

# Investing in Early Childhood: The Case for HealthySteps in New Jersey

## A Proven Model for Lifelong Health Equity

HealthySteps is a national evidence-based program<sup>1</sup> embedded within pediatric primary care that supports families during the most critical early years of a child's life. In New Jersey, the model has demonstrated success in addressing gaps in developmental screening, behavioral health supports, and maternal wellbeing, all while expanding the capacity of pediatric practices.

The program places a trained HealthySteps Specialist—often a child development expert—into the care team to deliver tiered support to families with children ages 0 to 3. This integrated model ensures early detection of needs, rapid connection to services, and improved caregiver-child relationships.



Despite clear outcomes, New Jersey's HealthySteps footprint remains limited. Less than 10 sites currently operate in the state, serving approximately 2,000 children annually. This should expand significantly, reaching many children statewide and closing critical gaps in early childhood care access.



## Cost-Effective: The Economic Case for HealthySteps

HealthySteps delivers substantial savings to New Jersey across multiple public systems. The program produces both immediate and long-term cost avoidance through improved child health, stronger family functioning, and reduced need for emergency and specialized services.

The short-term return on investment for HealthySteps is 163%. For every \$1 New Jersey invests in HealthySteps, the **state can save an average of \$2.63** within the same year. Savings are primarily a result of reduced injury-related ER visits and better coordination of preventive services.<sup>2</sup>

Long-term, the program **generates \$8.35 in public savings for every \$1 invested**. Most long-term returns accrue through improved educational attainment, reduced public assistance needs, and healthier developmental outcomes.<sup>3</sup>



## Unlocking HealthySteps' Full Potential in New Jersey

HealthySteps advances health equity by directly addressing the social, emotional, and developmental needs of young children, especially in families with low income and publicly insured children.<sup>4</sup>

### Child-Focused Interventions

Improving well-child visit and immunization rates  
Promoting earlier access to dental health care  
Encouraging appropriate use of care for ambulatory sensitive conditions

### Adult-Focused Interventions

Providing screening and referrals to care for postpartum maternal depression  
Increasing support for continued breastfeeding  
Providing counseling and referrals to support services for intimate partner violence  
Providing family planning consultations and referrals for families at risk of unhealthy birth spacing  
Providing counseling and referrals for smoking cessation services

## The Impact on Care

- Increases timely well-child visits and vaccinations.
- Improves early detection of autism, maternal depression, and developmental delays.
- Enhances access to housing, nutrition, and behavioral health supports.
- Lowers emergency room use and risk of child maltreatment.
- Strengthens secure attachment, breastfeeding duration, and early literacy.

## The Bottom Line

Medicaid enhanced reimbursement for HealthySteps practices in New Jersey went into effect July 2025, allowing HealthySteps practices to build program sustainability. By expanding this model statewide and building a pathway for all pediatric providers to receive enhanced reimbursement, **New Jersey can deliver stronger outcomes for children and families while reducing avoidable costs for generations to come.**

<sup>1</sup> Evidence-based program: Program or intervention that is supported by rigorous research and scientific studies, demonstrating their effectiveness and impact.

<sup>2</sup> HealthySteps Interventions Drive Short-Term Medicaid Cost Savings. HealthySteps. (n.d.). <https://www.healthysteps.org/resource/healthysteps-return-on-investment>

<sup>3</sup> Healthy Steps. "HMH ROI Update Long and Short-Term Nov 2024," ZERO TO THREE, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Alternative Payment Model Framework for HealthySteps. HealthySteps. (2021, July 20). <https://www.healthysteps.org/resource/alternative-payment-model-framework-for-healthysteps/>