



Position Statement

Optimizing the Health and Well-Being of America's Children: The Value of PNCB Pediatric Nursing Certification



Overview

Children are among society's most vulnerable and have a unique set of health care needs. Care provided early in life is critical and lays the groundwork for lifelong physical, social, intellectual, and emotional well-being. Pediatric health care professionals with in-depth knowledge about the complex developmental and behavioral needs of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, and who specialize in diagnosing, treating, and preventing childhood illness and injury are best equipped to meet the complex needs of this population segment.

Pediatric nurses and pediatric nurse practitioners certified by the Pediatric Nursing Certification Board (PNCB) have the knowledge, specialization, mindset, and experience to provide the highest standards of patient care. As highly skilled specialists, Certified Pediatric Nurses (CPNs) and Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioners in Acute Care and Primary Care (CPNP-ACs, CPNP-PCs) play a central role in strengthening U.S. health care by improving access to high-quality, value-driven care. Furthermore, advanced practice registered nurses certified as Pediatric Primary Care Mental Health Specialists (PMHSs) use their validated knowledge and expertise to address developmental, behavioral, and mental health conditions in children and adolescents.

PNCB Certification: Transforming Pediatric Care

PNCB focuses singularly on pediatric health and the nursing professionals who provide pediatric-focused care. Through its acclaimed certification programs, PNCB is helping to increase the availability of and access to high-quality, evidence-based, and age-appropriate care for children. PNCB validates the knowledge of pediatric nurses beyond RN licensure using rigorous, accredited certification exams that are established as the U.S. national standard. PNCB's exams certify demonstrated mastery in promoting health and treating health conditions unique to young patients. To maintain their credentials, CPNs, CPNP-ACs, and CPNP-PCs must fulfill recertification requirements on an annual basis which attest to lifelong learning and continuing competence. Beginning in 2022, PMHSs will also recertify each year.

Certification as a mark of excellence demonstrates to patients and families, employers, and the public that a nursing professional has a deep commitment to the highest standards of care and achieving excellent patient outcomes. More than 50,000 nursing professionals have sought and maintained one or more PNCB credentials since the certification board was established in 1975. More than 95% of all pediatric nursing professionals who seek to certify choose PNCB. In 2021, 96% of all PNCB-certified nurses made the decision to recertify.¹

PNCB exams are recognized and endorsed by leading U.S. pediatric organizations including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the Society of Pediatric Nurses (SPN), the Association of Faculties of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (AFPNP), and the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP). See PNCB's [exam development process](#) for details on research and rigor.

PNCB offers four unique certification programs:

- Certified Pediatric Nurse (CPN®)
- Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioner – Acute Care (CPNP-AC®)
- Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioner – Primary Care (CPNP-PC®)
- Pediatric Primary Care Mental Health Specialist (PMHS®)

Improving Health Outcomes through Excellence in Pediatric Nursing

The demand for highly skilled certified nurses has never been greater, particularly as the number of children with chronic and complex health conditions rises in the U.S. A pediatric nurse brings an empathic mindset to the care of children that embraces their uniqueness and understands their emotional, social, spiritual, and physiological development. A pediatric nurse promotes health throughout all stages of childhood development with specialty knowledge of childhood-specific illnesses, medications, and therapies. In addition, pediatric nurses educate family members in the treatment and care process and manage multiple complex relationships and communication among health care providers, family members, and patients.

Additional competencies that make pediatric nursing professionals a unique resource to support optimal child health include the ability to:

- Utilize a flexible set of assessment and communication skills, equipment, and techniques for the pediatric patient.
- Use specialty expertise to recognize and respond to the child who has life-threatening symptoms.
- Communicate on different cognitive/developmental levels in same setting with children, family members, and other stakeholders.
- Recognize the environmental context and family choices in order to improve child health, which is tied to the health of the family.²

All four specialty nursing professionals certified by PNCB play an integral role increasing access to pediatric-focused health care for patients and their families.

Certified Pediatric Nurse

Among registered nurses, Certified Pediatric Nurses (CPNs) represent the best resource to support optimal child health from birth to adolescence in a variety of health care settings including hospitals, schools, community groups, primary care offices, and subspecialty clinics. CPNs perform assessments for the child or adolescent, measure vital statistics, and carry out treatment plans employing specialized knowledge of children's unique physical, behavioral, and cognitive development. They also educate patients and families about effective methods for protecting a child's health and provide anticipatory guidance as the child grows. CPNs serve as educators, advocates, and administrators working to advance the profession and support interdisciplinary team-based care. Depending on their specific role, CPNs may:

- assess, analyze, plan, and implement nursing interventions
- evaluate patient outcomes

