

# What is HealthySteps?



**HealthySteps is an evidence-based, interdisciplinary pediatric primary care program designed to promote nurturing parenting and healthy development for babies and toddlers.**

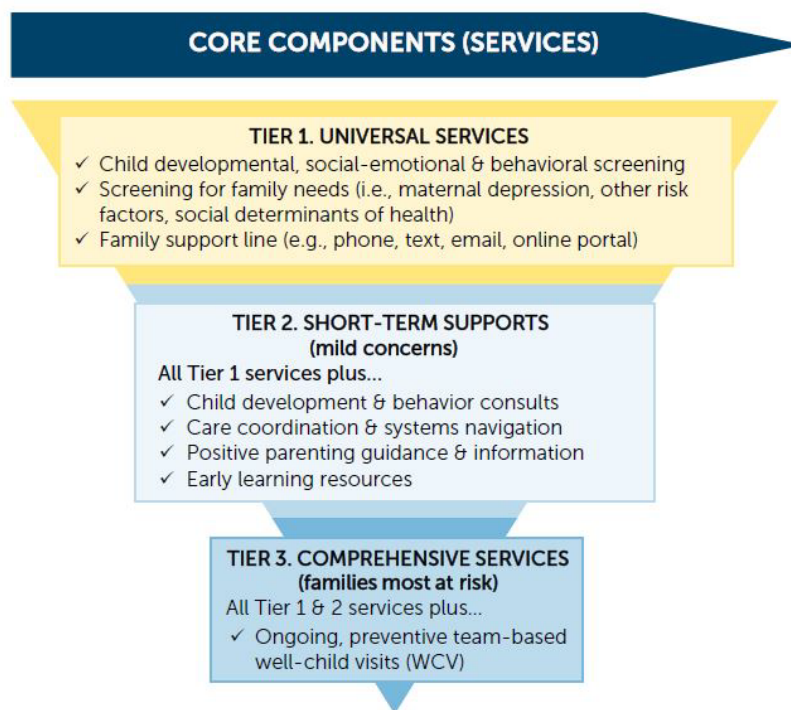
ZERO TO THREE's HealthySteps program provides early childhood developmental and behavioral health support to families where they are most likely to access it—the pediatric primary care office.<sup>1</sup> The HealthySteps approach means the entire practice works as a team to implement eight Core Components that strengthen the relationship between families and the practice and support strong caregiver-child attachment.

With HealthySteps, a child development and behavioral health promotion and prevention professional, known as a HealthySteps (HS) Specialist, connects with and guides families during and between well-child visits as part of the primary care team. The HS Specialist offers support for common and complex concerns that physicians often lack time to address, including behavior, sleep, attachment, perinatal depression, social determinants of health, and adapting to life with a baby or young child. HS Specialists are trained to provide families with parenting guidance, support between visits, referrals, and care coordination—all specific to their needs.

**HealthySteps offers an array of services to meet families' needs through a resource-efficient, tiered approach.**

The HealthySteps National Office at ZERO TO THREE has developed a risk-stratified and population-health-based model of care that connects each family with support and services in response to their unique needs.

If funding is abundant or patient populations are relatively small, sites may choose to provide comprehensive services for all families in a practice.



<sup>1</sup> Including pediatric practices, community health centers, family medicine practices, hospitals, and academic medical centers.

## Tier 1: Universal Services – For All Families With Children Age 0-3 in the Practice

Universal services—including screenings and access to a support line—are provided to all families with children age 0-3 in the practice. All children and families benefit from being in a HealthySteps site, even if they do not interact directly with the HS Specialist, as HealthySteps is a practice transformation model, with the entire practice working together to transform the promise of pediatric care for infants, toddlers and their families.



**Child Developmental, Social-Emotional, & Behavioral Screening:** HS sites routinely monitor and screen all children age 0-3 for physical, cognitive, language, social-emotional, developmental, and behavioral concerns on a recommended screening schedule. The National Office recommends a screening schedule that fulfills the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) latest best-practice guidelines (i.e., *Bright Futures*).<sup>1</sup> If they comply with National Office fidelity metrics, sites may adjust this schedule to fit their needs.

In addition to flagging possible concerns, screenings identify potential referrals to the HS Specialist and serve as an entry point for communicating with families about their child. HS Specialists are not solely responsible for implementing universal screenings but collaborate with practice staff in developing workflows, monitoring compliance, and quality improvement.



**Screening for Family Needs (i.e., maternal depression, other risk factors, social determinants of health):** HS sites regularly monitor and screen all families with children ages 0 -3 for important family needs, such as maternal depression, food insecurity, housing instability or homelessness, utility needs, transportation needs, interpersonal safety (e.g., domestic violence, interpersonal violence, community violence, etc.), substance misuse (alcohol and other drugs), and tobacco use.

The National Office provides a questionnaire to assess these various needs, but sites may choose to use other tools that cover these key areas of need. Results alert the HS Specialist and practice staff to make essential referrals and may be used to educate caregivers on how their life experiences impact their child's development and their parenting.



