

Program Overview

Meeting the challenge of having communitywide impact on the health and wellbeing of infants and their families has gained momentum in communities across the country. Family Connects is the most successful evidence-based universal approach to supporting parents at the time of birth. Rigorous evaluations demonstrate that this program does indeed improve communitywide outcomes for families. The Family Connects model focuses on newborn infants, families, and communities to address family unmet needs and to identify critical gaps in the early childhood ecosystem to create population-level impact.

Community-wide service delivery is a paradigmatic shift in home visiting underpinned by the assumption that every family is vulnerable at the birth of a child, and community-wide eligibility is the best route to population-level change. Universal efforts complement, and do not replace, intensive targeted home-visiting programs by introducing all families to the local system of care, ensuring they receive what they need regardless of demographic factors.

Family Connects has three program components:

- *Community Alignment.* A community system of care, including identification of community services that support young children and families and the active participation of community stakeholders to foster local participation and program ownership.
- *Home Visiting.* Nurse home visits aim to connect with every family approximately three weeks after discharge from the birthing hospital to provide: assessment of the family to identify family risks and needs; health assessments of the newborn and postpartum mother; supportive guidance; responses to questions about infant care; and facilitated linkages to community resources.
- *Use of Data for Monitoring and Decision-Making.* Family Connects sites employ data and monitoring to document interventions, assess local program implementation, evaluate program impact, and support communities in using data for day-to-day decision-making. Aggregate reports summarize program activities, community penetration, quality assurance for adherence to the protocol, the prevalence of risk factors in communities, and accountability.





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The Family Support Matrix, developed by Family Connects, is a high inference approach used to assess family risks and needs in four domains: Health Care, Safe Home, Infant Care, and Parent Support. Twelve factors, three for each domain, guide the nurse and parent(s) in understanding the family's status. Each factor is rated as the family having no identified needs/risk factors, needs addressed during the visit, needs for connections to community resources, and urgent situations requiring immediate intervention. With family collaboration, the results are used to plan facilitated referrals to community services, including, but not limited to, longer-term home visiting programs available locally.

Two randomized controlled trials and a field quasi-experiment provide the evidence base for program benefits. Findings indicate that the program can be implemented with high participation rates and high adherence to the protocol, even at low cost. Follow-ups indicate that, compared with families not randomly assigned to receive the program, Family Connects families demonstrate more connections to community resources, better parenting behaviors, lower maternal anxiety and depression, fewer infant emergency hospital visits, and lower rates of child protective services investigations for child abuse.

Replication of the model is occurring at numerous sites across the country, funded by community governments, federal and state grants, Medicaid reimbursements, philanthropy, and corporate health systems.

References

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