



News Release

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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS: FOSTER CHILDREN NEED BETTER COORDINATED HEALTH CARE TO ENSURE APPROPRIATE USE OF PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATIONS

Washington, D.C.—Children in foster care need coordinated medical care to ensure that any treatment they receive, including psychotropic medications for behavioral and emotional problems, is appropriate and part of a comprehensive health plan for these children, according to testimony provided today by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

“All children, including children in foster care, should have a medical home,” said Laurel K. Leslie, MD, MPH, FAAP, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Task Force on Foster Care. “We must ensure that, in removing them from their homes, we improve the health and well-being of foster children and do not further compound their hardship.”

Thursday’s hearing, before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, focused on reports of potential overuse of psychotropic medications among foster children.

Responding to recent analyses and media reports that too many foster children are being prescribed too many psychotropic medications, Leslie said that at this time, “it is difficult to know...whether the use of these medications by children in foster care is appropriate.

“Clearly medication can be helpful to some children,” she said, noting it can be a useful part of a more comprehensive treatment strategy for these children. But, Leslie warned, if these children continue to have fractured care—that is, having their care overseen by a revolving door of doctors, caseworkers and other adults—“there is a greater risk that medications will be prescribed to control children’s behaviors in the absence of individualized service plans that might offer the greatest chance for success.”

Leslie recounted the heartbreaking story of one of her young patients, a 4-year-old whose violent tantrums stabilized when Leslie was able to wean her down to one medication and teach her foster parents effective behavioral interventions. But when the child was placed for adoption in a neighboring county, none of that information was passed on to her new family or doctor. The tantrums returned and the adoption fell apart.

AAP recommendations to protect such children include:

- Provide a medical home—that is a physician who would have an ongoing relationship with the child no matter where he or she is placed—to give foster children “a crucial source of stability, continuity of care and information;”
- Require that children receive a comprehensive physical, developmental and mental health assessment within 30 days of entering state custody;
- Establish a protocol to be followed when prescribing psychotropic medications to foster children;
- Create a system to ensure the effective transfer of physical, developmental and mental health information among professionals who treat foster children;
- Provide comprehensive health insurance to foster children to ensure they receive optimal care;
- Create a system to track the use of psychotropic medications among foster children;

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety and well being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults.