

## Exceed Pediatric Consumer Expectations

**The last year was challenging for pediatric hospitals and health systems, as well as their patients, as the pandemic continued and brought new variants that had a greater impact on children.** As we put COVID in the rearview—for now anyways—boards should reflect on the consumer’s experience during this time and how their organization can exceed expectations moving forward. This article provides highlights from NRC Health’s 2022 Pediatric Consumer Trends Report.<sup>1</sup> It looks at shifting parental needs and evolving healthcare trends such as deferment, telehealth use, and the pandemic’s toll on mental health.

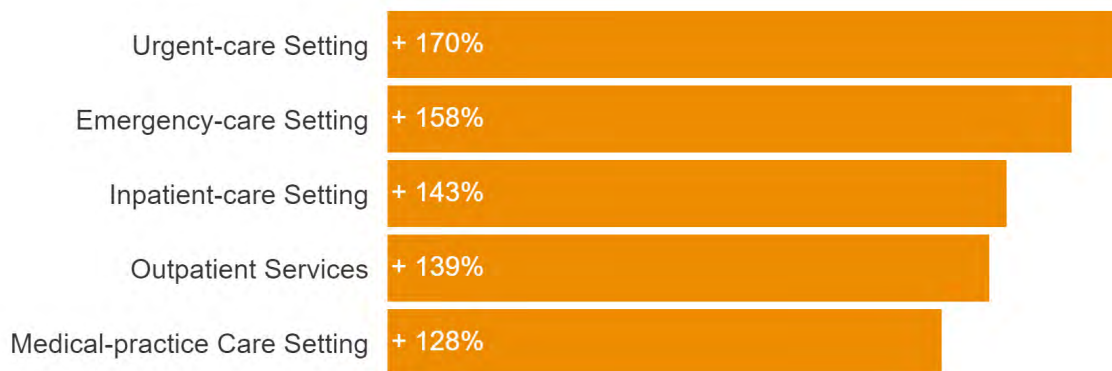
### The Return of Pediatric Patients

One of the most significant disruptions in healthcare delivery in modern history has come from patients deferring care during the pandemic. The promising news is that NRC Health data shows that healthcare deferment in pediatrics is decreasing, and parents are starting to resume services for their children. However, pediatric hospitals and health systems should be mindful that some patients who re-emerge could be sicker and costlier in 2022.

As of Q4 2021, 11.6 percent of parents stated that they had delayed pediatric care for a child in the household, compared to 12.3 percent in Q4 2020. Additionally, 42.6 percent of parents stated that concerns over COVID-19 very much impacted their decision to delay care.

Fortunately, the rate at which parents are resuming services has risen by 135 percent from 2020 to 2021 across all major service lines. The largest increases in volume among major service lines have come from:

<sup>1</sup> View the full report at <https://go.nrchealth.com/l/279972/2022-03-02/s5z18>.



A small but often overlooked percentage of parents don't plan to return to healthcare or are unsure when they will do so. As of Q4 2021, 12.5 percent of parents say they are unsure when to resume healthcare activities, and 5.5 percent say they will not return to healthcare.

As pediatric healthcare organizations continue to manage the flux, the CDC urges pediatric providers to work with families to keep children up to date with all recommended vaccinations, contact families that have missed well-child visits to schedule in-person appointments (especially those with children school-age or younger), and ensure that developmental surveillance and early childhood screenings are taking place.<sup>2</sup>

