

What is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?



Iowa Association for Infant & Early
Childhood Mental Health

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Mental health plays an important role in everyone's wellbeing, even for infants and very young children. So what is infant and early childhood mental health?

Infant and early childhood mental health reflects both the **social-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, the child and the child'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.

Why is infant and early childhood mental health important?

The first years of life provide the foundation for children's mental health and social-emotional development.

Social development includes the ability to form healthy relationships with others, and the knowledge of social rules and standards.

Emotional development includes the experience of feelings about self and others, with a range of positive and negative emotions, as well as the ability to control and regulate feelings in culturally appropriate ways.

The development of **self-worth, self-confidence and self-regulation** are important features of social-emotional development. Healthy social-emotional development is essential for success in school and in life.

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. Young children need a “secure base” built from nurturing, caring relationships. This base allows children the ability to explore the world, frequently checking back for reassurance. The more they explore and try new things, the more success they experience.

Good relationships help children feel valued. Kind, nurturing relationships also teach children how to treat others. Children watch adults and imitate them. **Children who feel loved and cherished grow up to be adults who care about others.**



What can happen if a child does not have healthy early relationships?

Children may respond to the lack of a healthy relationship in a variety of ways.

- Some children seem sad, rejected and lethargic.
- Some babies may become depressed or develop eating or sleeping problems.
- Some children try to meet their own needs. They “self-stimulate” or rock back-and-forth trying to nurture themselves.
- Some children may be so starved for affection that they seek attention from any willing adult, potentially placing themselves in an unsafe situation.
- Some children get angry. They are aggressive and hostile without provocation. They won’t allow comforting, even when they are hurt.

How does stress affect mental health?

Frequent or prolonged exposure to chronic stress can negatively affect the developing brain. When we experience stress, our bodies respond by releasing stress hormones. In large amounts, stress hormones can impact nerve cell growth. Children who are exposed to chronic stressors (such as physical or emotional abuse,



domestic violence, substance abuse, caregiver depression or poverty) can actually experience a disruption in brain development which can impact learning, behavior and health. **The effects of chronic stress in early childhood can last a lifetime.**



What can adults do to nurture children's social and emotional development?

- Surround children with nurturing relationships.
- Smile and laugh with young children.
- Create a trusting environment.
- Provide stable and consistent caregivers at home and in child care.
- Understand and respond to children's cues.
- Spend unhurried time together.
- Comfort and reassure children when they are scared, angry, or hurt.
- Develop daily routines to promote infants' feelings of security and to help them learn what you expect.
- Learn developmental stages and have appropriate expectations.
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Consider that whatever you're doing or going through may affect your child.
- Recognize early signs of social and emotional distress.

Warning Signs that MAY Indicate Social or Emotional Distress

The following are indications that a young child MAY be experiencing distress. Remember, these are only warning signs; these behaviors may be related to other health factors. If you suspect a child or family may be in need of assistance, talk with the child's pediatrician or a licensed mental health professional in your community who has experience in early childhood.

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
- Physical 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
- Is hurtful to self, others or animals
- Limited use of words to express feelings

Parent-Related Risk Factors:

- Known mental illness
- Substance abuse
- Limited coping skills
- History of traumatic events
- Frequent moves or lack of friends and support

Other Things to Consider:

- How severe is the child's behavior?
- How many weeks or months has the behavior been occurring?
- How long does the behavior last (e.g., minutes, hours)?
- How does the behavior compare with the behavior of other children of the same age?
- Are there events at home or in childcare that make the behavior better or worse?

What can parents and family members do?

- Talk with the child's pediatrician or primary care provider
- Contact Iowa's Early ACCESS program by visiting www.earlyaccessiowa.org or by dialing 1-888-425-4371
- Ask their childcare provider for local resources
- Seek mental health providers who have expertise with young children

Teachers and providers can:

- Consider different cultural perspectives
- Talk with the child's family
- Talk with colleagues or supervisors
- Help families find additional local and internet resources





Iowa Association for Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health

We welcome your support!

Join the Iowa Association for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.

Join other professionals committed to improving systems for children's social, emotional and behavioral development. Information regarding membership can be found at www.promotementalhealthiowa.org.

Recommended websites:

www.promotementalhealthiowa.org

www.zerotothree.org

www.cpeip.fsu.edu/index.cfm

csefel.vanderbilt.edu/

brightfutures.aap.org/index.html

eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/center

gucchd.georgetown.edu/64273.html

www.cdc.gov/ace/index.htm

www.talaris.org

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