

## Ensure Timely Access to Physical and Mental Health Services

CHAMPS, which stands for Children Need Amazing Parents, is a policy campaign focused nationally and in states to promote high quality foster parenting. CHAMPS is based on the understanding that all children need and do best in families. Foster parents, including kinship caregivers, play a primary role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. In fact, stable, quality foster parenting is one of the most powerful ways we can help children in foster care to heal and thrive. It is associated with a range of better outcomes for children, such as greater success in school, healthy relationships with family, and improved health and safety.

The CHAMPS policy playbook highlights six priorities for policy change, including ensuring timely access to physical and mental health services.

### Why is it important to ensure timely access to physical and mental health services?

Many children in foster care have experienced significant trauma and have complex physical and behavioral health needs. Foster parents can be effective partners in the child's healing process, but they need the appropriate information and support to ensure the children in their care have timely access to the physical and mental health services they require. Unfortunately, systemic barriers related to medical consent, information sharing, access and coordination of services, and training can hinder foster parents' ability to support a child's health and well-being. Policy should remove barriers so that children receive the care they need.

#### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- The American Academy of Pediatrics classifies children in foster care as a category with special needs as a result of their significant health needs and disparities compared to children who are not in out-of-home care.<sup>1</sup>
- Foster parents rated mental health needs of children in their care as the top challenge to the well-being and functioning of their family.<sup>2</sup>
- Foster parents are not receiving the role clarity, training, information and support they need to responsibly address increasingly complex health and mental health challenges of the children in their care. Foster parents' lack of understanding of behavioral and emotional problems can result in multiple disruptions and a revolving door of placements before children are referred for mental health assessments or interventions.<sup>3</sup>
- Foster parents reported the lack of timely access to needed physical and mental health services as a reason to discontinue fostering.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics (2015). Health Care Issues for Children and Adolescents in Foster Care and Kinship Care. Retrieved from: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/136/4/e1131>.

<sup>2</sup> Barnett, E.R., Jankowski, M.K., Butcher, R.L., Meister, C., Parton, R.R., & Drake, R.E. (2018). Foster and adoptive parent perspectives on needs and services: A mixed methods study. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 45(1), 74-89.

<sup>3</sup> Pasztor E.M., Hollinger D.S., Inkelas M., & Halfon N. (2006). Health and mental health services for children in foster care: The central role of foster parents. *Child Welfare*, 85(1), 33-57.

<sup>4</sup> Geiger, J.M., Hayes, M.J. & Lietz, C.A. (2013). Should I stay or should I go? A mixed methods study examining the factors influencing foster parents' decisions to continue or discontinue providing foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(9), 1356-1365.

## STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Through policy and supportive practice, we can ensure children have timely access to physical and mental health services. Strategies that work:

- **Authorize foster parents to consent to routine medical care.** Requiring birth parent or agency consent for all medical treatment, even routine care, can delay treatment for minor conditions that can keep children out of school and away from activities, such as team sports.
- **Facilitate electronic health information sharing.** Electronic information exchange can ensure that information is current, and also allow for tiered access to maintain appropriate privacy protections while promoting coordination.
- **Establish a mobile crisis response program.** Mobile crisis response provides immediate help to families, promotes placement stability and prevents the need for higher intensity interventions such as residential treatment.
- **Prepare foster parents to understand and manage children's physical and behavioral health needs.** Foster parents should receive training and support that addresses the effects of trauma, developmental delays, and other challenges. Foster parents need baseline knowledge and a sense of self-efficacy regarding management of children's complex needs.
- **Require child welfare agencies to have medical directors.** Agency leadership should bring a medical perspective to agency decision-making and policy formulation.

## TAKING ACTION

CHAMPS calls on child welfare leaders, legislators and other decision makers to ensure children in foster care have timely access to physical and mental health services. Suggestions for getting started:

- **Agency and program leaders** can engage stakeholders in examining existing policies and practices for supporting access to physical and mental health services. Invite foster parents, including kinship caregivers, and birth parents to help review policies and discuss improvements.
- **Legislators** can hold a hearing or listening session to learn more about existing policies and practice and how to remove barriers to physical and mental health services. In addition to foster and kinship caregivers, invite pediatricians, family doctors and mental health professionals who serve foster families to share their experiences.
- **Advocates, families and community leaders** can reach out to local and state organizations that represent physical and mental health professionals. Partner to identify professionals who serve foster families. As champions, they can help articulate the need and advocate for policy improvement.

## CHAMPS RESOURCES

- **For more information on CHAMPS,** go to [www.fosteringchamps.org](http://www.fosteringchamps.org)
- **For administrative and legislative policy examples** related to ensuring timely access to physical and mental health services, check out the CHAMPS policy playbook at <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org>
- **Find additional information and guidance** on physical and mental health services for children and youth in foster care from CHAMPS partner, the American Academy of Pediatrics, at <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/healthy-foster-care-america>
- **Learn more about CHAMPS technical assistance options** at <http://fosteringchamps.org/champs-technical-assistance/>
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