Healthy Child Development: What's Important

Young children's healthy growth and development is critical to their long-term health and success. Brain research has identified the first years of life as critical ones to the actual wiring of the brain and the development of lifelong abilities and patterns of response. During the early years, there is a complex interplay between a child's environment and the child's developing brain. Factors affecting healthy growth and development in the early years include:

- Genetic predispositions and conditions
- Healthcare services to address clinical health issues and concerns
- Other services to support the social, emotional, language and cognitive development of the child; and, most important
- Family and community environments that protect nurture and guide a child's growth and development

These latter "social determinants" of health include:

- Family economic security that meets basic food, shelter, clothing and other needs
- Safe environments – free from violence or environmental toxins – in the home and the community
- Consistency in parental nurturing, support and response to stress
- Opportunities to explore the world – starting with home and neighborhood – that provide multiple avenues for experience, interaction and growth

In short, parents are their children's first and most important teacher. They also are their children's first and most important nurse, safety officer, nutritionist, care coordinator, ambassador, environmental specialist, mentor and coach.

Information about the status of young children in Arizona is needed in all these areas. Information itself is available from a number of sources, from birth records and American Community Survey data to incidence data on such things as elevated blood lead levels and child abuse reports. Information also is available through research and demonstration projects.

Parent survey data, however, is the only way to obtain population-level information about many essential family and social factors related to healthy young child development, including the content, use and value of health and other early care services; parenting beliefs and perspectives about child development; and young children's nutrition, exercise and early literacy activities.