

# Supporting Healthy Parenting in Primary Care

An Initiative of the Collaborative on Healthy Parenting in Primary Care  
2016

The Collaborative on Healthy Parenting in Primary Care<sup>1</sup> recognizes the accumulated evidence of the effectiveness of family-focused prevention programs that promote the physical and behavioral health and emotional well-being of children from before their birth through adolescence. Members of this collaborative have united around an initiative to support the integration of effective programs that promote healthy parenting into primary care settings in order to achieve optimal health for children.

## Family-Focused Preventive Interventions

Evidence from a number of studies has found that family-focused preventive interventions can improve the well-being of children and families and help promote cognitive, affective, and behavioral health in children. These programs have increased positive parenting practices and reduced behavior problems, anxiety, and depression in children. Though these programs have demonstrated effectiveness that could result in improving population health outcomes if they were widely implemented and attended, they are not reaching a sufficient number of families who could benefit from participation.

## Barriers

A number of barriers keep families from receiving programs that can provide lasting impacts. First there is a potential stigma associated with attending parenting classes, as they have been typically offered to, or required for, families of children with existing social and/or behavior problems. Parents may see a suggestion of parenting support as a judgement on their parenting rather than a resource to help them promote the health and success of their children.

Participation in these programs has also been limited due to concerns about the expertise and legitimacy of the organization providing parenting advice. Parenting programs may be offered through a number of settings, such as early childhood centers, child welfare agencies, or schools, but parents may not be confident in the expertise of providers to advise on parenting. Many programs currently offered to parents have not been rigorously tested for their effects on children's health or behavioral outcomes.

## Moving the Agenda Forward

What is needed to increase parental involvement in effective evidence-based programs is a trusted and legitimate professional home for these programs. Primary health care is such a home. Tested and effective programs for preventing behavioral health problems from before birth through adolescence should be available to all families in the U.S. through primary health care. Primary health care is provided nearly universally and repeatedly to children beginning in the first year of life, offering an opportunity to engage parents early in supporting their children's healthy physical and behavioral development. Several parenting enhancement programs have been integrated into child health primary care systems and practices across the country. Some have shown positive effects, but additional rigorous studies of these programs in primary care settings are needed.

Members of the Collaborative seek to advance the availability of preventive family-focused interventions for all children. Toward this goal, we seek to 1) increase the research evidence testing the effectiveness of family-focused preventive interventions in primary care settings; 2) increase public awareness and strengthen political will for this initiative; 3) increase the acceptance of these preventive interventions for behavioral health problems in primary care settings by health care professionals; and 4) identify and develop sustainable funding mechanisms to cover the costs of these services.

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<sup>1</sup> The Collaborative on Healthy Parenting in Primary Care is an initiative of the Forum on Promoting Children's Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Health at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The views expressed by the Collaborative do not represent official positions of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Contact Sarah Tracey ([stracey@nas.edu](mailto:stracey@nas.edu)) at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for more information.