The term “health disparities” usually refers to differences in health status among various groups of people, based on their race, ethnicity, gender, and/or socio-economic status. Children and adults with disabilities also experience health disparities. And for children and adults from diverse populations with disabilities, disparities in health care are even more prevalent.

Disparities can result in poorer health for the individual, apart from a disability. It is important for families and providers to work together to keep children with disabilities healthy. This tip sheet examines how health outcomes for individuals with disabilities can be improved and how the ACA (Affordable Care Act) can facilitate this.

People with Disabilities and Health Disparities
A recent article in the American Journal of Public Health, *Persons with Disabilities as an Unrecognized Health Disparity Population* reported on “population-level differences in health outcomes that are related to a history of wide-ranging disadvantages, which are avoidable and not primarily caused by the underlying disability.” For example, children with special needs are even more likely than other children to be overweight and have preventable secondary conditions. Some of these include the development of diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension, and heart disease.

Some health disparities experienced by children with special health care needs may be due to lack of routine preventive care. The study notes that some preventive measures -- such as lead screenings, blood pressure checks, and ob-gyn care-- do not happen with the same frequency for children and adults with special needs as they do for the general population. This may be because the focus of care for people with disabilities is on their primary condition, so that preventive services recommended for everyone are overlooked, or perhaps seen as lower priorities that don’t justify the time or effort to seek them out.

What Families Can Do
Parents of children with disabilities or chronic illnesses need to be aware of wellness and prevention services that their children need. The Bright Futures Pocket Guide for Families provides guidelines of these services that typically occur at well-child visits. (See Resources.)

By being aware of preventative services, a family can work with their child’s doctor to address their child’s special health care needs and wellness needs. For example, if their child needs bloodwork for their underlying condition, families can ask that recommended screening tests such as lead or cholesterol measurements are done at the same time.
An open and trusting relationship between a family and provider will help both keep tabs on all the needs of the child. While the health services needed by a child with a disability are critical, helping a child develop healthy habits may prevent chronic problems in the future. Families partnering with providers to follow the Bright Futures wellness and prevention guidelines can aid in this, and lead to better health outcomes for children with special health care needs.

In recent years, a “Life Course” approach has been developed by healthcare professionals to keep children healthy. Life Course Theory goes beyond looking just at the biological causes of illness. It looks at all the things that affect our health and well-being. Social, economic, and environmental factors play key roles in determining our health. For example, if we cannot buy healthy food in our neighborhood because it is too expensive or there is no grocery store or community garden, we will have a harder time being healthy. If our community has a lot of pollution, it will affect the quality of our air and water, and our health.

For families, a life course approach means trying to do things to promote health within the family and community. It means providing healthful diets, promoting regular physical activity, keeping our neighborhoods safe, etc. Helping all children to develop healthy habits early in their lives can lead to better health when they are adults.

For more information on Life Course, see [http://www.fv-impact.org/about/project-activities/life-course/](http://www.fv-impact.org/about/project-activities/life-course/).

**How the ACA Helps**

Health and wellness are promoted by the ACA in several ways:

- Wellness and prevention services — including immunizations, well-child check-ups, lead-screening and other screenings — are free when provided by in-network providers. A complete list can be found at [https://www.healthcare.gov/preventive-care-benefits/](https://www.healthcare.gov/preventive-care-benefits/). Note, though, that there may be costs if using out-of-network providers, so families should check with their insurance plan before using providers that are out-of-network.
- Insurers must cover children with pre-existing conditions.
- Depending on a family’s income level, the ACA may help people pay for their insurance premiums and copays.
- The ACA allocates resources for employer wellness programs.
- Grant funding is provided in the ACA to support evidence-based community prevention programs and school-based health centers.
- National initiatives, such as the National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council are established by the ACA.

This tip sheet is based on an ACA blog authored by Lauren Agoratus, M.A. Lauren is the parent of a child with multiple disabilities who serves as the Coordinator for Family Voices-NJ and as the southern coordinator in her the New Jersey Family-to-Family Health Information Center, both housed at the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) at [www.spanadvocacy.org](http://www.spanadvocacy.org). More of Lauren’s tips about the ACA can be found on the website of the Family Voices National Center for Family/Professional Partnerships: [http://www.fv-ncfpp.org/](http://www.fv-ncfpp.org/).

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