



What is infant and early childhood mental health?

Does the term “infant and early childhood mental health” make you think of a baby on a couch telling his problems to a psychiatrist? So what is infant mental health?

Infant and early childhood mental health reflects social and emotional capacities and the primary relationships in children birth through age five. Because young children’s social experiences and opportunities to explore the world depend on the love and care they receive, children’s relationships are central to “infant and early childhood mental health.”

It is essential to ensure that first relationships are trusting and caring, as early relationships provide an important foundation for later development.

If I am concerned about a child or family, what should I do?

- Talk with the parent and get more information about what may be happening
- Encourage the parent to talk with the child's pediatrician
- Recognize cultural differences
- Talk with your supervisor or another professional in a way that is respectful of child and family
- Be alert for child abuse/neglect.

Where do I go if I want to help?

Consult with health care providers and children’s mental health professionals.

Attend trainings on social and emotional development to learn more and implement relationship-based services.

Check out web sites with developmental and infant and early childhood mental health information.

Acknowledgements:

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Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health



Provided By:



Alcohol, Drug Addiction & Mental Health Services
Board for Trumbull County

www.tlifelines.org

Why is infant and early childhood mental health important?

The first years of life create the foundation for children to have positive relationships, self-confidence, and the ability to meet change and challenges successfully. Healthy social and emotional development is necessary for success in school and in life.

To grow and learn, children need good mental health as much as they need good physical health. Mental health is tied closely to relationships the child has with parents and significant caregivers. Children learn how to effectively express emotions, make friends, and explore the world



How does stress affect parenting?

A pregnant woman experiencing stress or depression may carry those feelings even after the baby is born. Studies have shown that chronic emotional and physical stress can increase the release of certain hormones that may result in the baby being born smaller. Ongoing stressors can impact the mother or father's ability to care for, and interact with, the baby.

What are potential signs that a child may need some help?

Intensity and frequency of the following signs may indicate that a child or family needs assistance. They do not indicate definite mental health concerns and are to be used only as “red flags” or warning signs.

Infant (birth-12 months)

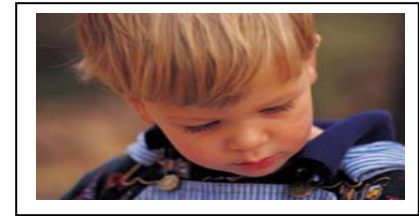
- Unusually difficult to soothe or console
- Limited interest in things or people
- Consistent strong reactions to touch, sounds, or movement
- Always fearful or on guard
- Reacts strongly for no reason
- Evidence of abuse or neglect

Toddler:

- Displays very little emotion
- Unable to comfort or calm self
- Limited interest in things or people
- Does not turn to familiar adults for comfort and help
- Has inconsistent sleep patterns

Preschool child:

- Consistently prefers to not play with others or with toys
- Goes with strangers easily
- Destructive to self or others
- Hurts animals
- Limited use of words to express feelings



How is infant and early childhood mental health nurtured by relationships?

Loving, nurturing relationships enhance emotional development and mental health. When infants and toddlers are treated with kindness and encouragement, they develop a sense of safety and emotional security. A nurturing caring relationship provides a “secure base” from which a child can begin exploring the world, frequently checking back for reassurance. The more children explore and try safe new things, the more they experience and feel good about themselves.

Should I wait until the child can talk before I refer for mental health services?

No. Research on brain development shows that the first three years of life are critical. During the first few months of life, pathways multiply in the brain. As the infant develops trust and attachment, the foundation for lifelong success in relationships and school is established. Often mental health treatment for the parents or parent/child joint therapy has a positive, lasting impact.