



# What is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?

Why Is It Important?





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Does the term “infant and early childhood mental health” make you think of a baby on a couch telling his problems to a psychiatrist? Well, not really. So, if not that, then just what is infant mental health?

Infant and early childhood mental health reflects both the social and emotional capacities and the primary relationships in children from 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 relationship are central to infant and early childhood mental health.

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

## Why Is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Important?

The first years of life create the foundation – secure beginnings – for a child 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 that the child has with parents and significant caregivers. Children learn how to effectively express emotions, make friends and explore the world around them through these relationships.

# How Is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Nurtured by Relationships?

Loving, nurturing relationships enhance emotional development and mental health. When infants, toddlers and young children 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.

## What Can Happen If a Child Does Not Have Nurturing Early Childhood Relationships?

Healthy social and emotional growth promotes a range of positive behavior skills, which develop during early childhood and grow over time. These skills build on one another, and have a life long impact on a person's relationships. Key developmental skills give young children the ability to:

- Manage impulses and regulate their own behavior;
- Learn to identify and start to understand their own feelings;
- Manage strong emotions and express them in a constructive manner;
- Recognize emotions and emotional cues in others;
- Develop empathy for others;

- Establish and sustain close relationships and friendships;  
and
- Develop confidence, cooperativeness and the capacity to communicate.



Researchers believe that children with underdeveloped social emotional skills are at risk for later problems in school, work and adult relationships.

# What Are Potential Signs That A Child Or A Parent May Need 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. Always consider how severe the behavior, how many weeks or months the behavior has been occurring, how long the behavior lasts, how the behavior compares with other children of the same age, and events at home or at child care that make the behavior better or worse?

- **Infant – birth to 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 apparent reason

- **Toddler \***

- Displays very little emotion

- Unable to comfort or calm self

- Limited interest in things or people

- Does not turn to families 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

*\* Be alert to evidence of child abuse and neglect at any age*

- **Parent**

Known mental illness

Substance abuse

Limited coping skills

History of traumatic events

Frequent moves or lack of friends and support



# How Can Adults Nurture Children's Emotional Development and Mental Health?

- Surround children and yourself with nurturing relationships.
- Create a trusting environment.
- Provide stable and consistent caregivers at home and in child-care settings.
- Learn about and respond to children's cues.
- Learn about child development in order to have realistic expectations.
- Spend unhurried time together.
- Comfort and reassure children when they are scared, angry, or hurt.
- Develop routines to promote predictability and security.
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Consider how whatever you're doing or going through may affect a child.
- Identify early signs of emotional or mental problems.

## 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 others in a way that is respectful of child and family.
- Be alert for child abuse and neglect.

## Should I Wait Until the Child Can Talk Before I Refer for Mental Health Services?

No. Research on brain development shows that the first 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 relationship has a positive, lasting impact.



## Where Do I Go If I Want Help?

*Families may:*

- Consult with your child's pediatrician or doctor.
- Contact your local Child Guidance Service program by calling the county health department where you live or by going to [www.health.state.ok.us/phone/chdphone.html](http://www.health.state.ok.us/phone/chdphone.html)
- Call OASIS (Oklahoma Areawide Services Information System) at 1-800-426-2747, call 271-6302 in Oklahoma City, or go to [www.oasis.ouhsc.edu](http://www.oasis.ouhsc.edu) for information about resources in your community.
- Contact SoonerStart if your child is under 3 years of age by calling OASIS or going to <http://sde.state.ok.us/pro/soonerst.html> to find the SoonerStart office for your location.

People interested in obtaining more information about infant mental health can contact the Oklahoma Association for Infant Mental Health at [www.ok-aimh.org](http://www.ok-aimh.org). Learn about trainings on social and emotional development and how to implement relationship-based services.

*Child care centers or homes may:*

Call the Warmline at 1-888-574-5437 for free telephone consultation on health and behavior issues or to access tape-recorded information on numerous health and development topics. The Warmline operator can also take a referral for child care consultation if a child care center wishes to arrange for regular visits by a trained consultant.



OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

## Check Out These Recommended Websites

[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

[www.futureunlimited.org](http://www.futureunlimited.org)

<http://csefel.uiuc.edu/>

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