



COST EFFECTIVENESS OF PREVENTION APPROACHES TO SUPPORT INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

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When We Prevent Mental Health Challenges Starting Early in Life, the Benefits to Families and Society Far Exceed the Costs

Supporting the social and emotional development of infants and young children provides the strong foundation they need for lifelong social, emotional, and physical health. Development of early social and emotional skills reduces children's behavior problems and emotional distress while contributing to school readiness and academic success.¹

Unfortunately, some children start out life with more adversity, increasing the risk of infant and early childhood mental health problems. This includes children:

- Living in poverty
- Experiencing child abuse and neglect and other forms of trauma
- Having a parent with a mental health or substance use disorder
- Experiencing discrimination²

In the long-term, when children develop serious mental health and behavioral disorders that go unaddressed, it costs society a great deal in lost earnings and unemployment, as well as costs related to education, health care, mental health treatment, and child welfare and justice system involvement.³

But poor mental health outcomes are not inevitable: intervening early in a child's life can prevent mental and behavioral challenges while providing a strong return on investment.

Evidence-based Prevention Approaches

Evidence-based prevention approaches for young children improve children's circumstances and reduce risks by strengthening parent/child relationships, building social and emotional skills, and increasing children's resilience for dealing with future adversities.

Common types of prevention approaches for young children and families include:

- Home visiting programs
- Infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC)
- Parenting programs
- Preventive services integrated into primary care settings
- Social emotional learning approaches

Prevention approaches for young children are often delivered where children spend their time — at home, in early care and education programs, in health care settings, and in local neighborhoods.

Two-generational interventions, which include both young children and their parents or other caregivers, are particularly effective because they strengthen the caregiver-child relationship, which is essential to children's mental health.⁴



Types of Prevention Approaches

PREVENTION PROGRAMS DELIVERED AT HOME

Early childhood home visiting programs⁵ support pregnant and parenting families with young children. Outcomes of home visiting programs include reduced child maltreatment, improved early cognitive skills, reduced child behavior problems in later childhood, and improvements in parent/child interactions and attachment. Maternal benefits range from improved health practices, such as reduced smoking, to fewer subsequent pregnancies, and increased likelihood of returning to work or school.⁶

Every dollar spent on evidence-based home visiting leads to cost savings. For example:

- Family Spirit has an average return on investment of \$2.37* for every dollar spent.⁷
- Healthy Families America has an average return on investment of \$1.81 for every dollar spent.⁸
- Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) has an average return on investment of \$1.52 for every dollar spent.⁹
- Nurse Family Partnership has an average return on investment of \$1.47 for every dollar spent.¹⁰

* Benefit-cost estimates for specific interventions presented in this brief represent Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) analyses updated in December 2023. These estimates are subject to change over time. Find more information [HERE](#).

COMMUNITY-BASED PREVENTION APPROACHES FOR PARENTS

Parenting programs¹¹ are often provided in group formats in community-based settings. They strengthen skills (such as responsive and nurturing caregiving practices and positive discipline) and support parents' sense of confidence. Parental outcomes include reduced stress and harsh parenting practices. Examples of child outcomes include decreased disruptive behaviors and improved reading skills and school achievement.¹²

Every dollar spent on evidence-based and evidence-informed parenting programs leads to cost savings. For example:

- Circle of Security – Parenting has an average return on investment of \$3.37 for every dollar spent.¹³
- Incredible Years Parent Training has an average return on investment of \$6.29 for every dollar spent.¹⁴



PREVENTION APPROACHES DELIVERED IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SETTINGS

To prepare children to be successful academically and at work, many early care and education programs and schools integrate lessons and materials that build emotional literacy, self-regulation, social competence, and interpersonal problem-solving skills, beginning as early as preschool and sometimes up through 12th grade. Examples of outcomes include reduced behavioral issues, improved social and work-related skills, and improvements in reading, writing, and math.¹⁵

Every dollar spent on evidence-based social emotional learning approaches leads to cost savings.¹⁶ For example:

- PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, preschool to grade 6) has an average return on investment of \$24.44 for every dollar spent.¹⁷
- Second Step (pre-K to grade 12) has an average return on investment of \$4.93 for every dollar spent.¹⁸

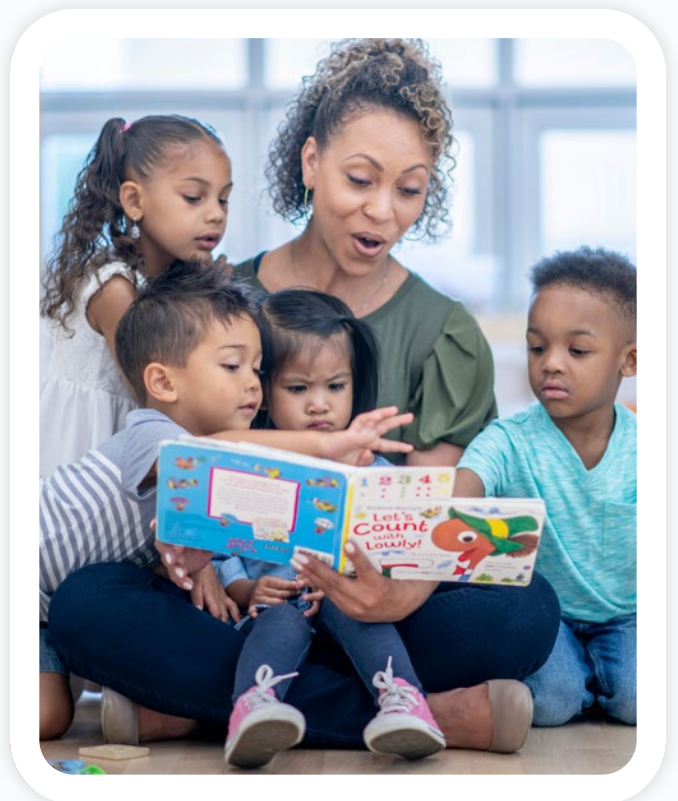
Promising Prevention Approaches

IECMHC AND INTEGRATION OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INTO PRIMARY CARE

Two promising infant and early childhood mental health prevention approaches that do not yet have available data on cost-effectiveness are infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC) and integration of behavioral health into primary care.

