

Child Health - Definition

Health Workgroup, First Things First, October, 2007

Background

There are many definitions of child health. First Things First (FTF) is a broad public policy initiative; as such, the definition of child health used by FTF should reflect broad societal goals of health. Because of this, we recommend that definition used by FTF be based upon the definition of child health used by the World Health Organization:

Child health is a state of physical, mental, intellectual, social and emotional well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Healthy children live in families, environments, and communities that provide them with the opportunity to reach their fullest developmental potential.

Children cannot achieve optimal health alone. They are dependent upon adults in their family and community to provide them with an environment in which they can learn and grow successfully. In addition, because they are continually growing physically and mentally, measuring FTF's success in achieving optimal child health will be challenging.

Maternal health status, habits, and environment during and even before pregnancy profoundly impacts the health and well-being of a child. Thus, achieving optimal child health is dependent upon optimizing the health and well-being of a child's mother.

Child health is foundational to adult health and well-being. When children's health is nurtured and supported and there is an absence of physical and mental abuse, or other intentional childhood trauma; and there exists opportunities to gain habits that support good health during childhood, the stage is set for a healthy adulthood less likely to include chronic health problems such as overweight/obesity, poor oral health, diabetes and other chronic physical and mental health problems.

Recommendations

Because of the mutable nature of childhood and the desired long-range impact of any initiative targeting early childhood, the Board will face challenges in how to use outcomes and indicators to measure their success in attaining optimal child health. Outcomes will need to be viewed in both the short and long term. In addition, because child health indicators are indirect measures of the health of communities as well as our state it is important that FTF choose indicators of child health that measure child health status from the perspective of not only the child, but also their environment (eg. family, community)

Although FTF funds will be targeted in early childhood, the long-range impact of funded interventions should be assessed using this definition of child health. For example, some measures of FTF success might include the funded interventions' impact on the community and state's:

- Economic status (eg. poverty rate)
- Educational status (eg. high school graduation rate)
- Workforce (eg. unemployment rate).

While such impact areas may seem far removed from First Things First's target actions, we suggest that any design elements for interventions in early childhood must logically align with these or similar long-range goals.

In addition, the short-term impacts of interventions will need to be assessed. Potential short-term measures of the FTF interventions in communities might include kindergarten readiness and educational achievement in elementary and middle school.

Using such a framework, funding targeted at improving child health must address the definition of child health or components thereof, and lead logically toward the progression of desired outcomes.