- facilitate initial or ongoing education for pediatric nurses
- conduct research about patient outcomes or professional issues
- provide management or leadership for pediatric nurses

CPNs are at the center of patient care coordination and communication, relaying and interpreting information between physicians, patients, and family members, and with other members of the health care team. A 2020 PNCB survey of nursing, physician, and other health care leaders credited CPN professionals as demonstrating superior patient-nurse interpersonal and communications skills. In addition, survey respondents believed that having a high percentage of certified nurses reflected well on their hospital, offered patients a higher level of care than other hospitals that treat children in the area, and served as a distinguishing value proposition for patients seeking care. Certification serves as an indicator that their providers are specially trained in pediatrics.³ It is also significant to note that pediatric nurses are among the specialties more likely to hold certification.⁴

When making hiring decisions, health care employers recognize the CPN credential and the standards of excellence it upholds. In a PNCB survey, 83% of health care leaders stated that they prefer to hire a CPN over a pediatric nurse without the CPN credential.⁵ Furthermore, 97% of leaders agree that pediatric nursing certification shows a nurse has gone to the “next level” or higher echelon of patient care.⁵ Overall, CPNs are considered central to patient care, outcomes, and patient/family satisfaction.

Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioners in Acute Care and Primary Care (CPNP-ACs, CPNP-PCs)

CPNP-ACs and CPNP-PCs represent a well-established and respected segment of the nursing workforce. The origin of the pediatric nurse practitioner as a health care provider dates back to 1965 when it was established as the first area of specialty for the role. In 1965, Drs. Loretta C. Ford and Henry K. Silver co-founded the pediatric nurse practitioner role to address a nationwide shortage of physicians and a growing demand for primary health care among underserved children.⁶ In 1977, PNCB established the national board exam for certification of pediatric nurse practitioners working within primary care.

As the U.S. grapples with ways to improve its health care system, CPNP-ACs and CPNP-PCs stand at the forefront of expanding access to safe, evidence-based, high-quality patient care for pediatric populations. They bring together graduate-level health care knowledge and the values and skills of nursing to meet the preventive, chronic, and acute care needs of the pediatric patient population. These professionals evaluate children, adolescents, and young adults, diagnose illness, and prescribe medication to patients in primary, acute, and specialty health care disciplines. They also serve as educators and researchers and guide other members of the health care team in achieving improved patient outcomes.

In a growing number of states, nurse practitioners are licensed, independent practitioners who practice autonomously and collaboratively with physicians and other members of the health care team. Studies also demonstrate that they consistently provide high-quality, safe care and have the same or better patient outcomes when compared to physicians.⁷

Unfortunately, in many states, regulatory barriers stand in the way of expanding the role of nurse practitioners, including scope-of-practice laws that limit the bounds of their professional practice. Mandatory collaborative agreements with physicians create barriers that prevent nurse practitioners from practicing to the fullest extent of their role. In states where nurses practice with full authority, nurse practitioners reduce costs by 11% to 29% and improve quality and access through the provision of care in routine settings, retail clinics, and vulnerable communities.^{8,9}

With advanced academic and clinical training, nurse practitioners are uniquely suited to serve as a solution to the country's ongoing struggle to expand access to high-quality, cost-effective health care to all patients. Among PNPs, there are two core subspecialties of practice certified by PNCB: primary care and acute care.

In PNCB's 2020 survey of nursing, physician, and other health care leaders, 85% of leaders stated that they prefer to hire a PNP over a Family Nurse Practitioner or Physician's Assistant for provision of health care to children.⁵

Primary Care Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

Certified Primary Care Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (CPNP-PCs) take a holistic approach to patient care—from infancy through young adulthood—and most often serve as the first point of contact for children needing health care. Specifically, CPNP-PCs provide advanced nursing care across the continuum of primary care services including routine wellness visits, immunizations, and treatments for mild to moderate conditions. They can also diagnose and treat both common and chronic health problems, and minor trauma as well as coordinate and integrate multidisciplinary services for children with complex medical problems. They work on prevention strategies aimed at establishing healthy habits early in life. CPNP-PCs work in a variety of settings such as private practices, outpatient specialty clinics, school-based health, and more. Acknowledged as trusted advisors for their long-term care of children across the pediatric lifespan, CPNP-PCs advocate for their patients and work with families and caregivers over multiple years – the "pediatric lifespan of the patient" – to help their children live healthy, happy lives.³

Acute Care Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

Certified Acute Care Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (CPNP-ACs) work with children at their most vulnerable moments. The CPNP-AC provides family-centered and culturally respectful care for pediatric patients with acute, complex, critical, and chronic illness across a variety of care settings. They are trained to make difficult, life-saving decisions in challenging situations. The CPNP-AC collaborates with an interprofessional team to provide the highest level of evidence-based care for infants, children, adolescents, and young adults with life-threatening illnesses and organ dysfunction or failure.

