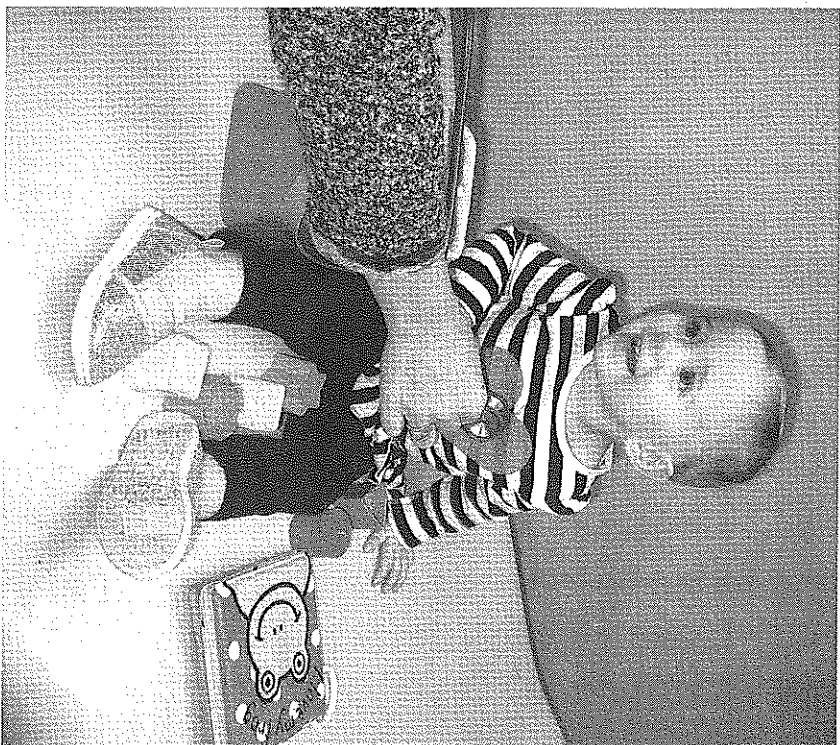


# Focusing on 1st Five

## New Opportunities program promotes healthy mental development

By **BRENDA HEITHOFF**  
Health View Editor



One-year-old Adleigh laughs as a provider listens to her heart during a recent well-child visit. As part of Iowa's 1st Five Healthy Mental Development initiative, local primary care physicians will play an important role in the early identification of children's social-emotional development. In Carroll County, New Opportunities will partner with the providers and serve as care coordinator for the program.

Seven hundred.

That's the number of new neural connections that are formed every second during the first few years of life. Numbers like these highlight the importance of early childhood to the learning, behavior and health of later life, says Paula Klocke, Health Services director at New Opportunities in Carroll.

Klocke is overseeing a new program for Carroll and surrounding counties — 1st Five — that focuses on children's social-emotional development during the first five years of life.

Research has shown that the foundations of mental health are set in the first five years of life. During these years, children rapidly develop social and emotional

capacities that prepare them to be self-confident, trusting, empathetic, intellectually inquisitive, competent in using language to communicate and capable of relating well to others, according to the Iowa Department of Public Health. These emotional skills form the foundation of a child's "healthy mental development" — to develop the ability to regulate and express emotions, form close personal relationships with other children and adults, and explore and learn from their environment. This social-emotional foundation also plays a key role in determining a

See 1st FIVE, Page 20

### Study shows harm caused by adverse childhood experiences

Results of an ACEs study conducted in Iowa last year reinforce the need for prevention initiatives like the 1st Five Healthy Mental Development program, says Peg Dohrer, Health Services assistant director at New Opportunities in Carroll.

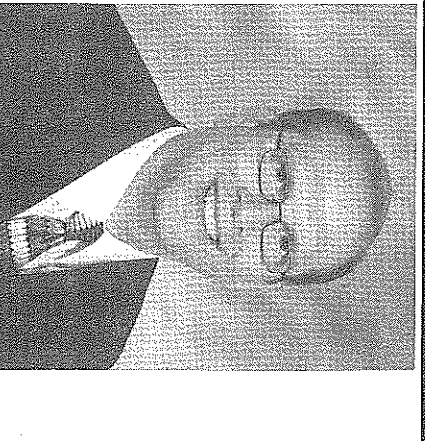
ACEs is an acronym for "Adverse Childhood Experiences," explained Dohrer, which are experiences that harm social, cognitive and emotional functioning, and dramatically upset the safe, nurturing environments children need to thrive.

