

Are Well-Child Visits Important?

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations

- Cultural Competence

Systems Expertise

- Service Delivery Systems

Direct Service Skills

- Responding with Empathy
- Life Skills

Communicating

- Listening

Thinking

- Solving Problems
- Planning and Organizing

Reflection

- Curiosity

We ask parents and caregivers about their child's well-child visits and immunizations during our home visits, but are they really important? According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), yes, they are. The CDC tells us that "well-child visits and recommended immunizations are essential and help make sure children stay healthy". Children who are not protected by immunizations are more likely to get diseases like measles and whooping cough. These diseases are extremely contagious and can be very serious, especially for babies and young children. In recent years, there have been outbreaks of these diseases, especially in communities with low immunization rates.

Well-child visits are also essential for tracking growth and developmental milestones, discussing any concerns about the child's health, and getting immunizations. According to the New Mexico Annual Home Visiting Outcome Report for the Fiscal year 2020, 67.6% of children enrolled in ECECD Home Visiting received well-child visits as recommended for their age by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which was an increase from 57% in 2019. Children in ECECD Home Visiting immunized on schedule stayed the same in 2020 and 2019 at 93%. Dr. Hassink states, "The American Academy of Pediatrics, and its 67,000 members, urges parents to make the decision to immunize. Pediatricians strongly recommend timely vaccinations because of what we know to be true: Vaccines are simply the best way to protect our children from these viruses and bacteria that can cause real and devastating harm. Just as you would never leave home without buckling your child into a car seat, vaccines will protect children from infectious diseases that are impossible to anticipate. We all have enough worries in our lives. Let's give ourselves the peace of mind that we have done everything we can to protect our children from these preventable diseases."

So now that we know they are important, how do we support parents in taking their children to their well-child visits during these challenging times? First, it is important to understand why they have not been able to get their child to their well-child visits and immunized. Is it fear that it is not safe to be in a doctor's office or clinic? Are there transportation issues? Are there other barriers involved in

getting to the well-child visit? Understanding the parent's perspective is key to supporting them in getting their child to their well-child visit.

How can we support caregivers? If they feel that it is still not safe to take their child to the doctor's office, ask them what would make them feel safe in a doctor's office or clinic? What do they have control over in terms of feeling safe? Have they thought of calling the doctor's office or clinic and asking about any special measures they have in place and ways they are safely offering well-child visits? Have they asked for information on any new protocols such as waiting in the car until their visit or limiting the number of people in the waiting area? If there are transportation issues and their child has Medicaid, have they inquired about transportation benefits with their Managed Care Organization (MCO)? Is it available in their area, and if not, are there any other solutions to their transportation issue? Do they have any family or friends that can transport them? Does their community have any transportation available, such as tribal vans?

Thinking through some solutions together could help them realize supports they already may have or new supports they may not have thought about. Are they worried that their child is so far behind on their immunizations that they would need to get too many shots at once? Does their child get upset during immunizations? How does the parent feel when their child is upset? What would a make-up schedule look like for their child? Would it help to develop questions with them for their Primary Care Provider (PCP) or clinic? Having all of the information may help to ease their fears and help them move forward with getting back on track with well-child visits and immunizations.

Another way to support parents in getting their child to their well-child visit is to help them prepare for the visit. Discuss the importance of being honest with their child that shots can pinch or sting, but that it won't hurt for long. Avoid telling scary stories or making threats about shots and remind the child that vaccines can help keep him healthy.

The CDC suggests the following 9 things parents can do for themselves and their baby before, during, and after shots:

1. Do research. Take a moment to read vaccine information.
2. Ask for a sweet solution. Tasting something sweet can help reduce their little one's pain response.
3. If they can, breastfeed. Breastfeeding can be a great way to calm and relax their baby, as it can help distract him and provide comforting close contact.
4. Ask for a pain-relieving ointment or spray. Using an ointment or cooling spray may reduce their own and their child's stress.
5. Be honest and calm. Kids are smart, so take the time to explain in simple terms what to expect.
6. Bring their child's favorite things. Bring anything their child finds comforting, like a favorite toy, blanket, or book to help them focus on something pleasant.
7. Distract their child. Right before the shot, call their child's name, sing their child's favorite song, tell a story, or just act plain silly to pull their child's attention away from the shot giver.
8. Big kids need support too. If their child is older, they can take deep breaths with them to help "blow out" the pain.
9. Care for the shot. Calm young infants by swaddling them. Hugs, cuddles, and soft whispers can help soothe older babies after a shot.

When we stay curious and open to the parent's perspective, we can understand possible obstacles and help them to develop strategies to overcome those obstacles. By using the reflective processes, we help them to identify their feelings and possible solutions. When we help parents develop strategies to deal with intense emotions for themselves and their child, we are helping to take some of the fear out of the process.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- Are you open and curious about why parents have not taken their child to their well-child visit?
- How do you help families prepare for well-child visits?
- Do you have any biases or fears about doctor's offices or clinics? If so, how are you able to support parents despite these fears?

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/visit/index.html>

Cradle to Career Policy Institute. (2020). *New Mexico Annual Home Visiting Outcomes Report Fiscal Year 2020*.

https://www.nmececd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020ECECD_HomeVisitingOutcomesReport.pdf

Hassink, S. MD, FAAP (2018), *An important immunization message from the AAP*.

Healthy Childen.org

Additional Resources

Easy Read Vaccination Schedule for Infants and Children 0-6

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/easy-to-read/child-easyread.html>

How to Hold Your Child During Vaccination (English and Spanish)

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/visit/holds-factsheet.html>

Making Shots Less Stressful (English and Spanish)

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/visit/less-stressful.html>

Vaxview NM: Access My Immunization Record

https://nmsiis.health.state.nm.us/webiznet_nm_public/Application/PublicPortal