**Over 42 percent of parents stated that concerns over COVID-19 very much impacted their decision to delay care.**

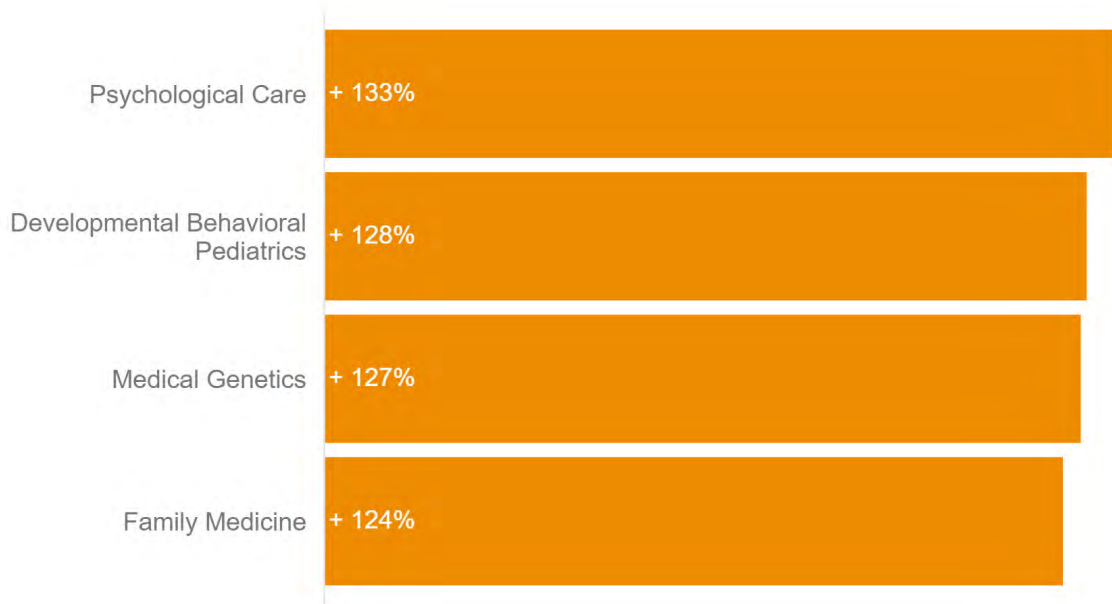
### Strategically Using Telehealth

Telehealth excitement and adoption among parents has hovered around 63 percent throughout the pandemic, compared to the pre-pandemic average of 57.8 percent in

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Information for Pediatric Healthcare Providers," Updated December 30, 2020.

Q1 2020. Additionally, parents are more excited about telehealth (63.1 percent) than consumers without any children in the household (52.3 percent).

Telehealth’s inherent ease of use, amount of time spent with providers, courtesy, respect received, and attentiveness have made the technology a winner—but only for specific groups of providers. Telehealth usage has grown within disciplines such as:



Outside of these areas, telehealth usage in pediatrics has decreased in almost every area, so it’s critical for pediatric hospitals and health systems to use telehealth strategically. A parent from California explains that they are tired of telehealth serving as the default: “I don’t feel like the service for my son is as good as it would be in person. For some things it’s fine, but for others, I feel like it’s gone too far and hasn’t come back to what is best for the patient yet.”

Given that telehealth usage has more than doubled since 2020, boards of pediatric hospitals and health systems should ensure their organization has cultivated an effective and meaningful telehealth practice that prioritizes provider time, attentiveness, and financial transparency, while also considering what additional digital health innovations may be needed.

## The Pandemic's Toll on Mental Health

Citing mounting evidence of ongoing harm, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a public health advisory in December 2021 on the mental health challenges confronting youth, a rare warning and a call to action to address what he called an emerging crisis exacerbated by pandemic hardships.

Before the pandemic, children from all backgrounds—especially immigrants, students with disabilities, and students of color from low-income families—faced serious mental health challenges. At the same time, pandemic-related safety measures reduced in-person interactions among children, friends, social support, and professionals such as teachers, school counselors, pediatricians, and child welfare workers.<sup>3</sup>

NRC Health's Real-time Feedback data finds that mental health hospitalizations of children have increased 163 percent from 2020 to 2021. In early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51 percent higher for adolescent girls and 4 percent higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time in early 2019.<sup>4</sup> Further, parents reported slightly higher rates of their own worsened mental health (32.4 percent) than consumers without children in the household (29.9 percent) in Q4 2021.

Pediatric hospitals and health systems should maximize communication in offering mental health resources and preventative mental health services to help decrease pediatric hospitalizations. The National Institute of Mental Health suggests sharing prevention hotlines, promoting a variety of mental health providers, offering options for those without insurance, providing literature on community services, and promoting online apps and phone resources.<sup>5</sup>

**There has been a 163 percent increase in mental health hospitalizations of children from 2020 to 2021.**

- 3 Howard Blume and Melissa Gomez, "[Surgeon General Warns of Emerging Youth Mental Health Crisis in Rare Public Advisory](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2021.
- 4 U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, [Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory 2021](#).
- 5 Jayne Leonard, "[What Mental Health Resources Are Available?](#)" *Medical News Today*, September 28, 2020.

## Pediatric Healthcare Recall

For healthcare organizations that adults visit, marketing recall has increased 4.8 percent from its lowest point of 59.4 percent in 2020 to 66.3 percent in 2021. However, for pediatric facilities specifically, that percentage has remained stagnant (at 1.5 percent) in both 2020 and 2021. Advertising for pediatric services among parents has only marginally improved, with 9.1 percent of parents recalling seeing advertising for pediatric services in 2021, compared to 8.1 percent in 2020.

Fortunately, consumers visiting a pediatric hospital Web site have increased 5.3 percent from 2020 to 2021. An all-time high of 41.4 percent of consumers report having visited a pediatric hospital Web site as of Q4 2021, so the commitment within pediatric marketing-communications technology is important.

Pediatric providers can ensure that their marketing has a digital-first, mobile-ready strategy. Nearly two-thirds (65.8 percent) of parents say they will use a handheld mobile device to access information in the next 12 months. Social media (at 20.1 percent, up from 13.3 percent in 2020) is now the second-most recalled ad platform behind television (24.8 percent) among consumers with children in the household.

