

Making Prevention a Priority: For a Healthier Future

We often hear about how we are losing ground as a nation when it comes to our health and well-being. The truth is we can do something about it and change the current downward trajectory. And it is particularly true when it comes to our children and their ability to succeed.

At first glance, the challenges may seem daunting. Compared to other countries, we are quickly losing ground on important indicators of health and success. Consider:

- In the last twenty years, US life expectancy plummeted in comparison with other countries from 11th to 42nd.
- Comparing 21 wealthy countries, the US has the second highest poverty rate both overall and for children, surpassed only by Mexico.
- New census data shows that 22 percent of our nation's children live in poverty, a grave concern because children living below the poverty line are seven times more likely to have poor health than those in higher income households.

Just as troubling—and directly related to these indicators—are the educational outcomes of our children. They ranked in the bottom third or lower on several measures of academic achievement among the 30 developed countries— 21st in science literacy, 24th in problem-solving literacy, and 25th in mathematics literacy.

All these statistics indicate that our children are not as healthy as they should be and are predictors of mental health and substance use problems. In fact, the US now has the highest rate of mental illness of any country in the world. And we have the second highest rate of substance, trailing only the Ukraine. By 2020, mental and substance use disorders will surpass all physical diseases as a major cause of disability worldwide.

We know that good mental and emotional health is strongly linked to educational achievement. Because the median age of onset for mental illness is approximately 14, it is critical we reach children early and provide the tools to parents and communities to boost their health and well-being.

So what can we do to put children on a successful course? It is imperative that we work together to prevent mental health and substance use conditions and create healthier children and communities.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the government's lead agency in the area, is calling for action to improve the nation's health. In "Leading Change: A Plan for SAMHSA's Roles and Actions 2011-2014," it identifies eight strategic initiatives to produce positive change. And topping the list is prevention of substance abuse and mental illness.

Although prevention is a relatively young concept in the area of mental health, SAMHSA points to a number of programs and services shown through research to improve the healthy development of children and prevent the onset of mental health and substance use conditions. And the evidence of their positive effects is rapidly accumulating.

Just as we take action to improve our children's diets or correct other health concerns, we can implement prevention and early intervention programs that can head off problems and help our children reach their potential.

For example, the Nurse Family Partnership helps first time mothers learn about parenting and child development in order to promote healthy families. Another, called appropriately The Good Behavior Game, is a strategy schools use to help create nourishing classroom environments and teach pro-social behaviors.

The Positive Parenting Program is a multilevel intervention that helps families, schools, and communities raise successful and happy children, and prevent mental health and substance use conditions, as well as other problematic behaviors. Communities That Care helps local leaders identify youth problem behaviors and select the right programs to reduce them.

Follow-up studies show that early intervention can have lasting effects. The Nurse Family Partnership not only helps young mothers; the children have lower arrest rates as adolescents. The Good Behavior Game, used in elementary school, has preventive effects that remain into early adulthood.

Given the evidence, policymakers will--and should--want to see such programs used more widely. And there should be no argument about spending money on these strategies; they are cost effective. Each dollar invested returns from \$2 to \$10 savings in health costs, criminal and juvenile justice costs, educational costs, and lost productivity.

If we are serious about changing the trajectory of our nation's health and allowing our children to succeed, we should make prevention a priority. It will produce a healthier future.

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