**Family Support Line (e.g., phone, text, email, online portal):** HS sites offer access to the HS Specialist to address non-urgent, non-medical questions on various topics such as child development, behavior and parenting. Sites may inform caregivers of this resource in various ways, including posting flyers in the waiting and exam rooms. Support line inquiries may lead to referrals to resources in the community or consultations with the HS Specialist as needed.

In response to recent research indicating that millennial parents prefer more modern forms of communication, sites may provide a broad range of HIPAA-compliant tools for parents to communicate with the HS Specialist, including phone calls, video chat, websites, patient portals, email, text messaging, and/or smartphone apps.

## Tier 2: Short-Term Supports – For Families with Specific, Time-Limited Concerns

For families with specific, time-limited concerns, in addition to Tier 1 services, HS Specialists provide behavioral health consults and in-house support and make referrals to resources and programs in the community to strengthen the quality of relationships and environments that support healthy growth—and they follow up to make sure families are supported.



**Child Development & Behavior Consults:** HS Specialists provide short-term consultations (approximately 1-3 visits) to families to address specific concerns about a child’s development and/or behavior or a caregiver concern (e.g., depression, substance misuse). When possible, a provider may bring the HS Specialist into the exam room during the appointment to address concerns immediately or to facilitate a “warm handoff” where the HS Specialist can briefly meet the family, assess the severity of their concerns, and schedule a follow-up appointment. Evidence illustrates that parents are more likely to attend a scheduled appointment after receiving a warm handoff.<sup>ii</sup> Based on needs or risks identified during a consultation, the HS Specialist may recommend a family participate in Tier 3—Comprehensive Services—moving forward.



**Care Coordination & Systems Navigation:** HS Specialists refer patients, caregivers, and families to in-house and community resources based on identified needs. HS Specialists partner with community resource providers and families to help caregivers coordinate and navigate complex systems, offering close follow-up and support when barriers occur. HealthySteps care coordination empowers families by enhancing their health literacy and systems navigation capabilities so they become their child and family’s own best advocates. To the best of their abilities, HS Specialists and other staff develop relationships with community resource counterparts through early, frequent engagement and communication around patient needs. Many HS sites convene local community resource stakeholders to address barriers to communication and information sharing.



**Positive Parenting Guidance & Information:** HS Specialists provide caregivers with guidance, education, information, and resources that help them support their children through the different stages of development. This includes regular, tailored anticipatory guidance that helps caregivers better understand their child’s developmental progress and behavior; timely discussions and partnering/problem solving about common parenting challenges such as safety, feeding, discipline, and limit-setting; teaching and encouraging caregivers to provide positive, responsive parenting; helping caregivers build strong, healthy attachment relationships with their children; exploring family risk factors and buffers of toxic stress, including caregiver self-care; helping caregivers understand their own history and how it impacts their parenting; and providing evidence-based, literacy level-appropriate and culturally attuned materials and resources, including handouts, videos, text messaging services, and apps.



**Early Learning Resources:** HS sites offer caregivers concrete strategies, activities, and tools designed to support their child’s early learning. Resources span a broad array of early learning subjects, such as language, literacy, science, technology, engineering, math, relationships, music, art, and social-emotional competence. They also include information about each subject, explain how and when children develop different learning skills and faculties, and provide easy, low-cost activities parents can do at home to encourage early learning at every age.

### Tier 3: Comprehensive Services – For Families Determined to be Most at Risk

For families with more significant risk factors and/or concerns, the HS Specialist and pediatric primary care provider jointly see the family at well-child visits. Families receiving Tier 3 services also receive Tiers 1 and 2 services.



**Ongoing, Preventive Team-Based Well-Child Visits:** For families in Tier 3, the HS Specialist provides support in the exam room prior to, during, and/or following a child’s routine health care maintenance visit. These visits are preventive in nature and begin as early as possible, potentially at the newborn visit. Meeting with families when they are already at the practice for routine visits is convenient for caregivers and ensures seamless coordination of care between the HS Specialist and medical providers. A HS Specialist is expected to participate in team-based well-child visits in person, as an integrated member of the care team.

The HS team at the site determines which families receive this comprehensive level of intervention. The HS Specialist is not limited to a patient’s routine appointments and may schedule additional visits as needed. If staffing allows, this component may be provided universally.

[Learn about the evidence base for the HealthySteps model](#)

---

<sup>i</sup> Hagan, J.F., Shaw, J.S. and Duncan, P.M. (2017) *Bright Futures: Guidelines for health supervision of infants, children, and adolescents*. American Academy of Pediatrics.

<sup>ii</sup> Germán, M., Hsu-Walklet, T., Gurney, B. A., Parekh, J., Stein Berman, R., Herrick, J., Briggs, R. D., Aviv, E. C., & Faro, E. Z. (2020). “Nice to meet you”: A quality improvement project to increase warm handoffs. *Clinical Practice in Pediatric Psychology*, 8(3), 247–256. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpp0000357>