Dominican Pediatric Clinic. For more information on the Health Improvement Partnership, please visit www.hipscc.org. For more information on First 5, including a free kit with useful information on child development for new parents, visit www.first5scc.org.