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**Health Stars Program Rationale – Brief Summary**

**Social determinants of health (SDH),** or the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and play, have a powerful effect on health. Experts agree that health outcomes are largely determined by the communities in which we live; whether families have access to things like healthy foods, transportation, and safe places to play and live.

**Economic stability** is a social determinant of health and a primary predictor of health outcomes; the greater one’s income, the lower one’s likelihood of disease and premature death. There is a growing body of research demonstrating that poverty in childhood can have negative short-term and long-term implications not only for a child’s physical health but also their mental/social-emotional well-being throughout their lifetime. These children exhibit higher than average rates of learning disabilities, developmental delays, poor classroom behavior, and chronic disease in childhood and adulthood.

**Parent and child interactive activities** and routines promote early childhood language skills and subsequent educational achievement. Significant disparities exist in these types of parenting practices between economically advantaged and disadvantaged parents. Participating in fewer interactive activities has been associated with an increased risk of developmental delay among low-income families. One important interactive parenting technique found to affect children’s developmental, behavioral, and academic outcomes is regular shared reading. Reading regularly with children stimulates brain development and strengthens parent-child relationships which, in turn, builds language, literacy and social-emotional skills that last a lifetime. Studies have shown that parents’ participation in other interactive literacy activities such as storytelling is foundational to children's language growth, emergent literacy, and cognitive development. Similarly, family meals, also interactive, have been found to positively impact children's social and behavioral skills.

**Pediatricians have a unique opportunity** to promote parent-child interactive activities due to their access to and influence on new parents. However, time constraints of the primary care visit can make it challenging for pediatricians to spend adequate time modeling these behaviors and low-income families face barriers to accessing care, including transportation to a clinic, time off from work for medical appointments, etc. Further, physicians can implement best practices in care and anticipatory guidance, but if they do not have a good understanding of the family’s daily living situation, culture, stressors, and unmet social needs, it can be difficult to meet their health needs. New models of care that bring physicians into the communities of the high risk families they serve are needed.

**The Health Stars Program** is a literacy program for low-income parents and their children age 0-5 with the goal of increasing positive parent-child interactions including reading aloud with children and activities to teach key habits for raising healthy children. Health Stars brings physicians into the communities of high risk families and is designed to enhance child development and family mental/behavioral well-being by:

1. Increasing parents’ knowledge and understanding of the importance of reading aloud with their children and the frequency that parents read with their children.
2. Educating families about key behaviors for raising healthy children via interactive learning.
3. Linking families with unmet needs to appropriate social, health and behavioral services in their community.

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