



Compassion, Medical Home and School Readiness~ Beginning the Conversation in Washington State

Compassion

Why Talk About Compassion?

Compassion is part of the definition of a medical home, and compassion is part of healthy parent-child relationships which promote children's healthy social-emotional development and readiness for school. Compassion is not just a "feel good term" but can be a conscious way of living. Compassion is also based in science, and there are proven connections between compassion and child outcomes. *Seeds of Compassion* celebrates and explores the relationships, programs and tools that nurture and empower children, families and communities to be compassionate members of society (www.seedsofcompassion.org). This handout gives an introduction to compassion in the context of medical homes and school readiness.

Compassion and Young Children

Children are born "wired for feelings and ready to learn." (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) Children's development is continuously influenced by both biology (what they inherit) and experience (what happens in their lives). The first five years of life lay the foundation for a child's physical, social, and emotional well-being, and set the stage for life-long learning. Nurturing relationships are central to child well-being. Yet parents, child care providers and preschool teachers often do not have the resources they need to support children's health and development. A child's medical home can help change this, supporting the child and family in partnership with the community.

Medical Home

What is a Medical Home?

A medical home is defined as "primary care that is accessible, continuous, comprehensive, family-centered, coordinated, compassionate, and culturally effective" (American Academy of Pediatrics). In a medical home, a pediatric provider partners with the family and child to assure that all of the medical and non-medical needs of the child are met. The provider can help the family access and coordinate medical care, educational services, family support, and other public and private community services that are important to the overall health of the child and family. Medical homes help children be healthy and ready for success in school and life.

What Does a Medical Home Look Like?

A child has a regular doctor or other health provider who knows the child and family, and works with them to provide whatever care the child needs. This includes preventive "well child care," care for illnesses and injuries, and care for any ongoing medical or developmental problems. A medical home supports the "whole child" – physical, social-emotional and cognitive. A medical home provides care within a positive, ongoing relationship with the family over time.

Why is a Medical Home Important to the Health and Well-Being of Every Child?

Children receive better care when they have a medical home. They receive more preventive care, which helps parents learn about child health and development, and what they can do as parents to support their child. Children who have a medical home get better care for illnesses like asthma; and they spend less time in emergency rooms and hospitals. Care in a medical home costs families and society less money, and works better to help children and families be healthy. Children in medical homes have help getting the services they need, and parents have better access to information and supports.

School Readiness

What is School Readiness?

School readiness is typically means readiness for Kindergarten. School readiness has been defined as meaning three things: 1) Children are ready for school; 2) Schools are ready for children; and 3) Families and communities have the supports they need to help children be ready for school. School readiness is not just about a child or a family, it is about children, families, communities, and schools. There is evidence that almost half of children in Washington state are not ready for school, and multiple strategies are needed to improve this.

What is Children's Readiness for School?

School readiness for children is about healthy development of the "whole child." This has been defined across five areas of development:

- Physical health, well-being and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches to learning
- Language and literacy development
- Cognition and general knowledge

School Readiness (continued)

Parents are Children's First Teachers

Learning occurs in the context of nurturing relationships, starting first and foremost with parents. Most parents do not feel prepared for this role. There are evidence based services, such as home visiting and parenting education programs, which help parents obtain the knowledge and skills to be more comfortable and effective in this new role.

Children Benefit from Quality Early Learning

More than half of young children in the U.S. are in some form of early care and education on a regular basis. High quality child care enhances children's cognitive, social and emotional development and provides a link for children and families to comprehensive health, nutrition, and social support services. Long term studies have clearly demonstrated the benefit of high-quality early learning experiences. Most young children are not in high quality settings because they are often difficult to find and afford. Improving access to high quality early care and education programs will benefit children and families.

Community Services and Strategies Support Parents and Promote School Readiness

Meeting the needs of young children involves a partnership between families and communities to assure that all families have the information and resources they need to promote all aspects of their children's health and development. In addition to assuring needed services are available to families; governments, employers, businesses, and community organizations can also help parents promote their children's health and development through "child and family friendly" policies, including part-time work, flexible hours, and paid family leave.

Compassion, Medical Home and School Readiness

Medical Homes and School Readiness Efforts Improve Outcomes for Children and Families

A medical home promotes a child's healthy physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development through the doctor-family relationship and medical home services. This supports the parent-child relationship and connects the family to needed services and supports. School readiness efforts promote children's healthy physical, social-emotional and cognitive development so that children will be ready for success in school and life. Early learning efforts support parents, and provide services in the community which promote child health and development.

Reach Out and Read is a Proven School Readiness Program within the Medical Home

Reach Out and Read (ROR) promotes child and family literacy during regular well-child care visits to the doctor. ROR trains doctors and nurses to advise parents about the importance of reading aloud and gives free books to children at pediatric check-ups from six months to five years of age. ROR helps parents understand that books and reading aloud are an important part of healthy growth, learning and development. ROR emphasizes the importance of the nurturing relationship between parent and children, creating social and emotional connections while enhancing literacy.

By building upon the unique relationship between parents and medical providers, ROR helps families encourage early literacy skills so children enter school prepared to become successful readers. Studies in peer-reviewed medical journals show that parents participating in ROR read aloud more often, and demonstrate improvements in the expressive and receptive language of young children. See www.reachoutandreadwa.org for information about ROR programs in Washington State

Medical Homes Connect Families with Early Learning and Family Support Services

Doctors and medical homes are key connectors for parents and children to the information and services that will promote health and school readiness. Doctors know that a child's social-emotional well being is central to optimal physical health and to cognitive learning. Most children and families have regular visits with medical providers in the early years, and doctors are often trusted by families. Emphasizing the importance of compassion, social-emotional development, and family reading are important roles for the medical home.

Providing each child with a medical home, and offering early learning services to all families, will nurture and empower children, families and communities to be compassionate, productive members of society.

Docs For Tots & Seeds of Compassion

This handout was developed for a *Compassionate Health Care for Children and Families* workshop at the April 2008 Seeds of Compassion event in Seattle, Washington (www.seedsofcompassion.org). Docs For Tots Doctors advocate for the policies and programs which will help young children and families thrive. See our Docs For Tots Washington State website at www.docsfortots.org/dftwa.asp for more information, other handouts, references, and links.