

# **What is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?**



**Why is it important?**



*“How young children feel is as important as how they think, and how they are treated is as important as what they are taught.”*

Jack Shonkoff, co-editor, *Neurons to Neighborhoods*

### ***What Is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?***

Infant and early childhood mental health refers to the ability of babies and very young children to experience emotions, develop relationships and learn. This is also referred to as social emotional development in children birth through age 5. Positive, nurturing early relationships with primary caregivers help infants and very young children thrive.

### ***Why Is It Important?***

Mental health is closely tied to the relationships infants and young children have with their parents and other primary caregivers. Through these important relationships in their lives, they learn how to effectively express emotions, make friends and explore the world around them.



Healthy social and emotional development in early childhood helps children learn and master the skills they need to be successful in school and throughout their lives. Children who have mastered these skills are better able to:

- Manage impulses and regulate their behavior
- Learn to identify and begin to understand their feelings
- Manage strong feelings and express them in appropriate ways
- Learn to recognize feelings and emotional cues in others
- Develop empathy
- Make friends
- Develop confidence, cooperativeness and the capacity to communicate

### ***How Do We Nurture Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?***

Mental health and emotional development in babies and very young children is enhanced through relationships which help them feel loved and protected. The more young children are able to safely explore and experience the world around them, the better they feel about themselves.

To nurture healthy social and emotional development, adults can:

- Surround children and themselves with positive, nurturing relationships
- Create a trusting, secure environment through stable, predictable routines
- Provide stable caregivers at home, in child care and in school
- Learn about child development as a way to have realistic expectations



- Learn about and respond to infant and young children's cues
- Spend quality, unhurried time together without distractions such as television, phone or computer
- Comfort and reassure infants and young children when they appear scared, upset, angry or hurt
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict
- Consider ways your behavior and emotions may be affecting your infant or young child
- Identify early signs of potential mental health problems



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

Research on brain development and on adverse childhood experiences suggests that children with underdeveloped social and emotional skills are at risk for problems in school, child care, work and in adult relationships. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study by Vincent Felitti, M.D., demonstrated how negative events in early childhood, such as abuse, neglect, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, and

an incarcerated primary caregiver, have a lifelong impact. These events have been linked to obesity, smoking, heart disease, diabetes and other illness and risky behaviors in adults.

### ***What Are Potential Signs That a Very Young Child May Need Help?***

The following warning signs do not indicate a definite mental health concern but are listed here as potential “red flags” that a child and family may need help. When there are concerns, always consider how severe the behavior is, how long it has been occurring, how it compares with other children of the same age and events in the child’s environment which might make the behavior better or worse.



**\*\*ALWAYS** be alert to evidence of child abuse and neglect at any age.\*\*

#### ***Infant (birth through 1 year)***

- Excessive fussiness-very difficult to soothe/console
- Limited or no interest in things or people
- Failure to gain weight
- Consistent strong reactions to touch, sounds or movement
- Sleep problems
- Feeding problems

### **Toddler (1-3 years)**

*(Includes the above issues in addition to the following)*

- Displays very little emotion
- Unable to calm self
- Does not turn to adults for comfort or help
- Excessive fearfulness or excessive sadness
- Withdrawal or excessive clinging
- Aggression toward self or others
- Impulsiveness and hyperactivity
- Excessive tantrums or defiance
- Language delays
- Interference with typical developmental tasks

### **Preschool (3-5 years)**

*(Includes the above issues in addition to the following)*

- Consistently prefers not to play with others or with toys
- Goes to strangers easily
- Destructive
- Hurts animals
- Limited use of words to express feelings





### ***What Are Potential Signs That an Adult May Need Help?***

- Lack of support by family, friends
- Limited coping skills
- History of traumatic and stressful events
- Mental illness
- Substance abuse

### ***What Do I Do If I'm Concerned about a Child or Family?***

- Talk with the parent or caregiver to get more information.
- Encourage the parent or caregiver to talk to the child's doctor
- Be mindful and respectful of cultural differences
- Be respectful of the child and family when talking with others about concerns.
- Be alert for signs of child abuse or neglect

### ***Shouldn't A Child Be Able to Talk Before Being Referred for Services?***

**NO!** Research on brain development indicates that during the first months and years of life, pathways multiply in the brain. These pathways are developed as the infant develops trust through attachment with primary caregivers. Infant mental health specialists focus on infants' and very young children's relationships with their parents and caregivers because there is ample evidence that early intervention can reduce or prevent later problems. Often, mental health treatment for the parent or caregiver or the child-parent relationship has a positive, lasting impact.





### ***Where is Help Available?***

- Consult with the child's doctor
- Contact SoonerStart (children under age 3) at <http://sde.state.ok.us/Curriculum/SpecEd/SoonerStart.html>
- Contact a local public school district Special Services office (children over age 3)
- Contact a local Child Guidance program at [http://www.ok.gov/health/Child\\_and\\_Family\\_Health/Child\\_Guidance\\_Service](http://www.ok.gov/health/Child_and_Family_Health/Child_Guidance_Service)
- Contact a local Community Mental Health Center at <http://ok.gov/odmhas/>
- Contact OASIS for resources and information about special health care needs and disabilities at **800-426-2747** or <http://oasis.ouhsc.edu>

### ***Help for Child Care Providers:***

Contact the Child Care Warmline at **888-574-5437** for free live phone consultation with a mental health professional or a Registered Nurse, 8:00-5:00, Monday through Friday. Access to an early childhood mental health consultant who is able to go to your child's licensed child care facility can also be arranged through the Warmline. [www.warmline.health.ok.gov/](http://www.warmline.health.ok.gov/).



Warmline provides prerecorded messages on a variety of topics related to child health, behavior and development. These messages are available anytime at 888-574-5437 or [warmline.health.ok.gov](http://warmline.health.ok.gov).

***For More Information about Infant Mental Health:***

The Oklahoma Association for Infant Mental Health (OK-AIMH), an affiliate of the World Association for Infant Mental Health (WAIMH), is made up of individuals across multiple disciplines working together to ensure that Oklahoma families, professionals and community organizations collaborate to support every child's mental health through awareness of the central role that relationships play in building healthy lives. OK-AIMH is available to provide training/professional development opportunities about infant mental health, reflective practice, brain development, the impact of early trauma, relationship based services and other topics. Contact [www.okaimh.org](http://www.okaimh.org) for more information.

***Resources:***

- [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)
- [www.ecmhc.org](http://www.ecmhc.org)
- [www.waimh.org](http://www.waimh.org)
- [zerotothree.org](http://zerotothree.org)



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**OK-AIMH**

Oklahoma Association for Infant Mental Health



**Child Care  
Services**

**Oklahoma Department of Mental Health  
and Substance Abuse Service**



**Oklahoma State  
Department of Health**  
Creating a State of Health

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