The competencies of CPNP-ACs are built upon nurse practitioner core competencies and demonstrated through clinical practice, teaching, consultation, advocacy, and professional leadership activities. The CPNP-AC's practice has continued to evolve in response to increasing patient acuity, care complexity, and the subsequent demand for safe and competent providers in inpatient settings and outpatient subspecialty clinics. Additionally, there has been an increase in the role's recognition and acceptance within numerous pediatric subspecialties, including cardiology, trauma surgery, and oncology. CPNP-ACs are valued as highly accessible, compassionate, and effective health care providers.³

Pediatric Primary Care Mental Health Specialists

One in five adolescents in the U.S. suffers from developmental, mental, or behavioral health disorders.¹⁰ Half of all mental health disorders begin by the age of 14 years. Early diagnosis and delivery of appropriate services can alleviate the potential risk of long-term adverse outcomes. Lack of access to support, services, and providers for children with mental health conditions is a serious problem in the United States. Fewer than half of the children who need services obtain them. To meet this demand, the PNCB launched the Pediatric Primary Care Mental Health

Specialist (PMHS) certification exam in 2011 to improve access to care for children and adolescents experiencing behavioral and mental health concerns.¹¹

PMHSs are advanced practice registered nurses with the added expertise to identify the more common developmental, behavioral, and mental health conditions in children and adolescents. PMHSs utilize relationships established within primary care settings to screen with validated screening tools, identify, intervene, and monitor these concerns. PMHSs develop comprehensive plans, counsel parents in all aspects of care, and refer more seriously ill children to appropriate services and specialists.

Despite the rising numbers of children being diagnosed with developmental, behavioral, or mental health conditions, accessing care remains a concern. Gaps exist in treatment. Only about 20% of children receive care from specialized mental health care providers.¹² And, nearly two-thirds of children get little or no assistance. Unfortunately, a shortage exists of mental health providers skilled in working with children, and of primary care providers experienced in screening and diagnosing pediatric developmental, behavioral, and mental health conditions. PMHSs present a viable solution to addressing the gaps in care. In a 2020 survey of PMHS credential holders and other APRNs evaluating children and adolescents, the overwhelming majority indicated a surge of increasing need for this specialized care due to the pandemic.

Significance of a PNCB Certification

The importance and value of PNCB certification begins and ends with the well-being of the child, adolescent, or young adult. As the demand grows for accessible, evidence-based, lower-cost care and improved patient outcomes, validation of a health care provider's competence through certification and recertification activities becomes even more important to achieving national health care goals, as well as global health care goals in the future. PNCB certification of pediatric nursing professionals provides a host of benefits to patients, families, employers, the public, and the U.S. health care system overall.

Patients and Families

Certification improves access to high-quality care. PNCB-certified nurses and nurse practitioners who have demonstrated experience, knowledge, and critical thinking play an important role in increasing access to high-quality pediatric care across all health settings, particularly in vulnerable and underserved populations.

Certification plays a role in attaining positive health outcomes. Ensuring that children have access to qualified pediatric health care providers is as important in improving outcomes as other variables contributing to child health outcomes.¹³ Pediatric nursing certification represents an advanced level of knowledge and skill in the specialty area of pediatrics.

Certification provides peace of mind to patients and families. Certification provides patients and their families with the confidence that the nursing professional caring for them has demonstrated clinical excellence. According to a 2020 national survey conducted by the American Board of Nursing Specialties, 75% of adults think it is important that all nurses be required to have a specialty board certification in a relevant field.¹⁴

Pediatric Nursing Professionals

PNCB sets a standard for excellence in pediatric nursing care. Unlike other nursing certification boards, PNCB requires annual recertification for CPNs, CPNP-ACs, and CPNP-PCs through continuing education credits and other approved options to ensure continuing competence in the profession. PNCB-certified nurses are highly engaged in lifelong learning, and they must

document current state licensure free of disciplinary actions on the annual renewal application and attest to a code of ethics.

PNCB advances nursing professionals' personal growth. PNCB certification is one of the most meaningful and powerful achievements for a pediatric nursing professional. CPNs and PMHSs voluntarily choose to earn PNCB certification. Pediatric nurse practitioners use their CPNP-AC or CPNP-PC credential to enter the workforce and begin practicing in their role. Certification empowers CPNs, CPNP-ACs, CPNP-PCs, and PMHSs with confirmation of their specialized knowledge, offering an added sense of confidence and achievement. For CPNs, their certification accomplishment often translates into greater career mobility and earning potential and affirms respect from employers, colleagues, and other members of the health care team.

