

Module 5

The Health Professional As Advocate

A Course for Health Professionals

Children's Rights and Child Health

The Health Professional as Advocate

Learning Objectives for Module 5

1. To understand the relevance of Human Rights and the principles of the Convention to public policy
2. To understand the positive and potentially detrimental effects of public policies on the rights of children to optimal health and development
3. To understand how to influence public policy using the framework of the principles of children's rights

Content of Module 5

This final module on child rights examines how the social, economic and physical environments in which children live can contribute to or deny them the right to fulfill their optimal development. It focuses on actions that pediatricians and other health professionals can take to raise awareness of the impact that public policy has on the well being of children, and on what we can do to advocate for greater protection of children's rights through changes in public policy.

Activity and Discussion

The intent of Activity 5.1 is to identify policies that have detrimental effects on children's health, and then to explore the potential role of health professionals as advocates for change to promote policies that ensure children's right to the best possible health. Table 1 may provide some insights into public policies of interest to you and/or those in the recent news.

Examples of the Impact of Public Policy on Children's Rights to the Best Possible Health

- **Child poverty** has a profound impact on children's physical, mental, emotional and psychological well-being.
- **Childhood accidents** can be exacerbated by the priority given to road users over pedestrians, by failure to invest in road safety programs and lack of attention to safety in design of public spaces.
- **Environmental pollution** is damaging the health of millions of children, for example, through toxic emissions, widespread use of chemical pesticides, lead in homes, etc.
- **The fashion industry** is encouraging increasing numbers of young girls to aspire to images of thinness that cannot be attained while eating a normal diet, resulting in a significant rise in the incidence of bulimia and anorexia.
- **Food advertising** targeted at children encourages a desire for foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, leading to a greater incidence of obesity and other chronic diseases.
- **Violence.** Children in many countries in the world are the only group of people not protected by law from all forms of violence. Physical punishment remains legal in all but a handful of countries and is widely used and tolerated despite the growing body of evidence of its harmful impact on children.
- **Discriminatory laws and practices** can and do cause profound damage to children's health and well being increasing the likelihood of mental illness, low self-esteem and depression, as well as poorer physical health.

Activity 5.1

In this Activity, learners will be asked to identify an aspect of public policy that has a detrimental impact on children's optimal health. Next, they will develop a strategy for advocating for the necessary changes to legislation, policy, practice and/or resources in order to better ensure the rights of children.

Activity 5.1 **Advocating for Changes in Public Policy and Practice**

Choose an aspect of legislation, public policy, or issue that you feel is having a particularly harmful impact on children's rights to the best possible health in the US or abroad. It may be one of those listed on the above Table, or it may be something of particular interest to you and those in your community.

Now consider the following questions:

1. Which child rights are being breached by the policy that you selected, and why is it important to address them?
2. What changes would be necessary in order to protect children's rights to health more effectively?
3. To what extent are changes needed related to health policy and practice and to what extent do they need wider reform?
 - Do you think that pediatricians and other health professionals have a role to play in seeking change on this issue? Why or why not? What unique contribution can you make as a result of your direct experience?
 - How might you develop a strategy to highlight your concerns and seek to achieve the changes necessary to protect children's health?
 - How might you involve children themselves in such a strategy?

Once you have considered the above questions, other, perhaps even more fundamental questions may arise that may be useful for you to explore in greater depth.

- Why do children need advocates?
- How can you prioritize children's issues?
- How can you develop a strategy for advocacy?
- How can you involve children and elicit their views?

Discussion

Ultimately, it will be necessary to begin advocating for children if you are to have an impact on public policies affecting the families you serve. Advocacy can occur in the context of direct patient care, or it can happen on the local, state and/or national levels to effect changes that will impact many families in many parts of the country or world. The following Table presents a framework for child advocacy that relates to the continuum of advocacy endeavors.

