

Chapters Views and News

Pediatricians can connect economically insecure families to community resources

from the **AAP Department of Community, Chapter and State Affairs**

In the wake of the “Great Recession,” pediatricians across the country are seeing the effect of economic insecurity on their patients and their families. While 22% of U.S. children live below the federal poverty level, nearly half (45%) live in a low-income household. Since 2008, the largest and fastest increase in the nation’s poor population has occurred in major metropolitan suburbs.

Children in low-income and poor households can experience a number of challenges to their health and well-being, such as inadequate food or housing, loss of health care, and school disruptions. Poverty can serve as a source of early childhood adversity that negatively impacts early brain development, childhood health and health across the life course.

Pediatricians can play an important role in helping children and families navigate difficult economic times. They can work with the care team to identify basic needs and find community resources to meet those needs. They also are uniquely positioned to advocate for policies that support family economic security by highlighting the connections between economic well-being, healthy child development and health across the life course.

Helping families with basic needs

Kathryn L. Plax, M.D., FAAP, an adolescent medicine specialist in Missouri, described a 13-year-old patient whose once middle class family now is struggling to make ends meet.



Dr. Plax

“After her father lost his job, the family lost its financial footing,” she said. “They can’t cover all of the bills and have to juggle which ones to pay. There have been times when they’ve run out of food. The children have had a very hard time adjusting, and the parents are also coping with mental health issues like depression.”

Dr. Plax has worked with a social worker to help the family access food and other supports.

Dr. Plax also is a member of the AAP Poverty and Child Health Work Group, which is developing a strategy to address the health effects of poverty to ensure the healthy development of all children



Twenty-two percent of U.S. children live below the federal poverty level. Pediatricians, both individually and through their AAP chapters, can help connect families to local resources and advocate for policies that support family security.

within a medical home.

“One of the most important things that pediatricians can do for families in the practice setting is to ask simple screening questions about basic needs, in the same way that we ask about other health needs,” said Benjamin A. Gitterman, M.D., FAAP, chair of the AAP Council on Community Pediatrics and member of the poverty work group. “It is important to know if a family is unable to provide the day-to-day needs of their family, such as food, heat and housing. And if we identify a family is having difficulty, it is critical to know how to connect them to resources in the community that can help.” (See related article on page 25.)



Dr. Gitterman

At Children’s National Medical Center, Dr. Gitterman co-founded the Washington, D.C., site of the nationally recognized Health Leads program to help address families’ basic needs. Health Leads programs operate in health clinics for the underserved, supporting physicians to “prescribe” food, heat and other basic resources. Under professional

supervision, volunteer college students follow up with families to help them access needed community resources and public benefits.

“Full-fledged programs like Health Leads are a great resource but are not available in all communities,” Dr. Gitterman said. “Pediatric clinical settings can start helping families address unmet needs by maintaining lists of current information about community services and supports.” For instance, practices can keep an up-to-date list of food assistance resources such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and local food pantries.

Promoting family economic security

In addition to practice-level strategies, the Academy is looking at how public policies can protect child health and family stability.



“We have had some major success in expanding health care coverage for children who are low-income and poor through the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP),” said Andrew D. Racine, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, chair of the Poverty and Child Health Work Group. “In terms of health care coverage, one of the most significant things we can do for children and families is keep the CHIP program strong and fully funded through 2019.”

Dr. Racine and the work group also are examining how a broad range of policies can help support family economic security.

“There is substantial evidence that income-support policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit can be

extremely helpful in providing resources to families that help moderate the impact of economic deprivation,” Dr. Racine said. “The Academy is very interested in advocating for strengthening and expanding these and similar policies in cooperation with federal and state policy-makers.”

Chapter education, advocacy

To support chapter education and advocacy, the AAP Division of State Government Affairs has begun to develop poverty-related resources. The 2014 AAP State Advocacy Blueprint identified poverty as an issue for chapters to watch, and several chapters already are engaged in advocacy on the issue.

For instance, the West Virginia Chapter partnered with the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition and state Sen. John Unger to support successful legislation that will provide free breakfast and lunch to every child in pre-kindergarten through grade 12.

RESOURCES

- For more information on the Academy’s poverty and child health strategic priority, visit www.aap.org/poverty or email the Council on Community Pediatrics at cocp@aap.org.
- For information on state advocacy issues and chapter resources, visit www.aap.org/stateadvocacy.
- For information on Health Leads, visit <https://healthleadsusa.org/>.