Chapters Views and News: New resource provides key messages about poverty, child health
by from the AAP Department of Community, Chapter and State Affairs

When the Academy began working on poverty and child health as a strategic priority, members and chapter leaders expressed great interest in the topic. They also indicated that poverty can be a difficult topic to address and wanted information on how to communicate effectively with the public, decision-makers and their own patients.

In response to this interest, the Academy developed a poverty and child health messaging guide. The resource includes messages and communications tips that pediatricians and AAP chapters can use to talk about poverty and child health with policymakers and other decision-makers in their communities.

"Poverty is a complex issue that triggers strong, often polarizing responses," said Andrew S. Garner, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, a member of the AAP Poverty and Child Health Leadership Workgroup. "The language that we use to talk about it must be simple and clear, but it must also be accurate and nuanced. We need to communicate that while children who grow up in poverty are clearly at higher risk of poor outcomes, they are not doomed. And while factors that lead to poverty may lie outside the realm of medicine, poverty is certainly a medical concern. We also want to communicate that while there is not a quick fix to poverty, that does not mean that there is nothing that we can do about it."

Following are several of the key messages in the guide:

**Poverty is one of the most widespread and persistent health risks facing children today.**

Research shows that living in poverty can cause severe, lifelong health problems. Poverty has profound negative effects on birthweight, infant mortality, immunization rates, nutrition, language and social development. Children living in poverty also are more likely to be exposed to violence and suffer from injury and chronic illnesses like asthma and obesity.

**Poverty happens everywhere.**

One in five U.S. children under age 18 lives in poverty. While urban and rural areas continue to have high rates of poverty, the suburbs have experienced the largest and fastest increases in poverty since the 2008 recession.

**Fortunately, we have realistic solutions that we know will work to help lift children out of poverty.**

Effective interventions can buffer the effects of poverty. This includes promoting strong family relationships, which cause positive changes in the body's stress response system and the architecture of the developing brain.

Other interventions that play a role in helping protect against poverty include federal and state anti-poverty and safety net programs; health care; early childhood education; affordable housing; home visiting programs; and critical nutrition support programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the school lunch program. Without these programs, it's estimated that nearly one in three children would live in poverty, instead of one in five. We need to support and expand these critical resources for families.

**Pediatricians’ role**
Research shows that while conversations about poverty are taking place across the U.S., there is limited discussion of poverty's impact on children's health.

Pediatricians can provide a unique advocacy voice to poverty discussions by emphasizing the importance of addressing child poverty to improve the health and life course trajectory of all children. Due to their role on the frontline with patients and families, pediatricians have the credibility to speak about the health needs of children. By focusing on these needs, pediatricians have the opportunity to engage decision-makers across the political spectrum in conversations about what children need to be healthy.

The Academy also has learned that stories are needed to help audiences understand the diverse face of poverty and how poverty affects children's health in concrete ways. Pediatricians see the stress that poverty causes for family relationships and the impact of issues such as hunger, homelessness and unemployment on children’s health and well-being. Telling real stories of poverty can help move people to action.

The Academy encourages pediatricians and chapter leaders to use the new poverty and child health messaging guide to engage in local and state conversations about issues related to family economic security. The messages can be used to develop talking points, testimony, letters to the editor and other communications materials.

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