

Top 10 kids health issues to watch

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As 2008 comes to a close, Akron, Ohio, Children's Hospital has compiled "10 Kids' Health Issues to Watch" in 2009. This year's list includes both mental and physical health issues. However, one common thread factors into many of these issues and so became the country's focus of attention: the economy. The financial crunch, here and around the world, will undoubtedly affect the physical and mental health of parents and kids throughout 2009 - and beyond.

This list pinpoints some of the challenges - as well as opportunities - that lie ahead:

1. Dealing with Financial Turmoil: The tanking economy, credit crunch, housing crisis, and rising unemployment rate have put money (or, rather, lack of it) at the very top of people's minds, especially as we enter a new year, a recession, and a new administration.

Parents have an additional challenge: helping their children through these difficult times.

"Even if they don't always say so, kids are very aware of the tension felt by their parents," said Dr. Georgette Constantinou, a pediatric psychologist at Akron Children's. "Whether you are dealing with a job loss, a foreclosure or just a tightening of the family budget, it's best to be honest with your children, communicate on their level and reassure them that your family will always be your number one priority and everyone will do their part."

2. The Impact of Instant Communication: From a conviction tied to suicide and MySpace to ongoing concerns about cyber predators, communication technologies - and their hazards - garnered many headlines in 2008. Modern communication technologies will continue to grow and diversify. This means parents need to stay in the loop and make sure their children are using cell phones, texting, social network sites like MySpace and Facebook, and other communication technologies safely and appropriately.

3. The Case for Immunizations: As measles skyrocketed in 2008 because more parents opted not to immunize, the American Academy of Pediatrics unleashed a major push to promote complete and timely vaccinations of kids of all ages.

Despite what many parents may hear from 'celebrity moms' or read on the Internet, there is no link between vaccinations and autism and numerous studies have documented this, said Blaise Congeni, M.D., director of Infectious Diseases at Akron Children's. We encourage parents to ask their pediatrician questions, but be assured vaccinations are safe and have nearly eliminated the threat of many deadly childhood diseases, such as mumps, measles, rubella and polio. But that protection only remains if all children are immunized.

4. A Mobilized Youth Movement: The 2008 presidential race drummed up enthusiasm and involvement among Americans - young and old - more than any other election in modern history. And President-elect Barack Obama is calling on today's youth to keep the public service movement alive. Parents can set a good example by getting involved themselves and encouraging the whole family to help out where needed - at school, at church or the many non-profit agencies in their community that rely volunteers. It's never too early to teach children to be kind, empathetic and socially aware; traits that will serve them well into adulthood.

5. Start the Dialogue Early and Keep it Going: When the pregnancy of a popular teen TV star, movie character and vice presidential candidate's daughter took center stage, premarital sex became an even more pressing topic for parents. In the coming year, there will likely be more debate about the curriculum of sex-ed classes and other initiatives to promote abstinence, deter the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and reduce the number of teen pregnancies

Kids hear about sex from friends and get messages from the media at an early age, said Nneka Holder, M.D., a specialist in Adolescent Medicine at Akron Children's. Although it may be awkward to discuss sex with your children, parents should start the dialogue early and use 'teaching moments' every day to communicate their family's values. The topic is too important; don't leave it to the kids on the school bus to do all the talking.

6. Safer Kids' Stuff on the Horizon: Thanks to a groundbreaking new law passed in the summer of 2008, toys and other kids' products must be deemed safe before they actually make it to the store shelves, and, ultimately, children's hands. Lead is being officially phased out of kids' merchandise and there is increased awareness about chemicals used in the production of plastic products, such as baby bottles.

Although we're making major headway, global oversight of products is lacking. Parents should remain vigilant by reading product labels, keeping abreast of product recalls and supervising young children who naturally put everything in sight in their mouths.

7. Safety First When it Comes to Kids Meds: More and more medications are being prescribed for children and teens. Recent news stories have focused on the dangers of over-the-counter cough and cold formulas targeted to infants and toddlers and a proposal aimed at prescribing medication for children with high cholesterol. Every

medication has potential benefits and risks. Parents should question their child's doctor about all medications being taken and be especially careful about drug interactions. Children are not just small adults. Their bodies react to medication differently and caution is always advised.

8. The Fight Against Childhood Obesity Continues: Government health officials reported that the childhood obesity rate leveled off in 2008 - welcome news, to be sure. But it's too soon to get complacent. Kids still eat too much junk food and exercise too little and the risks of obesity-related conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and orthopedic problems, require attention. As the economy keeps spiraling downward and trips to the supermarket get pricier, it may become more challenging for parents to keep their kids' diets rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and other nutritious foods.

9. Safer Water and Sanitation: The United Nations General Assembly declared 2008 the "International Year of Sanitation," highlighting the crucial need for countries worldwide to have safe drinking water and sanitary places to wash up. Global health officials still have a long way to go before the people of many Third World nations can enjoy the same level of sanitation that we have in the United States.

The No. 1 way parents can keep their children healthy and keep a variety of illnesses at bay, including the common cold and flu, is to encourage frequent and thorough hand washing, said Karen Mascolo, R.N., director of School Health Services for Akron Children's. Have kids sing a song, count their fingers or try other fun routines to keep them at the sink until hands, fingernails and all nooks and crannies are clean.

10. Hope for Health Care Reform (Finally): A lack of insurance and gaps in coverage cause many families to go completely without preventive care or to hold off on seeing a doctor until it becomes a must. Past attempts at solutions to overhaul our health care system haven't

succeeded. But this time, the new administration's proposed plan, which includes mandatory coverage for children, just might get the support it needs. Whatever happens, kids have no say in whether they'll be able to get the care they need to stay healthy. So parents, health care professionals, and community leaders must be more proactive than ever about advocating for kids' health.

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