



Growing HealthySteps in New Jersey



February 2023

The first three years of a child's life is a time of rapid growth and development. The quality of care a mother and child receive during this time can have a profound impact on a child's ability to grow, learn and thrive. Having access to high-quality, regular well-baby care, combined with early and timely connections to the appropriate supports when necessary, can help ensure young children have a strong foundation for a lifetime of healthy development, learning and growth.

HealthySteps is an evidence-based program that helps make these connections for families. It serves both young children (0-3) and their families in a pediatric health care setting. This approach is non-stigmatizing and provides universal access, since nearly all young children regularly see a pediatric primary care provider. Child development professionals, known as HealthySteps Specialists, are housed in the doctor's office as part of the healthcare team. The HealthySteps Specialist fulfills a variety of roles, serving as a liaison between the child and family and the healthcare team, offering screenings and support that the physician may lack time to address, and providing families with parenting/caregiver guidance, support between pediatric visits, referrals and care coordination.

Through a philanthropically-funded initiative, New Jersey is currently piloting HealthySteps in several pediatric practices in low-income communities. Although HealthySteps is a proven and cost-effective approach to addressing health disparities and improving health outcomes, it currently reaches only a small fraction of the children and families that could benefit from these services.

The Problem: Health Disparities Compromise Healthy Development for Babies and Toddlers

[A disproportionately high number of infants and toddlers of color live in poverty in New Jersey.](#) There are also stark disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes among minority racial and ethnic groups in the state. Children growing up in poverty are:

- twice as likely to experience developmental delays as their higher-income peers. Poverty-associated trauma and toxic stress, or [adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\)](#), exacerbate these delays and compromise healthy development;
- significantly [less likely to be screened and evaluated](#) for developmental health interventions; and
- more likely to experience [long-term impacts](#) from the COVID-19 pandemic that can have a negative impact on the physical and emotional health and development for children.

Children Under Age 5 Living in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity, New Jersey, 2016-2020

Race/Ethnicity	Estimated Percent
White	11.4%
Black	24.9%
Hispanic	22.8%
Asian	4.5%
New Jersey	14.2%
United States	18.7%

Data Source: American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>

Additional barriers impact optimal health outcomes for infants:

- Pediatric primary care providers, especially those serving low-income communities, are overbooked and [spend an average of 18 minutes with families](#) – not enough time for patients to understand diagnoses, ask questions and/or fully understand options;
- Pediatricians are not reimbursed for longer visits, behavioral health screenings and/or the time it takes to navigate the complex mental health system; and
- There is a shortage of qualified providers willing to treat infants and toddlers with behavioral health needs, resulting in long waiting lists for an appointment or need to travel a distance to access care.



The Solution: HealthySteps

The HealthySteps [Return-on-Investment \(ROI\)](#) model shows significant Medicaid cost savings in just 12 months. Nationally, HealthySteps reaches more than 350,000 children and their families annually, across over 220 sites in 24 states and Washington, DC. [Outcomes](#) for young children and their caregivers include:

- ⇒ Increased well-child visits in the first 30 months of life;
- ⇒ Increased childhood immunization rates;
- ⇒ Increased developmental screening rates in the first three years of life;
- ⇒ Improved identification of and early intervention with maternal mental health and substance use disorders, helping mothers get the help they need;
- ⇒ Increased number of moms breastfeeding following hospital discharge;
- ⇒ Earlier age of autism diagnosis, increasing earlier opportunities for more intensive supports; and
- ⇒ Increased rate of Early Intervention referrals, helping families get the services they need.

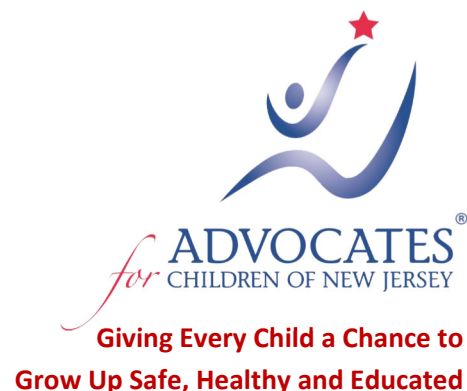
The New Jersey HealthySteps pilot currently serves approximately 2,000 families annually and is already demonstrating positive outcomes for children as well as cost savings:

- 100% of eligible children were screened for risk of developmental and social- emotional concerns,

- 100% of eligible mothers received at least one postpartum depression screen,
- More than 1,800 referrals have been made to community resources by HealthySteps Specialists (21% food-related services, 14% housing assistance, 10.3% early intervention, and 10.2 % lactation); and
- 82% ROI – for every dollar invested in HealthySteps, an estimated \$1.82 in savings is realized by Medicaid

By nearly every measure, children living in families with low incomes and children of color face the biggest obstacles that have a negative impact on a child's health and development. HealthySteps leads to improved outcomes in areas where there are persistent inequities so that all babies and toddlers have the greatest opportunity to thrive.

For more information or any questions contact Diane Dellanno at ddellanno@acnj.org



Advocates for Children of New Jersey

35 Halsey Street, 2nd Floor, Newark, NJ 07102 • (973) 643-3876 • Fax (973) 643-9153 • advocates@acnj.org • acnj.org