

Life Course: Looking at the Big Picture

Life Course Theory (LCT) suggests that throughout all phases of development, a complex mix of biological, behavioral, psychological, environmental, and social factors impacts overall health. Simply put, personal choices—as well as things that happen beyond one’s control—affect health and wellbeing over time. These factors are called “social determinants of health” and include income, education, occupation, employment, housing, childcare, family structure, geography, etc.

The Life Course approach to health and wellness emphasizes preventing illness through developing healthy lifestyles, families, and communities instead of treating illness after it happens. An example of LCT in action is the practice of regular and periodic lead screening in infants and children. Such screening is beneficial to children because it helps doctors prevent and treat lead poisoning, not just in one child but also in children who occupy shared environments, such as the same household, childcare facility, school, or neighborhood. Lead screening data from one child can prompt public health officials to identify at-risk areas, investigate the source of the lead, and ultimately implement interventions, such as improved water testing and purification, thereby protecting the health of entire communities.

What does LCT really mean for your child and family?

You are the “expert” on your child, and so health and wellness begin with you. You can build healthy practices and habits in your household, including providing a nutritious diet, promoting regular exercise, and more. If you need support, your doctor can address social determinants of health specific to your family’s situation. Your child’s medical home should provide health education in your family’s primary language, be knowledgeable about community resources that meet basic needs and ensure safety, and assist you in accessing those resources as needed.

If your child has a chronic health condition or disability, it is important to be proactive when considering the factors that impact your child’s health and wellbeing over time. As a parent of a child with special health care needs, you may feel you have limited capacity to envision and build a healthy, meaningful life for your child. You may require additional resources to adapt preventive and wellness strategies for your child.

To that end, in 2016, Indiana’s Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Services (DDRS) began to examine its process for providing supports and services to individuals with disabilities. Initially, this effort focused on improving Person Centered Planning and case management, to better support individuals and families in developing meaningful plans—including specific supports and services—that move them closer to their own idea of a “good life.”

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DDRS used a framework called **Charting the LifeCourse**

(<https://www.lifecoursetools.com/>) as a guide to the process. **Charting the LifeCourse** is a tool that was created for families and self-advocates by families and self-advocates. It is intended to help persons of all abilities and ages create a vision for a good life, consider the resources they need and action steps they will take, identify how to find or develop supports, and discover how to live the lives they want. Individuals and families may focus on their current situation and stage of life but may also find it helpful to look to the future to seek the experiences they wish to have.

Charting the LifeCourse is a resource that may be accessed throughout life to map the desired course. **Charting the LifeCourse** includes:

- **Focusing on All People:** Vision, values, policies, and practices are person-centered, ensuring all families have choices and access to the supports they need.
- **Life Stages and Trajectory:** Individuals and families can focus on a specific life stage, with an awareness of how prior, current and future life stages and experiences influence life trajectory.
- **Life Outcomes:** Individuals and families plan for present and future outcomes, building capacity for self-determination, healthy relationships, economic sufficiency, and community inclusion.
- **Recognizing the Person Within the Context of Their Family:** Individuals and families need supports that address all facets of life and adjust as the family ages and the roles and needs of members change.
- **Holistic Focus:** People lead lives made up of connected, integrated domains that affect quality of life. Domains include daily living, community living, safety and security, healthy lifestyle, social and spirituality, and citizenship and advocacy.
- **Supporting the Three Buckets of Need:** Strategies to support individuals and families.
- **Integrated Services and Supports:** It is essential to take into account the assets and strengths of the family and to build an individualized array of integrated supports, including those based on eligibility (public or private); community supports that are available to anyone; relationship-based supports; and technology.
- **Policy and Systems Change:** Individuals and families are involved in policy making to influence planning, policy, implementation, evaluation and revision of the practices that affect them. Every program, organization, system and policy maker must think about a person in the context of family.

To learn more and access materials, visit <https://www.lifecoursetools.com/>.

Programs and systems change often. It is important to ensure that you are using the most current information. This fact sheet was updated June 2024. Please check <https://www.inf2f.org/fact-sheets.html> for the most recent edition.

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