

Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration
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Guilford Child Health, Inc.

Guilford Child Health, Inc. (GCH) is a model pediatric practice providing general and specialty care for children from birth through adolescence. This private, nonprofit practice mainly serves children in families with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines. In addition to day-to-day concerns about their children, these families also experience the added stress of low socioeconomic status. By using a medical home approach, Guilford Child Health is able to commit to providing the highest quality care while embracing an outlook that is compassionate and inclusive for their patients and their families.

In 2000, Guilford Child Health received a Commonwealth Fund grant to begin the North Carolina Assuring Better Child Health and Development (ABCD) project. One of only four states funded nationally, North Carolina used the Community Care of North Carolina networks to build from a single quality improvement project targeted to children in one network (including GCH) to 11 networks during the third year of the grant and subsequently move the program statewide. The ABCD project was designed to better integrate services for children with developmental needs. It incorporated two components: (1) a standardized screening tool (Ages and Stages Questionnaire) used at selected well-child visits, and (2) collaboration with local and stage agencies and families to develop a system to identify and serve children with developmental needs.

Developmental screening has always been an important initiative for Guilford Child Health. In 1999, when the practice first began tracking screening efforts, staff used the Denver Screening tool that required 20 to 30 minutes of staff time and cooperation of the child. Because of the time needed to complete the exam, few children—mostly those who were suspected of having a developmental delay—received the screening. Through the ABCD project, GCH began using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. This tool involves parents by having them report on their child's development. It is easy to score, has excellent sensitivity and specificity, and fits easily into the practice flow. Moreover, it recognizes the parents as experts on their child and involves them in the decision-making process regarding the child's health, development, and other needs. Guilford Child Health is one of the few pediatric practices that is able to document the long-term effectiveness and benefit of developmental screening.

Dr. Marian Earls, medical director of GCH and developmental pediatrician, notes "using this tool allows the parents to become a partner in the visit and the visit is more family-centered. When a parent understands their child's behavior, they are better able to understand how to manage that behavior." Other providers in the practice note that having the tool completed before the visit helped them focus on the needs that parents identified and work together with the parents to develop solutions.

Collaboration and teamwork are major factors in the success of the ABCD project. GCH has developed relationships with many local and state agencies through wraparound services. The GCH provider team meets regularly with representatives of WIC, children's developmental service agencies (CDSA), Guilford County Department of Social Services, Guilford County schools, child service coordination, school health nursing, community nursing, and family planning. The meetings help link families with available resources and provide some continuity between agencies.

Since the inception of the ABCD project, Guilford Child Health has built upon the initial structure to offer a wider range of integrated services to all its patients and families. The ABCD screening is identifying

children with developmental delays at earlier ages and physicians are the largest referral group to services for children ages 0-3 through the CDSA. This allows children to get appropriate services and support earlier in their development. The ABCD screenings are now more comprehensive, including social and emotional development and maternal depression screenings during the two and four month well-child visits. In addition, screenings for school age and adolescent patients that include components of development, learning, and psychosocial issues are a routine part of well-visits. GCH has an integrated program with developmental pediatricians, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, a speech and language pathologist, and licensed clinical social workers.

These provider teams can work with patients at the same time to deal with psychosocial or mental health issues, all while in the relative comfort of the primary care practice. An integrated pediatric neurologist is available one half day per week and specialty consultations are available on-site. GCH was a participant in the mental health integration project through Community Care of North Carolina (CCNC). GCH providers utilize care managers from the CCNC network who extend care into community.

The primary care services have also become more integrated. The primary care providers and licensed clinical social workers have a team-directed care clinic one half day per week so that patients with chronic conditions or developmental delays can have longer visits. Community liaisons help patients set up appointments, arrange transportation, link them to resources like childcare or summer camp, facilitate and track referrals, and help families navigate the often complicated, disjointed health care system. The specialty staff has grown from a pediatric neurologist and asthma and developmental pediatricians to include licensed clinical social workers, a child psychiatrist, a child psychologist, and nutritionists.

Initially, Guilford Child Health focused on building systems of care in order to meet the special needs of children with developmental disabilities and chronic diseases, but the improvements in integration benefit all children in the practice. The integration of services facilitates healthy relationships with families. GCH uses a comprehensive approach so that families can access many services in the practice. Great working relationships with resources in the community offer benefits to families rather than just a phone number to call. The GCH providers strive to treat the whole child in the context of family, school, and community.

Marian Earls, MD, FAAP, medical director of Guilford Child Health, Inc., contributed to this article.