“Early childhood is such a critical time in brain development, and it was tragic that toddlers weren’t getting help,” remembers Briggs, explaining that clients often attributed problems to the “terrible twos” or claimed very young children wouldn’t remember traumatic incidents like domestic violence. “Getting them too late was just frustrating.”

That convinced Briggs that traditional private practice or work at a specialty mental health clinic wasn’t for her. “Why are we asking families to come to us instead of going where they are?” says Briggs, who received her doctorate from New York University in 2004. And where they are is primary care. Says Briggs, “Lots of children aren’t in preschool or early learning programs, but they all go to see the doctor.”

Briggs has built her career upon that realization. As director of pediatric behavioral health services at Montefiore Medical Group in the Bronx since 2013, she’s been busy integrating psychology into primary care at a system serving 90,000 pediatric patients a year. At the center of that effort is Healthy Steps, a national program that addresses emotional, behavioral and intellectual development within pediatric settings.

A two-generational approach
Briggs launched integrated early childhood mental health care at Montefiore in 2005, when a former supervisor received a seed grant from New York’s City Council Children’s Mental Health Under Five Initiative and invited her to put her interest in integrated care into practice. Briggs spent three days a week educating pediatricians about early brain development and screening pediatric patients for social and emotional development. In 2006, she received funding of her own – a large grant from the Altman Foundation that helped Montefiore become a formal Healthy Steps site.

Designated an evidence-based practice by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Healthy Steps helps pediatric practices focus on more than just physical health. The program embeds specially trained early childhood mental health specialists directly into pediatric primary care to provide all parents of very young children with information and support about such parenting challenges as surviving toilet training, managing tantrums and encouraging learning. The goal is prevention and early intervention, says Briggs.

“It’s far easier to intervene with a two-year-old who’s having tantrums than a 14-year-old who’s been crying out for help for 14 years to a silent response,” she says.

But Healthy Steps doesn’t just focus on children, Briggs emphasizes. To break the intergenerational cycle of risk, it also focuses on parents. Parents who have had difficult childhoods themselves often have a hard time parenting their own children, she says, so all parents – whether they’re expectant mothers coming in for obstetrician appointments or new parents coming in for pediatric visits – undergo Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) screening.

“As long as a two-month-old is gaining weight correctly, there aren’t a lot of ways of knowing whether the child is doing OK in terms of social and emotional development,” says Briggs. “Screening parents for their own ACES may be our best bet at identifying young children at risk as early as possible.”

If a parent reports a high ACES score, they’re invited to enroll in an intensive program that lets them see a Healthy Steps specialist every time they visit the primary care practice. Parents can also take advantage of home visits, “baby and me” groups, extra visits for help with topics like sleep...
GOOD PRACTICE  Fall 2014

training and adult mental health services in what Briggs calls
the “nonstigmatizing venue” of the pediatrics clinic. Even
families not at high risk get support, with ongoing screening
and intervention as needed. The Healthy Steps team is
always on the lookout for what they call “pink flags,” says
Briggs, explaining that they want to prevent problems before
they reach “red flag” level.

Briggs and the other Healthy Steps specialists don’t just
supplement the pediatricians’ efforts, she emphasizes.
They’re integral parts of the team. “Our folks are Montefiore
employees who use the same medical record as the primary
care providers, share treatment plans and have case
conferences together,” she explains. “It’s really much more
integration than co-location.”

Breaking the cycle

That approach is paying off, says Briggs, who is also an
associate professor of pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of
Medicine.

In a paper published this year in Clinical Practice in Pediatric
Psychology, Briggs and colleagues found that Healthy Steps
seems to moderate the impact parents’ childhood trauma
has on their own children’s development. Comparing three-
year-old children of mothers reporting their own childhood
trauma, the researchers found that just 34 percent of those
in the Healthy Steps program were at risk for social and
emotional difficulties compared to half of the children in the
control group.

Healthy Steps may also reduce costs, says Briggs. Take
emergency room visits, one of the biggest drivers of health-
care costs. Depressed mothers who received mental health
treatment as part of the Healthy Steps program had an
average of 2.44 emergency room visits in the year prior to
referral to services and just .96 visits in the year after, Briggs
and her colleagues have found. Healthy Steps also seems to
reduce psychotropic medication use among participating
children, says Briggs, noting that none of the participating
children had received prescriptions based on a study
conducted when they were five years old.

Now Montefiore’s Healthy Steps program is growing. With
funding from the Price Family Foundation, Tiger Foundation,
Stavros Niarchos Foundation and other foundations, Healthy
Steps has already expanded to three more large pediatric
clinics at Montefiore, including two residency training

The program embeds specially trained early
care health specialists directly
into pediatric primary care to provide
all parents of very young children with
information and support.

clinics. “That’s a wonderful opportunity to leverage what
we’re doing – to educate tomorrow’s pediatricians to be
particularly knowledgeable about early childhood brain
development and the importance of getting it right in the
early years,” says Briggs. The program has also received grant
funding from the Marks Family Foundation, Child Welfare
Foundation, and the Grinberg Family Foundation

Montefiore has been so impressed with the program that it is
now providing significant support, says Briggs, noting that
Healthy Steps was once entirely foundation-funded. Based
on the success of Healthy Steps, Montefiore is funding the
program’s expansion to all pediatric sites within the system
plus behavioral health’s integration into primary care for
school-aged children, adolescents and adults.

That means job opportunities for psychologists. Healthy
Steps at Montefiore already emphasizes the use of
psychologists as Healthy Steps specialists, says Briggs. “In
other health systems, it’s more often social workers, early
childhood specialists and nurses,” she says. The Healthy
Steps program already has six psychologists and plans to hire
at least six more in the next year.

“All primary care provider will tell you that by and large
they’re not very well trained to manage questions about
emotional health, behavioral health, social and emotional
development and parent/child interaction, yet that’s where
parents go,” says Briggs, adding that she’s now creating
short videos to educate pediatricians on such topics as picky
eaters, weaning and limit-setting. “It’s helpful for them to be
able to just walk a family down the hall to a known entity,
someone who’s part of their patient care team.”