

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)



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Summary: Everyone has mental health, especially infants and young children. It is especially important for infants and young children to have strong mental health, which lays the foundation for future health and wellness. The good news is that there are many things that caregivers (and society) can do to support the mental health of infants and young children. Perhaps one of the most important things is to ensure that caregivers can consistently meet a young child's needs, which teaches them that the world is a safe place.

What is Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health?

Everyone has mental health. Even infants and young children!

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is about an infant and young child's ability to:

- Form safe, secure relationships with adults and peers.
- Experience, manage and express a full range of emotions.
- Cope with stresses in life.

Unfortunately, mental health issues are becoming an increasing problem for many of our children.

- Since 2010, mental health emergency visits at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario have increased by 75%
- One in four (26%) children in Ottawa are behind in their development as they enter school.
- Children who experience high levels of daily stress without a caring supportive adult are at higher risk of depression, suicide attempts, alcohol and drug abuse.

The good news is that there are many things that we can do to improve children's mental health from early on. Starting early on is critical because a healthy brain starts to grow during pregnancy. The first 2000 days of life is the most critical time of brain development. It makes over 1,000,000 new connections every second and is always changing and developing. While it's best to start early, it's also never too late to build positive mental health.

Do's

- Have a healthy relationship and bond with your child. A key part of positive mental health is about the special bond a parent or caregiver has with a child. When your child expresses their needs (e.g. crying), it is important to consistently respond in a warm and sensitive way (e.g. soothing them, meeting their underlying needs such as hunger). This promotes a secure attachment, which is the foundation for your child having future healthy relationships and success and wellness in life.

- Allow a safe space for a child to learn and explore the real world through play. Being able to try things for ourselves and explore choices safely is sense of agency.
- Ensure that play is in the real world, not the electronic world. Although electronic screens are everywhere (such as TV, video games, computers, tablets, cellphones), young children up until aged 3 should not be exposed to recreational screens at all. Many early childhood professionals would even say no recreational screens until aged 5.
- Model your child healthy ways to deal with stress. A child will look to you to learn how to cope with stress and build this important skill. There are times in everyone's life where we go through periods of adversity or hardships. There is no way to completely remove stress from life. Being able to bounce back from adversity in a positive way is called resiliency.
- Get help if you are feeling overwhelmed. Healthy balance in your life as a parent or caregiver can help.

Want to Learn More?

Visit www.iecmh.ca

About this Document

Written by the eMentalHealth.ca team. Special thanks to the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health initiative (www.iecmh.ca).

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