

Promoting Food Security During the Health Supervision Visit



Many children in the United States live in households that do not have consistent access to adequate food due to a lack of finances or other resources (ie, are food insecure). While many of these households have experienced economic hardships, food insecurity is not related solely to poverty. Urban, suburban, and rural areas all experience food insecurity.

“Food insecurity is not always something you can tell by looking at somebody, so we ask everybody... I never want to miss anybody; it’s [a] universal screening form. And if they don’t fill it out, it’s something I just ask them about.” – Claire Abraham, MD, FAAP

Food insecurity is a complex issue, complicated by biopsychosocial factors, including disparities in access to health care, housing, education, and economic opportunities. Racial and ethnic disparities have also been documented, such that children living in Black and Hispanic households experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity.¹

Additional risk factors for food insecurity include:

- Households with children, especially children under age 6¹
- Poverty¹
- Changes in economic stability²

- Unemployment and underemployment³
- Certain populations of families, such as immigrant families, large families, families headed by single women, and families^{4,5} experiencing parental separation or divorce
- Households with smokers⁶

The pediatric health supervision visit provides a venue to assess the stress of food insecurity on families and connect them to federal, state, or local resources that can support their ability to obtain consistent access to healthy, nutritious foods.

“Having enough food is important for growth and nutrition; it’s a part of well-child care [and] something we try to address, like any other medical condition.” – Claire Abraham, MD, FAAP

ABOUT BRIGHT FUTURES

Bright Futures is a national health promotion and prevention initiative, led by the American Academy of Pediatrics and supported by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration. The *Bright Futures Guidelines* provide theory-based and evidence-driven guidance for all preventive care screenings and well-child visits. Bright Futures content can be incorporated into many public health programs such as home visiting, child care, school-based health clinics, and many others. Materials developed especially for families are also available. Learn more about Bright Futures and get Bright Futures materials by visiting brightfutures.aap.org.



EFFECTS OF FOOD INSECURITY ON CHILD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

The stress that families experience when they are unable to consistently provide adequate access to food can contribute to anxiety, depression, and toxic stress, which can make optimal parenting difficult.^{7,8} In addition to the negative effects of food insecurity on parents and families, there are multiple adverse physical, mental, and emotional outcomes for children, including:

- Poorer overall health, as well as more emergency room visits and hospitalizations⁹
- Iron deficiency^{10,11}
- Lower bone density¹²
- Obesity because of unhealthy eating patterns associated with unavailability of nutrient-dense foods¹³
- Lower cognitive indicators²
- Dysregulated behavior and behavioral problems²
- Emotional distress (eg, dysthymia, suicidal ideation)^{2,14}
- Developmental problems that contribute to impaired school functioning and reduced academic achievement^{15,16}

These health effects may persist beyond early life, leading to the development of adult diseases (eg, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, cardiovascular disease).^{17,18}

“You have to make sure the kids are getting enough to eat before you can think about more complex things.” – Claire Abraham, MD, FAAP

ASSESSING FAMILIES FOR FOOD INSECURITY

Pediatric health care professionals can assess for food insecurity in a variety of ways:

Use the 2-question [Hunger Vital Sign](#) validated screening tool to ask about food insecurity at the majority of health supervision visits or sooner, if indicated.² Look for signs of food insecurity in children and families, such as food anxiety, diet monotony, decreased nutritional quality, inadequate food intake, health problems associated with nutritional deficiencies, and social and environmental risk factors. Families may also present with high levels of anxiety and stress that stem from preoccupation with food and meals, as well as maladaptive behaviors surrounding meal planning and food consumption (eg, eating nutrient-poor meals, decreasing the quantity consumed by adults

in the family). Additionally, they may experience feelings of shame, fear, and stigma.¹⁹

Recognize barriers to food security, including lack of access to grocery stores (eg, availability, distance, transportation, cost of travel, accessibility for vulnerable populations) and financial difficulties (eg, limited income or changes to income, affordability of healthy foods).

“I really encourage, when screening, to do it universally and to use some type of normalizing statement that helps avoid and decrease stigma. It is really important to screen everybody... but in a thoughtful and empowering way.” – Emma Steinberg, MD, FAAP

PROGRAMS ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY

Multiple local, state, and federal programs are available to families experiencing food insecurity. Pediatric health care professionals should be aware of these programs and make referrals when they identify eligible families. These programs include:

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): WIC is a federal program administered by state agencies that provides vouchers or electronic benefit transfer cards that can be used to purchase eligible food products or pay for nutrition counseling. Eligible participants include pregnant women, breastfeeding women (up to the child's first birthday), non-breastfeeding postpartum women (up to 6 months postpartum), infants (up to their first birthday), and children (up to their fifth birthday).

