



INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH (IECMH):

# LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR ALL FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

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# Laying the Groundwork for all **Future Development**

## What is IECMH?

Experts from a range of disciplines consider Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) to be the foundation of healthy, lifelong development, especially when grounded in the child's racial, cultural, and linguistic identities. Because infants and young children learn and develop within the context of relationships, parents and other caregivers are vital influencers of a child's healthy development.

IECMH is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 5 years old to

- form close and secure adult and peer relationships;
- experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and
- explore the environment and learn

\*all in the content of family, community, and culture.

This [infographic](#) was developed by ZERO TO THREE to help early childhood professionals talk about social and emotional development.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A baby's social-emotional health is the foundation of all development including physical health, cognitive skills, language acquisition and long-term life outcomes. The domains of development are interdependent and do not progress within a silo. Early childhood is the most critical time of growth and learning.

- In the first years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second.<sup>1</sup>
- Babies' earliest relationships and experiences shape the architecture of their developing brains.
- Social and emotional health involves the developing capacities of trust, motivation, persistence, and curiosity, all necessary ingredients to succeed in school.

While positive early childhood experiences promote strong emotional health, negative experiences can adversely impact brain development, with serious lifelong consequences. When an infant or young child's emotional health deteriorates significantly, they can and do experience mental health problems. However, with early identification, assessment and treatment, infants, young children and their caregivers can develop the skills to mitigate these detrimental impacts and build resilience to live healthy and productive lives.



## HOW IS IT DEVELOPED?

IECMH develops through responsive, consistent, and nurturing caregiving. A baby's interaction with their caregivers (biological parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents, child care providers, etc.) has the most significant influence on their mental health.

The social-emotional health of infants and young children is closely intertwined with their parents' and other caregivers' mental health. Therefore, attention must also be given to the parents' and caregivers' physical, social, emotional, and mental well-being, as adult mental health challenges are often felt and experienced by infants and young children. Many times, the best way to support an infant or young child is by addressing the mental health needs of their parents and caregivers.

## WHAT DO MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN YOUNG CHILDREN LOOK LIKE?

### INFANTS

- Inability to gain weight
- Inconsolable crying
- Lacks emotional expression
- Sleeping and feeding disturbances
- Resistance to being touched or comforted

### TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

- Tantrums, intense emotional outbursts (yelling, hitting, breaking things)
- Impulsive behavior/play
- Inability to pay attention
- Difficulties managing their emotions
- Regression in sleep, toileting, language or eating routines
- Difficulty transitioning from one activity to another or following rules

\*all outside of typical, developmental and cultural norms

## NEGATIVE INFLUENCES ON IECMH

- Parental loss
- Substance abuse
- Exposure to trauma (child abuse and neglect domestic violence, community violence)
- Parental mental illness
- Poverty
- Homelessness

## HOW ARE IECMH SERVICES DELIVERED?

IECMH is also a term used to describe the full continuum of services and supports (i.e., promotion, prevention, developmentally and culturally appropriate assessment and diagnosis, and treatment) necessary to promote healthy development, prevent mental health problems, and treat mental health disturbances. Fortunately, IECMH may be positively impacted through a continuum of targeted strategies.

- **PROMOTION** strategies are aimed at maintaining social and emotional well-being and benefit all young children and families. Strategies include public awareness campaigns, help lines for parents, universal home visiting, mental health consultation, availability of high quality affordable child care, and universal availability of local and virtual mental health resources and supports.
- **PREVENTION** services are targeted toward young children and families who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes. Services are delivered in diverse settings, seek to identify risk factors, and recognize opportunities to enhance child/caregiver dynamics. Prevention services include home visiting services, referrals to community and social services, parent education, mental health consultation, and access to universal screening (including social and emotional/mental health, and Early Intervention/Part C services).



## HOW ARE IECMH SERVICES DELIVERED? (CONTINUED)

▪ **DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ASSESSMENT AND DIAGNOSIS** is designed to reduce the risk of mental health problems through early identification. Using an age-appropriate system for classification of mental health and developmental disorders of infants and young children, such as *DC:0-5™: Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood* (DC:0-5), is the recommended practice for the clinical conceptualization and diagnosis of children (birth through 5 years old) and connection to appropriate services as needed.

▪ **TREATMENT** services provide individualized, developmentally appropriate practices that are culturally and linguistically responsive for families of infants and young children struggling with mental health issues. Parents or primary caregivers are usually involved in these relationship-based treatments because of the age of the child. Services may include Child-Parent Psychotherapy, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, and Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up.



## Conclusion

Early childhood is a rapid time for brain development as well as the attainment of many skills. The evolving physical growth, cognitive skills, and language acquisition are interdependent and IECMH sets the stage for these developmental domains and for school and life success. Infants and young children have mental health needs. Nurturing, consistent relationships play a critical role in promoting the mental health and well-being of all children.

1. Center on the Developing Child. (2009). Five numbers to remember about early childhood development (Brief). Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)





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