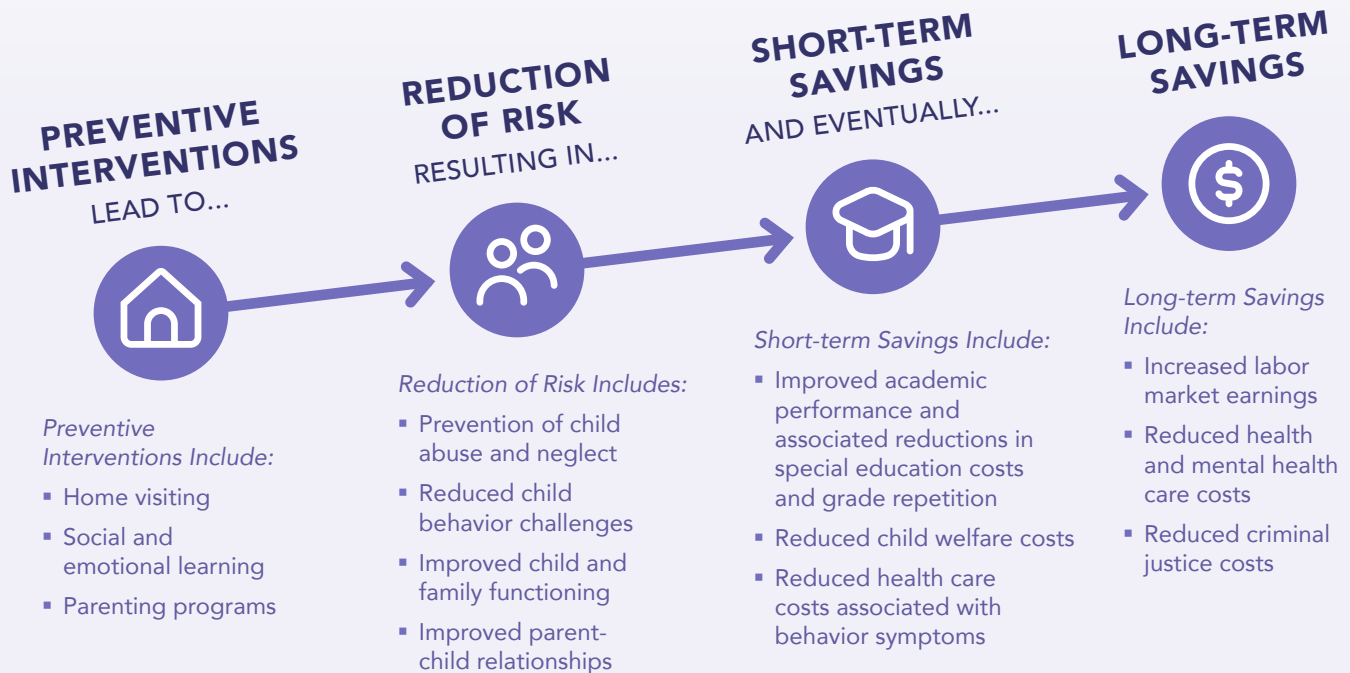
Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) consultants work in early care and education, home visiting programs, and other settings to increase providers' capacity to prevent and address young children's emotional and behavioral difficulties. Research on IECMHC suggests that it increases young children's social skills and positive caregiver-child interactions, while reducing children's problem behaviors and teacher stress.^{19, 20}

Integrating IECMH professionals into primary care settings to enhance screenings, offer parenting information, consultation, navigation, and other family supports, is a key component of initiatives like Healthy Steps²¹ and Project LAUNCH.²² Integrating Healthy Steps into a pediatric primary care program, for example, is associated with greater attachment security and fewer child behavior problems, as well as higher family satisfaction with and engagement in care.²³



How Does Investing in Prevention End Up Saving Money?

If we can address social conditions that lead to poor mental health — and support the health and wellbeing of adults raising young children — we will have more than enough money to invest in a generation of healthy and happy children.



CONVERSELY, WHEN WE FAIL TO INVEST IN THE PREVENTION OF EARLY ADVERSITIES, WE PAY SIGNIFICANT COSTS OVER TIME

- About 1 in 8 children experience abuse or neglect.²⁴ The cost of child abuse and neglect is estimated at \$2.96 trillion over children’s lifetime in health care, child welfare, special education, and criminal justice expenditures and intangible costs (such as reduced quality of life).²⁵
- About 1 in 7 mothers experience depression and/or anxiety during pregnancy or after birth. The cost of untreated maternal mental health conditions is \$14.2 billion annually.²⁶
- Approximately 1 in 8 children live with a parent who had a substance use disorder in the past year. The cost of substance misuse is \$510.8 billion annually.²⁷
- Over 1 in 6 individuals experience multiple childhood adversities (4+). The total cost of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is \$748 billion annually.²⁸
- Nearly 1 in 8 children live below the poverty line. The total cost of child poverty is \$1.03 trillion annually.²⁹

The path is clear: invest in evidence-based prevention early on for healthy families and communities now and in the future.



ENDNOTES

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