

# Polling the Public on Children's Health

The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health is an ongoing project that measures what the public is concerned about regarding the health — current and future — of the nation's children. Matthew M. Davis, M.D., associate professor in the Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases and director of the poll, explains how it works and some of what we've learned so far.

**Q: Why a national poll on children's health?**

**A:** The goal is to measure and spread the word about public perceptions, opinions and priorities about children's health and health policy. That's been missing from a lot of the national dialog for years, in part because we haven't asked the general public about their opinions. We wanted to step in and fill that gap. We know by watching media coverage of our reports that we've reached audiences at the regional, state, national and even global levels.

**Q: How does the poll work?**

**A:** About every four months, we send a questionnaire to approximately 3,000 households across the U.S., and about 2,000 respond. We partner with a survey firm which works with roughly 45,000 households representative of the nation's population. The survey firm provides Internet access for households without it, and that's important because we know about 20 percent of children nationally live in poverty; poorer households are much less likely to have Internet access. These households are part of the group that answers our questions. The questionnaire takes about

10 minutes; we analyze responses and produce several online reports from each survey. In two years we've released 25 reports online, free to the public, written in language that's easy to understand.

**Q: What does the poll tell us overall about the public's concerns regarding children's health?**

**A:** It's enormously important to invest in children's health because a lot of the national attention is directed at adult health — people who are sick already. We know from the poll that adults are worried about childhood health problems that can have long-term consequences — obesity, for example. The fact that the public realizes this and puts those problems at the top of the list speaks volumes about the degree to which they are concerned.

**Q: What are the top issues identified by the poll? Were there surprises? New trends?**

**A:** The top three concerns of adults about children's health in 2008 were obesity, tobacco smoking, and drug use. Each, while they can have short-term consequences, can have lifelong consequences as well. The ordering

changed slightly from 2007, when tobacco use topped the list. Over the past 25 years tobacco use among kids has decreased to about half the level it was in the 1990s, such that a rising problem like childhood obesity has now captured the attention of the public. In terms of new trends, the most concerning is that of Internet safety. We were surprised that the first time it made the list — in 2008 — it landed right in the middle of the top 10. That's led us to focus more on Internet safety in subsequent polls.

**Q: How do we bring what we learn from the poll to bear on policy and research?**

**A:** Our agenda is to bring better information about the public to the public. We present our findings and let the advocates or legislators or interest groups use the information as they wish. We believe that's important to maintaining objectivity, which allows us to present findings and have them be heard on all sides of the debate. If we were to advocate for one position or another, we'd likely lose the ear of the audience on the other side.

*Interview by Rick Krupinski*

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