HealthySteps integrates an early childhood specialist into every child’s primary care team.

How it works
Because most young children visit the pediatrician, well-child visits present an important opportunity to ensure that families are equipped to address children’s needs. A pediatric primary care specialist participating in regular well visits can help families during and between well-child care to address concerns that physicians often lack time to address, such as feeding, behavior, sleep, attachment, and socioeconomic risk factors to health. At the same pediatric visit, mothers experiencing postpartum anxiety or depression can also receive support.

Why it matters
Parents often have questions and concerns about developmental milestones, behavior and discipline, and breastfeeding and nutrition that aren’t always addressed at pediatric well-child visits. Without prior knowledge of early childhood development, parents may not know what to ask or even that they can ask for help with issues that aren’t strictly medical. They may worry that additional help may be unaffordable. Guidance and support from an early childhood specialist can improve children’s health, safety, and socioemotional development, as well as provide early intervention that can be life changing and cost saving for families.

HealthySteps has demonstrated positive social-emotional results for participating children whose mothers experienced childhood trauma, compared with children who did not take part in the program.

Studies show that HealthySteps may yield positive outcomes in:

- Child social-emotional development
- Duration of breastfeeding
- Reducing postpartum depression
- Key social determinants of health (food insecurity, housing instability or homelessness, utility needs, transportation needs, interpersonal safety, substance misuse, tobacco use)
- Parent-child relationships
- Greater adherence to well-child visits and continuity of preventive care
- Vaccination rates
- Use of positive parenting approaches
- Child safety practices
- Decreased use of harsh and severe discipline
- Parental satisfaction with care

Fully funding HealthySteps is key to addressing issues that prove costly to families and the health care system over time. More importantly, this kind of accessible, expert, and comprehensive care improves the lifelong health and well-being of children and families, preventing significant health, social-emotional, academic, and behavioral problems down the road, promoting a brighter future for DC’s kids.

Who it helps

The District of Columbia is home to 26,286 infants and toddlers, many of whom live in households with low-wage earners. To best serve children and the communities in which they live, HealthySteps clinicians are embedded in pediatric primary care practices where the majority of current patients are enrolled in Medicaid, DC Healthy Families, or do not have insurance, as these are the eligibility categories for HealthySteps screenings and consultations.

Funding one full-time early childhood specialist enables a pediatric practice to provide HealthySteps’ required universal screenings to up to 2,000 children annually. From that population of 2,000 families screened, HealthySteps specialists can provide short-term child development and behavior consultations to up to 300 children annually and comprehensive services (i.e., ongoing, preventive, team-based, well-child visits) to an additional 300 children annually.

What’s next

Providing this kind of critical support to families with young children requires funding for specialists’ training and compensation. Implementation of this component of Birth-to-Three for All DC requires new allocations each year of $300,000 in local funding to DC Health from FY 2019-2022 until the program is operating in at least four pediatric primary care clinics throughout Wards 5, 7, and 8. Funding of $300,000 supports two care coordinator specialists and covers administrative expenses at each site each year. Over the four-year (FY19-22) financial plan, this expansion will require investments totaling $3 million. Once fully phased in, HealthySteps will require $1.2 million in ongoing annual investments.

2 American Community Survey Table B09001, low-wage population estimates for 2019, and the “Children in poverty by age group” measure from the Kids Count Data Center.