See ACEs, Page 21

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**1st Five, from Page 9**

child's school readiness.

When young children do not achieve the milestones linked to healthy mental development, they are at risk to do poorly in the early school years, putting them at increased risk for school failure, juvenile delinquency, adult mental health concerns and other problems, explained Klocke.

In an effort to increase the early identification of social-emotional developmental concerns in children ages 0 to 5, Iowa created the 1st Five Healthy Mental Development initiative, which builds partnerships between primary care physicians and public service providers to enhance high quality well-child care.

Initially, seven care-coordinating sites were involved, encompassing 13 Iowa counties. Four additional sites were recently added to the program, including New Opportunities in Carroll, which will coordinate care in five counties: Carroll, Audubon, Dallas, Guthrie and Sac.

With over 90 percent of

Iowa families taking their children to a primary care provider before the age of 5, physicians have a unique opportunity to play an important role in early identification and treatment of children's developmental issues, said Klocke.

She explained how 1st Five works:

**Step 1**

The primary care provider performs standardized surveillance for social/emotional development, family stress and parental depression.

**Step 2**

When a medical provider discovers a concern, the provider makes a referral to a 1st Five coordinator. In Carroll County, this would be New Opportunities in Carroll.

**Step 3**

Shortly after receiving the referral, the coordinator contacts the family to discuss available resources that will meet the family's needs.

Often other issues come to light during these discussions and additional referrals are made. For every one medical provider referral to 1st Five, two to three additional refer-

als are identified when the care coordinator contacts the family. The coordinator works extensively with families to assure follow-up and access to services.

**Step 4**

The coordinator then provides feedback to the referring provider on the status of the referral.

"Medical providers see individuals much more frequently than someone would necessarily see a mental health professional, and some people wouldn't seek out mental health help," added Peg Dohrer, New Opportunities Health Services assistant director. "If we can get doctors to screen for social-emotional concerns and then immediately send that referral back to us, we will take care of everything else."

New Opportunities received a 1st Five planning grant last month and is currently making connections with area healthcare centers to determine what local doctors are already doing to screen for social-emotional issues, and identify which physicians are interested in

being a part of 1st Five. A full-time staff member will soon be hired to work with the 1st Five initiative.

Klocke explained why New Opportunities is well equipped to serve as a care coordinator for 1st Five.

"We do this every day, through our WIC clinics and other programs," she said. "This is branching out into the medical community."

Dohrer talked about the relationship that New Opportunities already has in place with many local providers.

"We do a lot of referring to medical providers as part of helping people find a medical or dental home," she said. "With 1st Five, we want to get that relationship to be a two-way street."

Dohrer emphasized that New Opportunities, not the participating physicians, will be taking on the bulk of the workload.

"We want to assure the providers of our role ... that we will carry the burden," she said. "We just need them to get the referral to us."

In addition to partnering with health care providers, New Opportunities will also work closely with mental health providers on the 1st Five initiative.

"We will have to assess

the capacity of area mental health providers," said Dohrer. "We know there is a lack of mental health providers in this region, but we also have access to gap-filling services that can help out between when we get that referral from a medical provider and the child's first mental health appointment."

She continued: "We will coordinate other care as well, such as parenting classes or substance abuse treatment, for the child's caregivers, if needed. We are focusing on the child, but a child's mental health is dependent on the health of the entire family."

The 1st Five initiative is in line with current healthcare reform trends that place a big emphasis on outcomes, said Dohrer.

"The funding system for healthcare is headed more toward outcomes, and 1st Five has a potentially great impact on outcomes," she said. "If you can identify children early on, you can intervene and do things that make a difference."

For more information, contact Klocke at (712) 792-9266, ext. 201, or visit the Iowa Department of Public Health website: [www.idph.state.ia.us/lstfive](http://www.idph.state.ia.us/lstfive).



**New Opportunities, Inc.**

Carroll County:  
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- 1st Five Healthy Mental Development Initiative
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- Share Iowa
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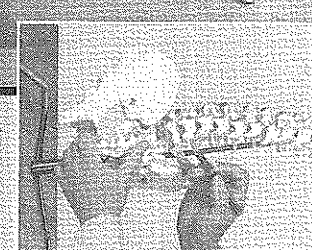
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