Table 2

Advocacy Strategies for Children's Rights
Gather evidence from other practitioners in the field and from children themselves on the extent and nature of the problem.
Commission and undertake specific research into the issue.
Publish articles, both in professional journals and also the popular media, highlighting the impact of a particular public policy on children's well being.
Seek other partners to press for change—NGOs, UN agencies, professional bodies, politicians, journalists, etc.
Organise conferences to gather experts together to share and exchange evidence and strategies for achieving change.
Look for evidence of how comparable issues are addressed, internationally.
Lobby government and parliamentarians to introduce the changes necessary to protect children's well being, using the evidence you have gathered from all sources.
Identify pending legislation into which changes can be introduced to achieve the improvements being sought.
Issue press releases whenever an opportunity arises to link your issue of concern to a topical news item.
Highlight how the government is failing to comply with its obligations under international law to protect the rights of children.
Gather evidence from children on their experience of the issue of concern—involve them in conferences, articles, use direct quotes from their experience, etc.

With respect to children living in developing countries, the issues impacting them may seem to have little relevance to children living in the US, UK and/or other developed countries. However, although the manifestation of issues like child labor, sexual exploitation, gender disparities, access to education, etc. may differ between communities in developed and developing countries, children in the US and other developed countries are affected as well. In considering your role and responsibility for advocacy, consider the need to advocate for all children, in the US and abroad. More than you might expect, in the context of a world being globalized, advocacy abroad will also have an impact on children in your communities.

Conclusion

A significant percentage of children in all societies are denied the right to optimal health and development, either as a result of public policies that impact directly or indirectly on their day-to-day lives, or as a failure to take the action necessary to provide healthy and safe environments for children. If children's rights are to be respected and realized, pediatricians must become skilled in and active in child advocacy. The following key points from this Module provide a framework to empower and capacitate pediatricians and Pediatrics to assume critical roles in child advocacy.

- Children's rights to the best possible health cannot be fulfilled simply through the provision of effective health care services. The social, economic and physical environments where they live can and do have powerful influences on their well being.
- Children lack the democratic rights that adults can use to protect their rights. Accordingly, they need adults willing to act as advocates on their behalf.
- Pediatricians and other health professionals have insight and experience with children's lives and how their right to the best possible health is affected by their environments, as well as how the actions and inactions of governments contribute to the failure to protect children's rights to health.
- When they advocate together as a body, and collaborate with communities, health professionals can tackle the barriers to children's rights to the best possible health, rather than simply treating the consequences on a daily basis in their clinics, health centers and hospitals.
- Children can contribute to their own protection along with adult advocates.
- Changes in the protection of children's rights need to occur in pediatric clinical practice, the delivery systems for health care services AND in public policy, if the optimal health and development of all children is to be protected and promoted effectively.

Additional Reading

Children are disproportionately vulnerable to the harmful effects of public policies because of their youth.

- ***Child poverty*** has a profound impact on children's physical, mental, emotional and psychological well-being. Inadequate diets, overcrowding, unsanitary housing, etc. The impact can extend well beyond childhood to impair long-term life chances.
- ***Childhood accidents*** are far more common among poor children and can be exacerbated by the priority given to road users than pedestrians, by failure to invest in safety programs, lack of attention to safety in design of public spaces, etc.
- ***Environmental pollution*** is damaging the health of millions of children through toxic emissions, widespread use of chemical pesticides, Lead in homes, etc.
- ***The fashion industry*** is encouraging increasing numbers of young girls to aspire to images of thinness which cannot be attained while eating a normal diet, resulting in a significant rise in the incidence of bulimia and anorexia.
- ***Food advertising*** targeted at children encourages a desire for foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, leading to a greater incidence of obesity and other chronic diseases.
- ***Violence*** is disproportionately targeted at children. In the UK for example, the risk of homicide for babies under one year is four times as great as for any other age group. Children in many countries in the world are the only group of people not protected in law from all forms of violence. Physical punishment remains legal in all but a handful of countries and is widely used and tolerated despite the growing body of evidence of its harmful impact on children. Furthermore, it promotes a message that it is acceptable to hurt someone smaller than yourself in order to make them do what you want them to do.
- ***Discriminatory laws and practices*** can and do cause profound damage to children's health and well being. Early marriage for girls and female genital mutilation, for example, can have dire consequences on health; and prejudice and race discrimination increase the likelihood of mental illness, low self-esteem and depression.

