

5 Things You Should Know About Early Childhood Mental Health

1

Mental health plays an important role in everyone's wellbeing, even babies and young children.

Mental health refers to the way we think, feel, relate to others, handle stress, and make decisions. It also includes the way we see ourselves. Mental health problems can occur at any age, and can include conditions such as anxiety and depression. Often, mental health problems in children lead to challenges with behavior and attention. Young children process and respond to stressful situations differently than older children and adults. It is important for people who work with young children to keep this in mind.

2

Early relationships and experiences lay the foundation for mental health across the lifespan.

Research indicates that children who are raised in a loving and nurturing environment with attentive and consistent caregivers are more likely to experience a lifetime of healthy mental development than children who endure abuse and neglect. It is important to note that the mental health of a parent or caregiver can impact the mental health of a child. Although genetics undeniably play an important role in early brain development, experiences and environments can impact mental health in either a positive or negative way. We can promote children's mental health by fostering safe, stable and nurturing environments for babies and young children.

3

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.

4

Protective factors may buffer the effects of chronic stress.

Even when bad things happen, children who have certain protective factors are more likely to be resilient or "bounce back" from adversity. These factors include:

- Caring relationships with adults
- Good physical health and development
- Positive relationships with peers
- Healthy self-esteem
- Good social skills
- Sense of control over some situations

5

Early identification and intervention is crucial.

Intervention is more likely to be successful when concerns are identified and addressed early. Developmental screening can detect problems early on, before the problem becomes overwhelming. Developmental screening can be completed by physicians, nurses, social workers, child care providers, or other professionals who work with young children. Screening can even be completed by a parent or other caregiver. It is important that parents know and understand the results of the screening, share the information with their child's primary care provider and other professional supports, and follow up on referrals to specialists when necessary. Early intervention should always occur within the context of relationships.



Warning Signs that MAY Indicate Emotional Distress

The following are indications that a young child MAY be experiencing emotional 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.

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

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

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

Parent-Related Risk Factors:

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

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Links to Additional Resources:

www.promotementalhealthiowa.org
www.kaimh.org/
www.zerotothree.org/
www.cpeip.fsu.edu/index.cfm
csefel.vanderbilt.edu/index.html

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

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