

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

Committee on Community Health Services

The Pediatrician's Role in Community Pediatrics

ABSTRACT. This policy statement offers pediatricians a concise definition of community pediatrics and provides a set of specific recommendations that underscore the critical nature of this important dimension of the profession.

ABBREVIATION. CATCH, Community Access To Child Health.

Today's children and families live in a period of rapid social change. The economic organization of the health care and social service systems in the United States is undergoing profound changes. Pediatric training programs are searching for the optimal blend of knowledge, skill, and experience to prepare tomorrow's pediatricians for the new challenges and morbidities they will face.¹⁻³ As clinicians and educators encounter new demands on their commitments and resources, it is important to reaffirm a vital and long-standing role of pediatricians: promoting the health and well-being of all children in the communities they serve.

DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY PEDIATRICS

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers this definition of community pediatrics to remind all pediatricians—generalists and specialists alike—of the profound importance of the community dimension in pediatric practice. Community pediatrics is all of the following:

- A *perspective* that enlarges the pediatrician's focus from one child to all children in the community
- A *recognition* that family, educational, social, cultural, spiritual, economic, environmental, and political forces act favorably or unfavorably, but always significantly, on the health and functioning of children
- A *synthesis* of clinical practice and public health principles directed toward providing health care to a given child and promoting the health of all children within the context of the family, school, and the community⁴
- A *commitment* to use a community's resources in collaboration with other professionals, agencies, and parents to achieve optimal accessibility, appropriateness, and quality of services⁵ for all children, and to advocate especially for those who lack access to care because of social or economic

conditions or their special health care needs

- An *integral part* of the professional role and duty of the pediatrician

For many pediatricians, efforts to promote the health of children have been directed at attending to the needs of particular children in a practice setting, on an individual basis, and providing them with a medical home. This approach, in combination with pediatricians' own personal community interests and commitments, has been dramatically successful. Increasingly, however, the major threats to the health of America's children—the new morbidity⁶—arise from problems that cannot be adequately addressed by the practice model alone.⁷ These problems include unacceptably high infant mortality rates in certain communities, extraordinary levels of intentional and unintentional injuries, chemical dependency, behavioral and developmental consequences of inappropriate care and experience, family dysfunction, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births, and lack of a medical home.⁸ "We must become partners with others, or we will become increasingly irrelevant to the health of children."⁹

Pediatricians remain instrumental in efforts to create, organize, and implement changes in communities, efforts that can substantially improve the health of children. Starting with Abraham Jacobi, MD, (1830–1919), a leading child advocate of his time and a founder of the discipline of pediatrics, pediatricians have recognized that children are best understood, and their needs attended to, within interlinking contexts of biology, family, and community.¹⁰ More recently, Robert J. Haggerty, MD, FAAP, identified the unique contribution and focus of community pediatrics:

Community pediatrics [has sought] to provide a far more realistic and complete clinical picture by taking responsibility for all children in a community, providing preventive and curative services, and understanding the determinants and consequences of child health and illness, as well as the effectiveness of services provided. Thus, the unique feature of community pediatrics is its concern for all of the population—those who remain well but need preventive services, those who have symptoms but do not receive effective care, and those who do seek medical care either in a physician's office or in a hospital.¹¹

With the sweeping changes occurring in the world of medicine and other human services, it is especially important now for pediatricians to reexamine and reaffirm their role as professionals in the community—as community pediatricians—and prepare themselves for it, just as diligently as they prepare for traditional clinical roles.

The recommendations in this statement do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pediatricians should use community data (epidemiologic, demographic, and economic) to increase their understanding of the health and social risks for children and of the opportunities for successful collaboration with other child advocates.
2. Pediatricians should interact with other members of the community to improve all settings and organizations where children spend time (eg, child care facilities, schools, youth programs).
3. Pediatricians should strive to bring community and school resources to bear on the problems that children face.
4. Pediatricians should work collaboratively with public health departments and colleagues in related professions to identify and mitigate hindrances to the health and well-being of children in the communities they serve.¹² In many cases, vitally needed services already exist in the community. Pediatricians can play an extremely important role coordinating and focusing services to realize maximum benefit for all children.^{13,14}
5. Pediatricians should seek to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of health care for all children and strive to ensure a medical home for every child in the community.
6. Pediatricians are encouraged to become involved in the education of residents and medical students in community settings. Community pediatricians have the unique opportunity to model roles outside the traditional clinical roles students and residents usually encounter. Pediatric academicians should use resources from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Ambulatory Pediatric Association to engage the community pediatrician as an educator, both in the care of individual patients in community-based practice and in roles related to promotion of the well-being of all children in the community.^{3,15}
7. American Academy of Pediatrics' chapters and their members should provide leadership for furthering the understanding of community pediatricians and encourage participation in creative, community-based, integrated models such as those supported through the Community Access To Child Health (CATCH) Program and the Healthy Tomorrows Partnership for Children Program.
8. American Academy of Pediatrics' chapters should provide leadership, support, and recognition for pediatricians involved in advocacy efforts at the local, state, and national level to ensure access to care for all children and to foster integration of these activities as an integral part of the professional role and duty of the pediatrician.

Caring, compassionate, and knowledgeable pediatricians must address the needs of their patients and all children in the context of the community.

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