PNCB's "No Pass, No Pay" employer program enables growth of pediatric nursing profession. In 2009, PNCB introduced "No Pass, No Pay," an innovative, award-winning certification program to support nurses in earning a CPN certification, the gold standard in pediatric RN certification. Employers finance the certification exam on behalf of nurses, but through PNCB's risk-free testing program, employers pay only when the exam is passed. Many employers also use this program to financially support CPN, CPNP-AC, and CPNP-PC annual recertification fees.

Certification reduces a patient's exposure to risk. Specialty certification has been associated with nursing expertise. Nursing certification correlates with lower rates of adverse patient events.¹⁵ Advanced education, clinical training, specialization, licensure, and certification all contribute to higher standards of care and ensuring safety, quality, and excellence in the delivery of health care.

Employers & the U.S. Health Care System

Employers use certification to make informed hiring decisions. Employers want to hire the best qualified individual to provide exceptional care that results in improved patient outcomes.

CPNs, CPNP-ACs, and CPNP-PCs support health systems' recognition as provider of high-quality care. The number of certified nurses on staff is a key factor in a hospital's ability to achieve initial Magnet[®] recognition and subsequent redesignation.

Hospital and other employers' use of PNCB's "No Pass, No Pay" certification program can help recruit and retain pediatric nursing expertise. Data and research have demonstrated that nurse engagement is critical to the patient experience, clinical quality, and patient outcomes.¹⁶ Employers who support pediatric nurses using PNCB's "No Pass, No Pay" program can inspire loyalty among pediatric nursing professionals for their willingness to invest in their professional development.

CPNP-ACs and CPNP-PCs can continue to transform pediatric health care in the U.S. The nation does not have enough pediatric specialists and subspecialists to care for the growing number of children with serious diseases and chronic conditions. The knowledge and expertise certified by PNCB enable PNPs to reduce the gap in care and provide patients with excellent, value-and evidence-based care.

PMHSs support access to pediatric developmental, behavioral, and mental health care. Integrating mental health services into the primary care setting both builds on mandates from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the American Academy of Pediatrics and allows for treatment of the patient as a whole, both physically and mentally. The top two coding/billing complexity levels assigned to PMHSs' patient care load are Complexity Level 4 (77.8%) and Complexity Level 3 (71.2%). At least one third of PMHSs credit this credential

with attracting new patients to their practice, thus increasing access to care in their community and increasing practice revenue.¹⁷ The value of earning and maintaining PMHS certification is not only functionally and financially advantageous to the practice but also to the patient. Since services are offered in the same setting, patients are able to access safe, timely, familiar, and cost appropriate mental health care.¹⁸

General Public

Increases consumer confidence. In an age of increased consumer influence, certification demonstrates to the general public a commitment to the continual advancement of one's knowledge and skills to provide the best possible health care to pediatric patients and their families.

Protection for the public. Certification empowers nursing professionals who utilize their advanced skills, knowledge, and experience to save lives, safeguard the public health, and advance the U.S. health care system overall.

Conclusion

Communities with high proportions of minority groups are 4 times more likely than other communities to have provider shortages.¹⁹ Nearly a quarter of the U.S. population lives in rural areas; however, only 10% of physicians practice in these areas. As a result, advanced practice registered nurses are more likely to provide primary health care services, including pediatric care, in rural areas.^{20,21,22}

Current estimates suggest that by the year 2032 there will be major workforce shortages in the primary care disciplines as well as in many specialty disciplines. Functional shortages in the pediatric workforce have been described by the Children's Hospital Association where data reveal long wait times for subspecialty services. Almost 50% of children's hospitals reported vacancies in developmental and behavioral pediatrics and adolescent and child psychiatry and over 30% of children's hospitals reported vacancies in child neurology and genetics.²³ With the future of the pediatric workforce at stake, significant concerns exist regarding the number of physicians who specialize in pediatrics to meet the growing demands of our pediatric population.

As U.S. health care continues to evolve and shift away from fee-for-service to value-based payment models, the value of certification as a mark of excellence is more important than ever. Achieving PNCB certification demonstrates to pediatric patients, families, employers, and the public that a certified nurse's knowledge reflects the highest national standards of care and a deep commitment to patient safety. Relying on the expertise of pediatric nursing professionals to care for children and adolescents will be critical to our nation's ability to successfully increase access to care, improve quality, and lower costs.

Position Statement of The Pediatric Nursing Certification Board, November 2021

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