

## **It Takes a Village: How Dyadic Care is Helping Families Thrive**

A child's health is deeply connected to the well-being of their parents and caregivers. When parents and caregivers walk into a pediatric clinic, they bring more than their child. They bring hope and a desire to be the best for their child. They also bring stress, exhaustion, uncertainty, and financial strain.

Traditionally, pediatric care has focused almost exclusively on the child, leaving caregiver needs unaddressed or handled separately through different systems, often with long waitlists, stigma, and logistical hurdles. [Research](#) shows that untreated or undertreated parental mental health challenges can negatively affect a child's growth and development.

California is changing that.

The state is implementing evidence-based models that support the mental and emotional health of both the child and their caregiver – *together*. This approach, known as [dyadic care](#), integrates behavioral health, stress reduction, caregiver-child relationship support, and early mental health interventions into routine pediatric visits.

“Programs like dyadic care offer hope,” says Kate Margolis, PhD, UCSF Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics and Founding Director of the UCSF Center for Advancing Dyadic Care in Pediatrics. “They integrate supports into systems families already trust, easing time pressure at a moment when parents are stretched thin.”

On January 1, 2023, the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) added dyadic services as a Medi-Cal benefit in both the fee-for-service and managed care delivery systems. Health insurers, including Medi-Cal, now reimburse providers for visits focused on family behavioral health promotion and prevention, including at the caregiver- and caregiver-child relationship levels. During these visits, providers can:

- Screen for social drivers of health, such as food insecurity, housing instability, and caregiver stress and mental health concerns.
- Refer families to community resources, like housing assistance, nutrition support, and healthcare coordination.
- Connect families with embedded behavioral health providers who offer structured interventions, psychoeducational services, and counseling to build resilience and support child development.

As of October 28, 2025, over 40,000 Medi-Cal members had benefited from the dyadic services delivered by over 600 providers.

### **Dyadic Care in Action**

The impact has been transformative. At the Children’s Health Center at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, an early adopter of [HealthySteps](#) – a leading dyadic care model – families meet with psychologists and clinical social work providers. These HealthySteps specialists help ensure whole-family care.

“Many of our families face complex psychosocial challenges—barriers in healthcare and basic essentials like housing and food,” said Dr. Eleanor Chung. “HealthySteps providers often uncover issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, intimate partner violence, or caregiver depression, critical factors in a child’s health that historically fall outside pediatric workflows.”

One family’s story illustrates the power of dyadic care.

Two exhausted parents arrived at a dyadic visit with their newborn, who was struggling to feed. Their care team — including HealthySteps provider and Licensed Clinical Social Worker Janelle Bercun and Dr. Neeti Doshi — tuned into the parents’ worries, acknowledged the emotional load they were carrying, and jointly developed an updated healthy feeding approach that felt more manageable.

This is dyadic care in action: medical care that honors both child and caregiver, offering guidance without judgment and building trust that lasts.

This collaboration benefits providers, too.

“Working with HealthySteps has expanded our ability to serve the whole family,” says nurse practitioner Jess Axelrod. “Parents are stressed, emotionally and financially, and as providers, we absorb that anxiety. Sharing the load with another professional has reduced my own stress.”

### **The Value of Compassionate, Whole-Family Care**

Another early adopter of the dyadic care model is School Health Clinics (SHC) of Santa Clara County, which serves children, adolescents, and families by operating school-based clinics in San Jose and Gilroy.

Kyra Delapedraja is a nurse practitioner serving families with kids ages 0-24 at SHC. While initially reluctant about adding one more step to standard well-care visits, she now hopes it continues to grow into the standard of care in pediatric practice.

"I would have benefitted greatly from dyadic care when I was a mom. The social emotional issues we are able to address during dyadic care visits are so pertinent to the health of the child and family."

SHC's network of clinics serves more than 4,800 patients annually, offering immunizations, well-child visits, chronic disease management, behavioral health support, and assistance with health insurance enrollment, all without turning anyone away due to not being able to pay.

"We have seen firsthand how compassionate whole-family care can reduce stigma with mental health issues and help families thrive," said SHC CEO Stephanie Kleinheinz. "I feel so fortunate to live in California and be an early adopter of these types of innovative policies."

### **Scaling Dyadic Care Across California**

Medi-Cal and initiatives like the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) make this possible. Through CYBHI, DHCS provided more than \$21 million in grants to more than 40 organizations to expand dyadic care. As a part of CYBHI, DHCS is partnering with the UCSF Center for Advancing Dyadic Care in Pediatrics to expand and scale dyadic services through a grant program that will provide training, technical assistance, and implementation support to local partners in regions across the state.

With dyadic care models, more clinics can embed family-focused behavioral health directly into pediatric care to provide proactive, stigma-free care in a trusted setting. It's a model that strengthens not just families, but entire communities—one pediatric visit at a time.