



**2021**

**GEORGIA**

# BLUEPRINT FOR CHILDREN

Priorities and recommendations to foster child health and well-being, strengthen families, support our communities, and enhance the position of Georgia as a leading state for children.

# Building a healthy future

*(Note: As used in this document, “Children” means those from birth through age 18.)*

## **ENSURE GEORGIA IS A LEADER FOR CHILDREN**

Children are our future, and child health and well-being should be elevated and maintained as a priority in Georgia. Policymakers should:

- Ensure health equity for all Georgia children and help them grow into healthy adults
- Address environmental health issues that affect children
- Focus on factors that make some children more vulnerable than others, such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and physical or mental disability.

## **PROMOTE HEALTHY CHILDREN**

All children should have access to high-quality health care, including medications, so they can thrive throughout their lifespan. Policymakers should ensure Georgia’s children:

- have affordable and high-quality health care coverage--regardless of where they live--with comprehensive, pediatric-appropriate benefits
- have access to primary care pediatricians and subspecialty pediatric care, when needed
- have access to behavioral and mental health services
- receive comprehensive, family-centered care in a pediatric medical home.

## **SUPPORT GEORGIA FAMILIES**

Stakeholders must work together so parents can give their children the best foundation for the future. Policymakers should take steps to ensure Georgia families have:

- Safe and secure housing
- Availability of high-quality schools, which do so much to support families
- Resources to support positive parenting skills
- Affordable and safe childcare
- Access to healthy, nutritious foods throughout the year
- Employment that provides a stable, adequate income with family-friendly benefits.

## **BUILD STRONG COMMUNITIES**

Strong Georgia communities are the building blocks for families and healthy children. Policymakers should ensure that communities:

- are safe from violence and environmental hazards
- provide high-quality early education and childcare programs
- support public health systems that protect children from vaccine-preventable diseases
- promote improved maternal and child health
- respond effectively when disasters and public health emergencies occur.

# 2021 Advocacy Agenda

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## **ISSUE: MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**

**Georgia AAP supports increased resources for children's mental & behavioral health, as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened this crisis.**

- The COVID pandemic has exacerbated an existing mental health crisis for children.
- In 2020 pediatricians, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, saw a sharp rise in the number of patients reporting anxiety and depression; suicide ideation; and other behavioral health issues.
- Pediatricians play critical roles in providing mental health services to children and teens. A recent study showed that for 75% of children, a pediatrician is the first provider they encounter for help.
- Increasing access to mental health services for children should be a high priority in 2021.
- Schools also play an important role for many children as it is one of their limited opportunities to access mental and behavioral health services.

## **ISSUE: MEDICAID & GEORGIA'S CHILDREN**

**We support strengthening Georgia's Medicaid program, because a strong Medicaid system is vital for children's physical & mental health, and especially so in rural areas.**

- Medicaid and Peachcare provide healthcare coverage to 1.2 million children in Georgia, more than half the children in the state and significantly more than any other health plan.
- The economic upheaval caused by COVID-19 has increased the number of children who rely on Medicaid for health care.
- Medicaid coverage for children is relatively inexpensive: nearly 70% of all Medicaid enrollees are children, yet they account for only 35% of Medicaid expenditures.
- In Georgia, Medicaid & Peachcare are vital in providing healthcare to rural areas of our state. Nearly a half million children live in rural Georgia, and many rely heavily on these important programs. Yet there are currently 64 counties in Georgia without a single pediatrician.
- A stable Medicaid program is critical to rural Georgia, not only by providing access to pediatricians & pediatric specialists, but also supporting the economic viability of the community.
- The General Assembly has taken important strides in recent years to increase Medicaid payments towards Medicare levels and this has been tremendously helpful in supporting the *entire* healthcare system in Georgia, not just those covered by Medicaid.

## **ISSUE: IMMUNIZATIONS**

**Georgia AAP strongly supports immunizations as a cornerstone of child health and ideally vaccines are delivered in the child's medical home.**

- Maintaining high childhood immunization rates is critical to protecting the health and well-being of Georgia's youngest citizens. We must remain diligent and dedicated to this and turn away misguided attempts that would weaken current immunization protections for children.
- We support legislative actions to strengthen the ability of the Georgia Department of Public Health and pediatricians to protect all children from vaccine-preventable diseases.
- We strongly oppose any attempts to weaken our child immunization system, eliminate current school entry immunization requirements, or any other measures which would undermine these protections.

- Our battle with COVID-19 has proven the need for vigilance in this area has never been greater. Outbreaks of diseases like flu, measles, and whooping cough—which vaccines have largely contained—could be devastating during the pandemic.

## **ISSUE: TOBACCO, NICOTINE & VAPING**

**Georgia AAP supports measures to counter the dramatic increase of vaping among our youth; and to reduce smoking and nicotine use.**

- Georgia AAP applauds the legislature and Governor Kemp for the steps taken in the 2020 session aimed at curbing the epidemic of tobacco and nicotine use among our state's children and teens.
- Reducing youth smoking initiation and tobacco/nicotine use must remain an important public policy goal deserving of the Georgia legislature's continued attention.
- Georgia's tax on cigarettes has not been increased in nearly three decades. This should be done as higher prices on cigarettes have proven to be an effective strategy in curbing teen nicotine use.

## **ISSUE: INJURY PREVENTION**

**Georgia supports greater efforts to protect children from intentional and unintentional injuries.**

- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, motor vehicle collisions, firearm injuries, and drowning are major causes of death in children and adolescents. Most of these deaths are preventable.
- Enacting legislation that improves safe infant sleep education, encourages proper storage of firearms, prevents drowning deaths, encourages car seat use, as well as safer teen driving, will save many lives and is urgently needed.

## **ISSUE: EARLY BRAIN & CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

**The first three years sets the stage for a child's whole life. Georgia AAP strongly supports early investment in the health and well-being of our youngest citizens.**

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, infants & young children have experienced many changes, including missing child-care and socialization, disrupted routines, and exposure to new family stressors.
- Young children may have difficulty adjusting to these changes and those difficulties may translate into increased behavioral health concerns or short-circuit aspects of normal early development.
- The legislature should support a medical home for all children where screening, assessment, treatment, and referrals can happen at the earliest timeframe to support young patients and their families. Programs which foster early brain development, like Reach Out and Read, should also be supported as part of the child's medical home
- As in-class learning continues to expand, we should ensure young children have access to recess, as studies have shown it improves academic performance and even helps with behavioral conditions such as autism and ADHD by reducing stress and improving cognition.

*For more information:*

*Georgia Chapter-American Academy of Pediatrics  
1350 Spring Street, #700  
Atlanta, Ga. 30309-2874  
Website: [www.gaaap.org](http://www.gaaap.org)*

*Hugo Scornik, MD, President  
Melinda Willingham, MD, Legislative Chair  
Richard Ward, Executive Director  
Phone: 404-881-5090*