

INSPIRING VIBRANT HEALTH

Staying strong from the start: Childhood checkups prevent later health challenges

By Greg Bradbard and Deanna Hendrick
IEHP FOUNDATION

There is nothing quite like holding your baby for the first time — and the sense of protection for its well-being that is instantly felt looking in its eyes and feeling its tiny fingers wrapped around yours. In those moments, you might quietly make countless promises, but the most vital one is to keep the child safe and healthy.

In addition to figuring out how to ensure your baby is well nourished, gets enough rest, has a suitable car seat for travel and has a safe place to call home, early health care visits should also be on the list of must-do's. Research confirms the importance of childhood checkups and early screenings to help prevent and reduce later health challenges.

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that infants have their first appointment with their pediatrician within the first week of birth and continue monthly visits until their first birthday, followed by visits at 15, 18 and 24 months, and then annually from 2.5 years onward.

As highlighted by Tara Tokijkla, director of quality improvement at Inland Empire Health Plan, routine pediatric wellness visits offer many benefits.

“These visits facilitate early detection of health issues, tracking of physical and developmental milestones, administration of crucial immunizations and provide ongoing parental education and support,”



An Inland Empire resident attends a checkup. **INLAND EMPIRE HEALTH PLAN**

Tokijkla said.

For parents, wellness appointments can provide an opportunity to ask questions and discuss concerns regarding their child's health, while also receiving valuable tips from a physician on safety, nutrition and development. If any issues are identified, pediatricians can also help with referrals to specialists for comprehensive and early intervention.

Early childhood health visits often include hearing and vision tests as well as vital childhood immunizations, safeguarding children from serious illnesses like measles and influenza. Moreover, your doctor will also ensure that immunization records are kept up to date, which is often required for day care and school enrollment.

In addition to health care providers, there are

organizations across the Inland Empire that provide resources and support to families during the critical early years of a child's life.

First 5 San Bernardino focuses on children's health and development from ages 0-5 in San Bernardino County, emphasizing the importance of early care and education. Executive Director Karen Scott says “by focusing on the earliest years, we have an opportunity to give our kids a strong start in life and provide the essential building blocks for a child's developmental journey, shaping the cognitive, social and emotional foundations critical for life-long learning, vibrant health and overall success.”

Both local First 5 organizations in Riverside and San Bernardino counties partner with and support nonprofit and community-based organizations to

deliver essential programs and resources for families with young children. One of those organizations is The Mom & Dad Project, a family resource center in the Big Bear area that helps families in hard-to-reach mountain communities navigate the early years of health and wellness.

“Preventive care, developmental screenings and consistent support ensure that every family gets the strong start they deserve — and that no parent has to navigate that journey alone,” said Megan Meadors, executive director of The Mom & Dad Project.

Meadors recounted a story demonstrating the powerful impact of preventive care for infants. A young first-time mother who was enrolled in The Mom & Dad Project's home visiting program received weekly support from a trained

family support specialist. During one of the well-baby visits, a nurse practitioner noted significant weight loss and expressed concern for the baby's well-being. As a result, it was discovered that mom wasn't producing enough breast milk. The family immediately received additional support, including lactation education and help transitioning to a nutrient-rich formula. Within a week, the baby gained over a pound and continued to grow.

Despite the importance of early childhood health care, many families struggle to keep up with attending recommended appointments and getting vaccinations for their children. KFF News recently reported there's a national decline in children's vaccinations and missed preventive care visits. The decrease in early childhood preventive care began during the pandemic and has continued, worsened by increasing vaccine hesitancy due to conflicting messages about vaccine safety.

The National Association of County Health Officials found that over 80% of local health departments across the U.S. reported challenges with parent and patient vaccine hesitancy in 2022 — a 56% increase from 2017.