### → Questions for the Board to Ask Management

- Is patient volume picking up at our hospital—how much and within what service lines? What is our organization doing to help make parents comfortable resuming services for their children, and ensure children are coming in for needed care?
- What service lines are seeing growth in telehealth use, and how can we improve the digital health experience for both patients and providers?
- How has the pandemic affected children’s mental health in our communities? What are we doing to effectively support children in need of mental health services?
- How are we ensuring that parents know about our brand and what we offer? Do we have a digital-first, mobile-ready marketing strategy?
- What steps do we take to understand a patient’s preferences in advance so that we can deliver personalized care?

The lack of pediatric recall for consumers creates an opportunity to elevate brand campaigns in regional and national markets. Boards should ensure that their pediatric organizations build their brands using an omnichannel approach to engage patients and personalization techniques to promote services, provide resources, and advertise personalized care to target active audiences.

## Necessary Increase in Human Understanding

Consumers' likelihood of recommending pediatric hospitals and health systems has increased while parents' likelihood of recommending hospitals has decreased, which

### → Key Board Takeaways

- **Ensure there is a plan for encouraging families to return for care.** During the pandemic, many parents delayed care for their children. While healthcare deferment in pediatrics is decreasing, it's important that hospitals and health systems are proactive about making parents feel comfortable coming back and reaching out to those who have postponed needed care.
- **Reassess your telehealth strategy.** Telehealth use in pediatrics has only increased in specific disciplines such as psychological care, developmental behavioral pediatrics, medical genetics, and family medicine, so ensure your organization is being strategic about when telehealth is utilized. Now is also a good time to refine telehealth practices and consider if additional digital health innovations are needed.
- **Recognize how the pandemic has affected children's mental health.** Ask management about the impact on patients' mental health (e.g., has there been more mental health hospitalizations?), the services provided at the hospital/health system and in the community, and additional partnerships that are needed to better support patients and their families.
- **Elevate your organization's brand.** To be successful, pediatric organizations will need to build their brands using an omnichannel approach to engage patients and personalization techniques to promote services, provide resources, and advertise care to target active audiences.
- **Build trust by demonstrating an understanding of patients' unique needs and preferences.** Ensure your organization is learning about patient preferences ahead of time so that interactions can be personalized at the right moments and exceed patients' expectations.

indicates that the care experience is not meeting expectations. Pediatric hospitals and health systems must meet people where they are to increase this critical metric.

Consumers' likelihood of recommending pediatric hospitals and health systems (Net Promoter Score or NPS) has increased slightly from 45.8 to 46.1 between 2020 and 2021. Although slight, consumer NPS for pediatric hospitals has not shown an upward trend in several years. Conversely, the pediatric patient experience peaked during the onset of the pandemic—with an NPS at 69 in April 2020 for hospital inpatients and emergency departments—but has been declining since, resulting in an NPS of 53 in December 2021.

The key to enhancing a patient's care journey is understanding preferences in advance, which can be achieved through communication assessments. Pediatric healthcare organizations should deliver a person-centered, equity-focused experience as a standard measure across care settings and treat each patient as unique while personalizing their experience.

During the past 15 years, covering the existence of the CAHPS program, NRC Health has seen the overall percentage of patients who recommend an organization barely increase—yet the industry is still spending billions of dollars a year to drive improvement against such measures. What needs to happen is a new understanding that 99 percent of a patient's life happens beyond the hospital setting. When pediatric healthcare organizations begin to understand each person's expectations in advance of their interaction or episode of care, they can personalize those interactions at the right moments and exceed patients' expectations.

When pediatric healthcare organizations begin to understand each person's expectations in advance of their interaction or episode of care, they can personalize those interactions at the right moments and exceed patients' expectations.

In NRC Health's 2022 Healthcare Consumer Trends Report,<sup>6</sup> they report that the number of consumers with no preference has plateaued, and pediatric services have

6 NRC Health, [2022 Healthcare Consumer Trends Report](#).



shown a similar trend. In 2021, 35.7 percent of consumers indicated no preference for pediatric services, compared to 36.9 percent in 2020. Further, consumers are reporting no change in preference for hospitals and health systems in terms of personalized care, indicating that hospitals and health systems are not going out of their way to meet patients where they are.

Ultimately, pediatric healthcare organizations must strive for seamless connectivity between service recovery and missed patient expectations, driving caregiver recognition and positive comments on social media to enhance reputation. Now is the time for pediatric organizations to use meaningful advertising and aim their messaging at patients in a personalized way that adds value to their life.

## **Conclusion**

As boards and senior leaders of pediatric hospitals and health systems lead positive change and transformation in their organizations, they should take time to consider the current and future needs of patients and their families. COVID-19 and its variants have quickly taught all healthcare organizations that transformational change is necessary to meet demand and move the industry forward. And while many pediatric hospitals and health systems have shown they can be flexible despite catastrophic losses, the pandemic has shined a light on how necessary consumer-driven improvements and a better patient experience are for continued survival and growth.