In these and many other ways, governments' public policies influence the extent to which the right to health and development is protected and promoted within a society. Too often, the best interests of children are subjugated to other, more powerful or influential interests. Pediatricians and other health professionals deal daily with the consequences of the failure to respect the rights of children to the best possible health, to an adequate standard of living, to a safe and healthy environment and to life itself.

More than any other professionals, pediatricians and other health professionals can bear witness to the detrimental impact of public policy on the lives of children. Through the treatment of individual children, they can document the cumulative consequences of social and environmental factors that are harmful to children's well being. This documentation provides the evidence needed for professionals to advocate for the changes that can prevent harm to children, rather than simply for them to intervene and treat after the harm has occurred.

Children need advocates. Children are relatively powerless in advocating for protection of their rights. They lack access to the channels that adults use to influence public agendas and debates.

- They cannot vote.
- They rarely have access to the courts.
- They are not members of trade unions or professional associations.
- They have little or no access to the media.
- They do not have powerful lobbies acting on their behalf to counter the well-resourced and sophisticated corporate lobbies that increasingly influence governments.

It is important that adults, who are informed about the situation of children and committed to promoting greater respect for their rights, are willing to become advocates for children. In so doing, it is important that they also help children learn to articulate for themselves, their concerns and priorities for change.

Criteria for determining where and what to advocate. There are many ways that pediatricians can use their expertise and knowledge of what happens to children as a consequence of public policy. The issues of primary concern vary from country to country, but there are invariably more issues than there are time and resources available to commit. The following criteria for determining where to focus energy are useful.

- *The scale and degree of harm.* How many children are affected and with what degree of severity?
- *The degree of urgency.* Is it an issue that should be addressed urgently if many more children are not to be affected?
- *The potential for enlisting broad public support.* A campaign is more likely to be successful if you can attract other partners to support the cause.
- *The topicality of the issue.* If the issue has attracted media attention, or public interest, you can capitalize on its topicality to promote the case from a children's rights perspective.
- *The current political environment.* You can exploit windows of opportunity. Examples would include: a) when a relevant bill is passing a legislative body that can

be amended to introduce better protections for children; or, b) a general election wherein you can lobby political parties to take your concerns or issues seriously.

- *The likelihood of success.* It may be a better investment of time to focus on policy issues that are attainable in the short-term, as well as other more challenging long-term goals.

Creating Change, First Steps. The first task in advocating for improvements in children's rights to optimal health and development is to identify what changes will be necessary. Will it require legal reform? Additional resources? Change in policy? Shift in public attitudes? All of these?

Can change be achieved locally or does it require state or national reform? For example, the introduction of a safe route to school strategy to reduce traffic accidents and promote children's opportunity for physical exercise can be lobbied for locally. A change in the law to limit the rights of parents to hit their children would require a state or national campaign and legal reform. The introduction of stricter controls on advertising of junk food during children's television viewing times would require a national campaign and legal reform.

Practical Strategies for Advocating Children's Rights. Once the required/desired change has been identified, appropriate action can then be taken to highlight issues of concern and campaigns for change. The following are some actions to consider:

- Gather evidence from other practitioners in the field, and from children themselves on the extent and nature of the problem.
- Commission and undertake specific research into the issue.
- Publish articles, both in professional journals and also in the popular media, highlighting the impact of a particular public policy on children's well-being.
- Seek other partners to press for change—NGOs, UN agencies, professional bodies, politicians, journalists, etc.
- Organize conferences to gather experts together to share and exchange evidence and strategies for achieving change.
- Look internationally for evidence of how comparable issues are addressed.
- Lobby government and legislators to introduce the changes necessary to protect children's well-being, using the evidence you have gathered from all sources.
- Identify possible legislation into which changes could be introduced to achieve the changes being sought.

- Issue press releases whenever an opportunity arises to link your issues of concern to topical news items.
- Highlight how the government is failing to comply with its obligations under international law to protect the rights of children.
- Gather evidence from children on their experience of the issues of concern. Involve them in conferences and articles, and use direct quotes from their experience.