However, the evidence is clear that routine vaccinations keep infants and children safe from many diseases, including polio, mumps and diphtheria, which have all been nearly eradicated due to regular immunizations. Unfortunately, preventable diseases like measles are starting to emerge again, and alarmingly there have been grow-

ing outbreaks in Texas, Utah and Arizona.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which sets vaccine recommendations, oversees rigorous vaccine testing and monitors immunization safety and effectiveness, emphasizing that vaccinations are one of the best protections against 16 harmful diseases in children. Side effects are typically mild, and severe complications are very rare.

For new parents, researching vaccines' effectiveness and side effects is important to ensure your baby is receiving the best and essential care. And, even as it can be difficult watching your little one receive a shot, as many health experts, doctors and parents have attested, those quick few seconds of unpleasantness can help provide a lifetime of health and protection.

If you have questions on vaccines or preventive care, be sure to speak with your doctor or health care provider. Many other local community organizations, health departments, and physicians are also available to provide reliable advice and guidance. Additionally, credible digital resources like HealthyChildren.org from AAP are also a good place to start.

IEHP Foundation provides resources and support to strengthen the local leaders and nonprofit organizations that make Inland Empire families healthier. Because when everyone in the Inland Empire lives a full and vibrant life, our region thrives.



This rendering depict an inside area of a new patient tower coming to Riverside Community Hospital. The expansion will include the 11-story tower, with a labor and delivery, postpartum and antepartum departments, plus a pharmacy, radiology, endoscopy suite, over 200 medical-surgical beds and 54 intensive-care beds. Hospital officials hope the expansion will help meet growing health care needs in the Inland Empire. **COURTESY OF HCA HEALTHCARE**

HOSPITAL

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our residents will have access to the resources, specialists and support they deserve — right here at home,” Riverside City Council member Philip Falcone said in the release.

Hospital spokesperson Cassandra Jones said the cost of the expansion — including the 459,496-square-foot tower, parking structure, emergency room entrance redesign and new campus driveways — will

be about \$912 million.

The tower will be built on the site of the hospital's current parking garage, parallel to the hospital's seven-story patient G Tower, Jones said. When the new parking structure — on which construction already has started — is completed in December 2026, the former parking area will be demolished.

Groundbreaking for the new tower is set for winter, Jones said.

Since 2021, Riverside Community Hospital has completed several overhauls

that invested \$79 million into the facility, officials said.

The projects include several expansions to its emergency room department, a 35-bed inpatient unit, expanding its neonatal ICU and telemetry unit, adding imaging technology to include three CT scans, MRI and X-ray machines, renovating its cardiac catheterization laboratories, surgical ICU department and the ER trauma bay area.

Hemstead said the latest tower will meet California's “stringent seismic standards,”

which mandate that all hospitals upgrade facilities by 2030 to withstand earthquake activity and remain operational.

“A new inpatient building allows us to have an earthquake-safe hospital operational sooner than a remodel of our older towers and, most importantly, allows us to have a facility with a longer lifespan than our current aging hospital,” he said. “This expansion is part of our broader commitment to deliver safer, smarter and more comprehensive care.”

TEMECULA

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Administrator of the Year by the district.

The 30-year educator has pushed academic achievement, innovation and partnerships with families and the community, the release states.

“Dr. Velez is exactly the leader TVUSD needs right now,” Board President Dr. Melinda Anderson said in the release. “Her steady leadership, deep roots in this community, and unwavering commitment to students make her uniquely qualified to guide our schools into the future.”

In her Temecula schools career, Velez has been a principal, district executive and most recently held the assistant superintendent post.

The district educates about 28,000 students across 29 schools.

Velez's annual salary has not yet been set by the board, district spokesperson Jodie Mueller wrote in a Tuesday email.

Woods, who spent 38 years in public schools, came to Temecula six months after the school board fired Superintendent Jodi McClay without cause.

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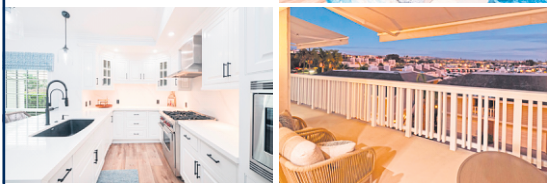
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