

What is Infant Mental Health?

Infant mental health is social and emotional development. It is determined by a child's (birth to five years) ability to:

- Experience, control and express emotion.
- Form close and secure personal relationships.
- Explore their environment.
- Learn all in the context of family, community and cultural expectations for young children.



Adapted from a working definition Developed by Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families- Infant Mental Health Task Force.

Factors That Influence the Mental Health of Young Children

- Biological (temperament, genetics, etc.)
- Parenting practices (socialization, nurturing, play, exposure to violence, etc.)
- Environments (prenatal, family, community, experiences, poverty, etc.)
- Relationships/Attachments (experiences, interactions, etc.)

"Consistent, nurturing relationships with the same caregivers early in life are the cornerstones of emotional and intellectual competence."

Stanley Greenspan, MD



What Early Childhood Research Says

- All children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn.
- Early environments matter and nurturing relationships are essential.
- What happens during the first months and years of life absolutely **does matter**. This sets a lifelong pattern for what follows in adulthood.

Nurturing Your Baby: Responsibilities of parents and caregivers:

- Hold and cuddle your child often, even when he is not crying.
- Look at your baby. Your baby can see and hear you.
- Rock your baby gently to calm and soothe her.
- Never shake your baby.
- Talk, sing, read and play with your child.
- Touch your baby softly and gently. This is very important to your baby's development.
- Set up routines. They will provide a sense of security and consistency (ie: bedtime, mealtime, naps, family time, reading to your child).

These tips apply to **all** young children.



Goals for an emotionally healthy child include the ability to:

- Form healthy, warm and trusting relationships.
- Experience positive self esteem, feel good about themselves and what they do.
- Use good impulse and behavior control.



- Show a rich, emotional imagination and use of words and gestures to express needs and feelings.
- Separate make believe from reality and begin to adjust to reality's demands.
- Begin to deal with loss and show empathy and concern for others.
- Concentrate, focus and plan in order to be able to learn.



Caring for the caregiver: Tips for taking care of yourself

- Eat balanced meals to nurture your body.
- Keep a journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings.
- Try to set a time for a break or an evening out.
- Join a support group.
- Make and keep medical appointments.

Children can develop mental health disorders in spite of positive and loving care giving. Some children with mental health needs have had excellent parent-child interactions.



Information sources for *Healthy Emotional Stages* and *At Risk Behavior Indicators* include: American Academy of Pediatrics, Centers for Disease Control, National Mental Health Information Center and Think Big, Start Small Organization.

Typical stages of Healthy Emotional Development

Infant (0-18 months):

- Enjoys social play and interactions (peek-a-boo, etc.)
- Cries to show pain or tiredness
- Reacts differently to smiling and scolding
- Establishes eye contact with caregivers
- Uses simple gestures (waving, etc.)
- May reject confinement in crib/play-pen
- Prefers to be with people
- Performs for social attention

Toddler (18-36 months):

- Does simple pretend play (talk on a toy phone, etc.)
- Looks at an object when you point at it and tell them to "look!"
- Throws tantrums (and objects) when angry
- Shows affection toward people, pets or possessions
- Communicates feelings, wants, interests
- Becomes more interested in other kids
- Grows possessive of toys/poor sharing

Preschool (3 years – kindergarten):

- Imitates adults and playmates (phrases, actions, etc.)
- Understands authority, but tests it
- Greets familiar adults spontaneously
- Expresses affection toward/liking of peers
- Responds to simple requests
- Becomes more sociable and cooperative with other children
- Learns to be sensitive to your feelings
- Will try to comfort you when you're sad

Indicators of At-Risk Behavior

Infants and Toddlers (0-3 years):

- Displays very little emotion
- Rejects or avoids being touched or held
- Won't play with others
- Unusually difficult to soothe or console
- Extremely fearful or on-guard
- Does not turn to familiar adults for comfort or help
- Exhibits sudden behavior changes
- Excessive hitting and biting of other children

Preschool Children (3-5 years):

- Absence of language or communication
- Frequently fights with others
- Extreme mood swings
- Inappropriate responses to situations (laughs instead of crying)
- Sudden behavior changes
- Destructive to self and/or others

Things to consider:

- How severe is the behavior?
- How long has the behavior been occurring (weeks or months)?
- How long does the behavior last (minutes, hours)?
- How does the behavior compare with peers?
- Are there events or situations that increase or decrease the behavior?

If behaviors are problematic:

- Talk with a co-worker or supervisor
- Talk with your family
- Get more information
- Seek professional help

Resources and Referrals

- Bright Futures Developmental Tools for Families and Providers
www.brightfutures.org/tools/index.html
- WI Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Association
(608) 442-8036
www.wiimh.org
- Zero To Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families
www.zerotothree.org
- Family Ties of Wisconsin
608-267-6888 or
800-422-7145 (parents only)
www.wifamilyties.org
- Primary healthcare provider
- Community and Private Mental Health Clinics or Providers
- Local Health/Human Services
- Southeastern Regional Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs Center
(414) 266-6333 or (800) 234-5437
www.specialneedsfamilycenter.org
- Wisconsin First Step Hotline
(800) 642-7837
www.mch-hotlines.org
- 211 Milwaukee
(414) 773-0211 or 211

Sponsored by:

- ABC for Health, Inc
- CHASE Committee
- Southeastern Regional Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs

Emotional Health Milestones and At Risk Behaviors

Ensuring social & emotional development in the early years



"The early stages of life have the potential for being a rich foundation that will support a child into adulthood."

From Neurons to Neighborhoods:
The Science of Childhood Development