

# Protecting Our *Children*

## Building Networks To Serve Children And Families

(NAPSA)—There is good news for parents in Orange County, California who do not know where to look for help. A public agency is finding ways to serve families when a child is born weeks premature, or when a 4-year-old is kicked out of preschool for disruptive behavior, or when a child has a dental or health issue that the parents could not afford to address.

It is tackling problems such as these, even in the face of increasingly limited funding. In addition, its innovative approach may serve as a model for similar agencies nationwide. By making smart use of its funding and encouraging coordination among agencies, it is finding ways to address the needs of children before they enter school.

For example, the Children and Families Commission of Orange County, California reaches out to parents with school health fairs and the county's "2-1-1" resource and referral hotline. It serves their needs by acting as an umbrella organization to combine the efforts of pediatricians, school nurses, clinics and public health centers into a web of supportive services.

### Early Health Needs

Among the many services the Commission has pulled together are efforts to address children's health and development issues as early as possible. For example, when it was reported that one-third of Orange County kindergartners have untreated tooth decay, the Commission invested in a program—Healthy Smiles—to provide dental services to more than 14,800 children.

It helped coordinate the efforts of a local hospital and university to create an asthma center that serves 3,800 children a year. It formed the first center dedicated



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to the treatment of autism in Orange County, evaluating children's needs and connecting parents to the appropriate services and treatments.

The Commission also helped Orange County to pioneer the introduction of school nurses to the preschool population. These nurses screen for developmental, vision, health, oral health and other issues, and then connect parents to the appropriate services.

One of the Commission's most successful programs is one that can be easily replicated by working with a national partner, Reach Out and Read. This program sends reading volunteers directly to pediatricians' offices, distributing free books and supporting the pediatricians' instruction to parents to read to their children every day.

### Developing Networks

"When we began in 2000," says Mike Ruane, executive director of the Children and Families Commission of Orange County, "we brought improvements to the lives of 41,000 children. By steadily strengthening our connections to networks that support families and children—including birthing hospitals, community-based agencies, and schools—we will bring improvements to the health and learning capacity of more than 205,000 children this year."

In just 10 years, the Commission has contributed to increases in the immunization rates of children at age 2 by 23 percent. Its partnership with the Orange County chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics safety education campaign has reduced fatal injuries to young children by 39 percent. Its support of shelter programs for homeless families has led to more than a tenfold increase in warm, safe beds for homeless families.

In one year alone, the Commission has sponsored more than 51,000 health screenings for children, delivered more than 74,000 home visits to help parents and families, and put free books into the hands of 61,000 children.

"If anything, this Commission is demonstrating how the simple act of coordinating existing social services can reap a sum of benefits far greater than the capabilities of individual programs," says Dr. Joseph Donnelly, a Harvard-educated pediatrician who relocated to work in Orange County, where he now directs a neurodevelopment program for children.

To learn more, visit [www.oc.childrenandfamilies.org](http://www.oc.childrenandfamilies.org) or call (714) 834-5310.