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): SNAP is a federal program administered by state agencies that provides nutrition assistance to low-income families and individuals through monthly benefits (eg,



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electronic benefit transfer cards). It is the largest food and nutrition program available through the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). Allotments are calculated using a percentage of the net monthly household income and are capped by the number of members of the household.

National School Lunch and National School Breakfast Programs: Children who are eligible for the National School Lunch program receive nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches in many public and private schools and residential childcare institutions. Similarly, the National School Breakfast Program offers children free, nutritionally balanced breakfasts in many schools.

Child and Adult Care Food Program: Administered by the USDA, the Child and Adult Care Food Program delivers reimbursements to state agencies for nutritious meals provided to children and adults who are enrolled in child day care centers, day care homes, adult day care centers, afterschool care programs, and emergency shelters.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP): SFSP is a federal program administered by state agencies that provides reimbursement to program operators who serve free, healthy meals and snacks to children and teens residing in low-income areas.

"We have resources we provide to the families at the visit and connect them with social workers to help them apply for government programs... Families that can get connected with the resources they need are able to then address other issues in their lives." – Claire Abraham, MD, FAAP

Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens: Food pantries and soup kitchens are vital local community resources that can fill gaps in food security for families who may not qualify for a specific program. However, it is important to note that food pantries and soup kitchens are often not

able to provide consistent access to healthy food items or food items required by specific individuals (ie, infants and toddlers).

"We developed a special program at the food pantries. We gathered the ingredients for a healthy meal, developed a recipe, made a video of a dietician or pediatric resident creating the recipe, and put that as a QR code on the recipe card. [At] the food pantry, [we] gave out the recipe card, samples of the recipe, [and] a little bag of ingredients. It was a really exciting thing that families seemed to love... We [also] built a community garden available to any family or group in the county, providing soil, fertilizer, seeds, and workshops. Every bed was filled, and people had an amazing experience growing their own food." – Mary Ann Rigas, MD, FAAP

MAKE THE MOST OF HEALTH SUPERVISION VISITS BY USING THE BRIGHT FUTURES TOOL & RESOURCE KIT

The *Bright Futures Tool & Resource Kit*, 2nd Edition, provides the forms and materials that pediatric health care professionals need to carry out preventive health supervision and health screening for infants, children, and adolescents. These materials can help health care professionals discuss safety promotion and injury prevention with families.

The *Toolkit's* Core Tools provide valuable resources that help pediatric health care professionals focus on safety promotion and injury prevention during the health supervision visit. Reviewing parents' and patients' responses on the **Previsit Questionnaires** gives insights related to safety promotion and injury prevention, providing a foundation for discussion during the visit. The **Visit Documentation Form** is a convenient resource for documenting activities during the visit. This form can be adapted for use in electronic health record systems. The **Education Handout** can help reinforce the discussion and provide additional information on promoting safety and injury prevention.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following resources can be used to learn about food insecurity, support families, and improve services.

[Screen and Intervene – A Toolkit for Pediatricians to Address Food Insecurity](#): This toolkit from the Food Research and Action Center provides education about food insecurity and offers guidance for pediatric health care



professionals regarding education and training, screening, interventions, and advocacy.

Food Insecurity: This AAP website includes a collection of research and recommendations summarizing the impact of food insecurity, recommendations for pediatric health care professionals for how to improve the lives of children who experience food insecurity, professional tools and resources, and resources for families.

Promoting Food Security for All Children: This AAP policy statement outlines how pediatric health care professionals can play a central role in screening and identifying children at risk for food insecurity and in connecting families with needed community resources.

Poverty and Child Health in the United States: This AAP policy statement offers a variety of strategies to address the effects of poverty on child health and recommendations for advocacy and community practice.

Bright Futures Tool and Resource Kit, 2nd Edition: Developed by AAP, this toolkit is designed to accompany and support Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents, 4th Edition. It contains forms and materials that relate to preventive health supervision and health screening for infants, children, and adolescents, including a Previsit Questionnaire (which includes the 2 validated questions and tip sheets focused on physical activity and community resources).

US Child Poverty Curriculum: This Academic Pediatric Association website provides educational tools that promote the understanding of the impact of poverty and other social determinants of health on child well-being.

Share Our Strength: This website provides information about the organization's mission, campaigns, programs, and community partnerships that support ending hunger and poverty in the United States and abroad.

Hunger and Food Insecurity: This Feeding America website offers information about the causes and effects of food insecurity, as well as facts and statistics about hunger inequities in specific communities (eg, children, seniors, Black communities, Latino communities, Native communities, rural communities).

Social Determinants of Health Literature Summaries – Food Insecurity: This Healthy People 2023 website offers an overview of the literature related to food insecurity, based on 4 primary objectives.

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