

Child Health - Definition

Health Advisory Committee, February 7, 2011

THIRD READ

Background

(CORE DEFINITION)

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 optimized physical, 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.

Child health is foundational to learning, including school readiness, literacy and academic achievement as well as to adult productivity, health and well-being.

(SERVICES)

Optimizing child health includes both preventing biosocial impairment and improving function. The former requires preventive care as well and utilizing accessible effective early and corrective intervention. The latter includes decreasing the internal and external limitations and the physical and/or emotional discomfort caused by existing cognitive, socio-emotional and medical health problems, whatever their origin (genetic, congenital, toxic, traumatic, infectious, psychosocial etc.).

Some children are more vulnerable (e.g., children with special health care needs or disabilities, children of immigrants or refugees, children in foster care or in the juvenile justice system), and special policies may be necessary to assure that these children thrive. Service systems should address their special needs while promoting the inclusion of these children and their families in all aspects of community life.

(ADULT SUPPORT/EMPOWERMENT)

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.

Maternal health status, habits, and environment during and even before pregnancy profoundly impact 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.

Nurturing and protecting the health of children requires supporting and empowering parents, both to prevent physical and emotional abuse and to afford opportunities for the parents to gain habits that promote their children's health and safety. Empowering parents in raising healthy children sets the stage for the children to become healthy and productive adults who are less likely to be impaired by chronic physical, cognitive or mental health problems such as overweight/obesity, dental disease, diabetes, depression and addiction.

(RESPONDING TO CHANGE)

Measuring FTF's success in achieving optimal child health is complex in the face of the constant physical, cognitive and social-emotional growth that characterizes childhood. Identifying FTF success will be further challenged by an environment in which the State's medical and educational systems – the foundation on which FTF was intended to build - are being dramatically downsized. This will require rapid evolution in FTF strategies, while keeping the clear vision of short and long-term outcomes that would represent optimized child health and development.