

Health Literacy: Primary Health Promotion and Prevention

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Health literacy is basic health knowledge needed to understand the importance of preventive health care, managing chronic health conditions and knowing when to see a physician.

Anyone can benefit from receiving health information in a simple and easily communicated format with reading levels for materials being at the 4th grade. For providers working with low-income families, the importance of providing culturally and linguistically appropriate low-literacy health education can increase parent confidence to identify and manage children's minor illnesses and injuries.

Lack of education on management of chronic health conditions or minor illnesses and when to seek care can lead to over-utilization of medical services increasing costs for families, organizations, communities and society as a whole (CDC, 2009). Studies suggest that low-income families may have less access to preventive health care through a primary care provider for well-child preventive health visits due to lack of insurance or lack of knowledge of the importance of preventive health care. As a result, parents may be more likely to seek non-urgent, routine care through emergency departments (Grossman, Rich, & Johnson, 1998; Lombraill, Vitoux-Brot, Bourrillon, Brodin, & De Pourville, 1997).

Such patterns of care certainly interrupt continuity of care, may seriously affect the child's health and because ED [Emergency Department] fees are characteristically much higher than those in a primary care setting, contribute to the increase in society's cost for health care. (Grossman, Rich, & Johnson, 1998, p. 20)

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), health literacy is defined as "the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions" (CDC, 2009, no page number). Without "information and an understanding of the information's importance, people are more likely to skip necessary medical tests, end up in the emergency room more often, and have a harder time managing chronic diseases like diabetes or high blood pressure (CDC, 2009, no page number).

There are a variety of resources to assist providers in assuring that families being served have the opportu-

nity to fully understand health information. In Kansas, the Kansas Head Start Association (KHSA) has used a "low-literacy guide covering more than 50 common childhood illnesses" to teach parents in Kansas Head Start programs basic health and medical information. (www.ksheadstart.org/node/90)

KHSA implemented the University of California (UCLA) and Johnson & Johnson health literacy program, 'I Can' Help My Child Stay Healthy. The third grade reading level medical reference guidebook called "What to Do When Your Child Gets Sick" was utilized conducting training for parents to teach them how to identify and manage common health conditions. The guidebook provides simple illustrations and written information on minor illnesses with eyes, ears and nose; the mouth and throat; the stomach and skin. Other topics include breathing problems, bedwetting and what to do if a child gets hurt. In addition there is a glossary of common words that a health care provider may use when talking with a parent. There is a section for parents to write their health care provider's and emergency numbers, as well as instructions on when to call their doctor or clinic (Mayer & Kuklierus, 2008).

To learn more about this resource, health communication and health literacy, visit:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) www.cdc.gov/healthmarketing/healthliteracy/
- Healthy People 2010 (HP2010) www.healthypeople.gov/document/HTML/Volume1/11HealthCom.htm
- Reach Out and Read Kansas City www.reachoutandread.org/cgi-bin/kc.pl
- National Center for Cultural Competence <http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/NCCC/foundations/frameworks.html>

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