The plight of children living in poverty is an example of situations faced by pediatricians every day. Children living in privately rented, substandard, multi-occupied housing are disproportionately vulnerable to accidents, fire, food poisoning, chest infections, respiratory disease and infestation. In such environments, they are denied many possibilities of respect for their right to the best possible health. If health professionals are witnessing a consistent pattern of these problems related to this environment, e.g., asthma, lead poisoning, accidents, etc., the only way they can protect these children's rights is to focus on the cause of the problem.

Focus social reforms on the causes of the problem. Health professionals can gather evidence of the patterns of illness and accidents and their incidence and location. This evidence can be used to press for increased housing regulation, introduction of minimum safety standards and a public commitment to seeking alternative accommodation for children. Health care providers can target their energies locally to persuade local authorities to address the problem, and nationally to seek legal reform to protect children for the future.



Optional Handouts



Module Five

The Health Professional as Advocate

HANDOUT 5.1

Examples of the Impact of Public Policy on Children's Rights to the Best Possible Health

- **Child poverty** has a profound impact on children's physical, mental, emotional and psychological well-being.
- **Childhood accidents** can be exacerbated by the priority given to road users over pedestrians, by failure to invest in road safety programs and lack of attention to safety in design of public spaces.
- **Environmental pollution** is damaging the health of millions of children, for example, through global warming, toxic emissions widespread use of chemical pesticides, lead in homes, etc.
- **The fashion industry** is encouraging increasing numbers of young girls to aspire to images of thinness that cannot be attained while eating a normal diet, resulting in a significant rise in the incidence of bulimia and anorexia.
- **Food advertising** targeted at children encourages a desire for foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, leading to a greater incidence of obesity and other chronic diseases.
- **Violence.** Children in many countries in the world are the only group of people not protected by law from all forms of violence. Physical punishment remains legal in all but a handful of countries and is widely used and tolerated despite the growing body of evidence of its harmful impact on children.
- **Discriminatory laws and practices** can and do cause profound damage to children's health and well being increasing the likelihood of mental illness, low self-esteem and depression, as well as poorer physical health.

HANDOUT 5.2

Strategies for Action in Advocating Children's Rights

Gather evidence from other practitioners in the field and from children themselves on the extent and nature of the problem.

Commission and undertake specific research into the issue.

Publish articles, both in professional journals and also the popular media, highlighting the impact of a particular public policy on children's well being.

Seek other partners to press for change—NGOs, UN agencies, professional bodies, politicians, journalists, etc.

Organise conferences to gather experts together to share and exchange evidence and strategies for achieving change.

Look internationally for evidence of how comparable issues are addressed.

Lobby government and parliamentarians to introduce the changes necessary to protect children's well-being, using the evidence you have gathered from all sources.

Identify possible legislation into which changes could be introduced to achieve the improvements being sought.

Issue press releases whenever an opportunity arises to link your issue of concern to a topical news item.

Highlight how the government is failing to comply with its obligations under international law to protect the rights of children.

Gather evidence from children on their experience of the issue of concern—involve them in conferences, articles, use direct quotes from their experience, etc.

HANDOUT 5.3

Key Lessons to be Drawn from Session Five

- Children's rights to the best possible health cannot be fulfilled simply through the provision of effective health care services—the social, economic and physical environments in which they live can and do have a powerful influence on their well-being.
- Children lack the democratic rights available to adults with which to fight to protect their rights--accordingly they need adults willing to act as advocates on their behalf.
- Pediatricians and other health professionals have a unique experience of how children's lives and their right to the best possible health are affected by their environment, and how the actions and inactions of governments contribute to the failure to protect their right to health.
- By advocating as a body, health professionals can tackle the barriers to children's rights to the best possible health, rather than simply treating the consequences.
- Children themselves have a contribution to make to their own protection alongside adult advocates.
- A greater recognition of children's rights in individual professional practice, the delivery of health services and public policy are needed if the optimal development and well-being of all children are to be protected and promoted.



Power Point Presentation



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