

Wisconsin Initiative for Infant Mental Health

With The Mental Health Association in Milwaukee County
133 South Butler Street, Suite 10
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 442-8036
infantmh@tds.net

What is the Wisconsin Initiative for Infant Mental Health?

A group of professionals in Wisconsin whose work centered on infants, young children, and their families formed a steering committee to explore the feasibility of creating a partnership to support the healthy social and emotional development of infants, young children, and their families. A Midwest Regional Summit held in Chicago, Illinois in November 2000, inspired the Wisconsin representatives to move forward in their efforts to create an initiative devoted to early childhood mental health issues. The group returned to Wisconsin, developed a draft vision and mission and secured first year funding. WIIMH officially started with the hire of a director in October 2001.

The vision of WIIMH is to have every infant and young child in Wisconsin have his or her mental health and developmental needs met within the context of their community and culture. The WIIMH's mission involves three related but separate activities:

- Increase knowledge regarding the expected social and emotional development of infants and young children, emphasizing (1) the importance of sensitive, responsive, and consistent relationships for infants and families, and (2) the value of therapeutic interventions when appropriate.
- Promote collaboration among service providers, families, and others concerned with the mental health of infants, young children, families, and their caregivers to build a seamless and full spectrum service delivery system.
- Influence public policy at the local, state, and national levels that supports the healthy social and emotional development of infants, young children, and their families.

What do we really mean by infant and early childhood mental health?

Infant Mental Health is synonymous with social and emotional development of our youngest children. Social and emotional development is a child's ability to experience, regulate and express emotions and form close and secure interpersonal relationships. Social and emotional development involves skills such as trust, self confidence, curiosity, motivation, persistence, and self control all of which affect future learning, growth and success. The development of all of these traits begins in infancy and within the context of relationships. A child's capacities to identify their own feelings, experience empathy for another and constructively manage strong emotions are skills that begin in early childhood and support later learning.

Why care about Social and Emotional Development?

The early preschool years are a critical time for skill formation and lay the foundation for future success in school and beyond. Practice-based evidence and scientific research have demonstrated the importance of early experiences as well as the interactions between genetics and environment. Over the last twenty-five years we have gained a greater understanding about what can hinder and what can promote healthy social and emotional development. Children who are unable to attain early social and emotional milestones do not do well in early school years. These children are at a

higher risk for school problems and juvenile delinquency. Research and experiential knowledge from the field of infant and early childhood mental health confirm that a child’s emotional development forms the foundation for all later development and sets the stage for relationships and readiness to learn. Research also indicates that children participating in “enriched early childhood programs are more likely to complete school, and much less likely to require welfare benefits, become teen parents or participate in criminal activities. Rather, they become productive adults.” (Heckman, James: Ounce of Prevention, 2000, Chicago, Illinois)

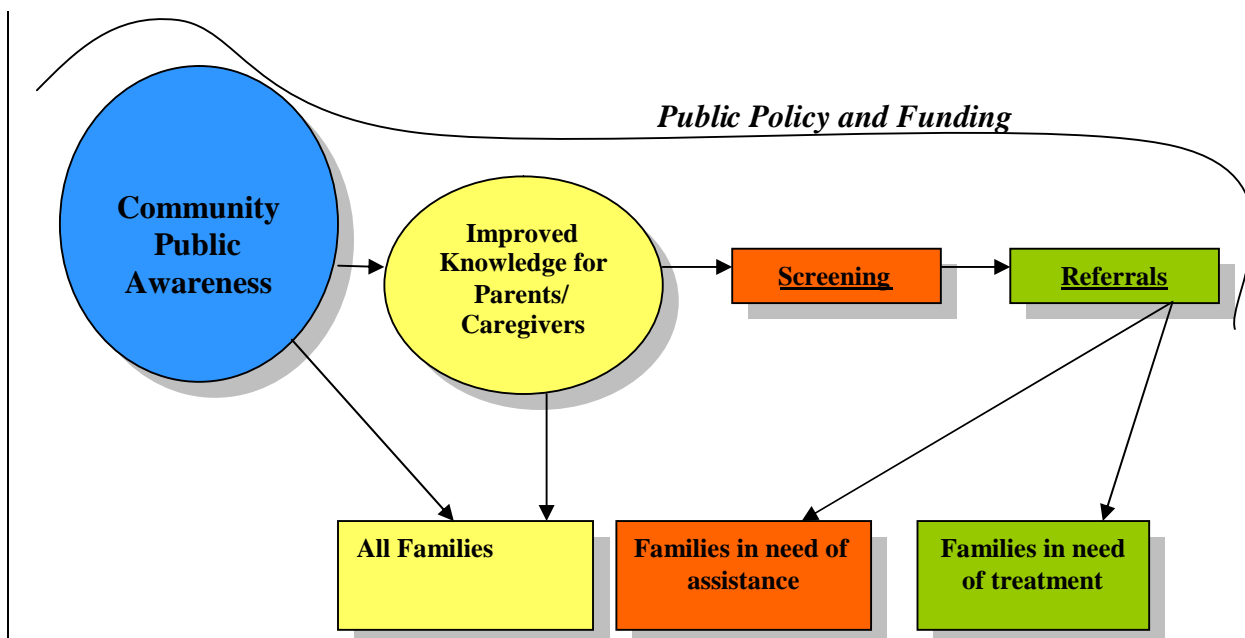
Current Efforts and Activities of Wisconsin Initiative for Infant Mental Health

Wisconsin Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Plan

The Wisconsin Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Plan presents a blueprint for a comprehensive system of care that includes prevention, early intervention and treatment. The goal is not to set up another silo for services but rather weave infant and early childhood development principles into the fabric of all systems that touch the life of children under the age of five. The plan works through existing public and private structures to enhance people’s ability to support healthy social and emotional development.

- **Plan Content**

The plan has six goals with suggested corresponding strategies and implementation tasks. In short the goals focus, in sequence, on community competence, professional competence, system competence and policy competence. The first goal addresses increasing public awareness in all communities. The next goal addresses building the competency of all people that touch the life of a child under the age of five, from child care providers, to social workers to infant mental health specialists. Goal three speaks to the need for early identification through screening while goal four addresses referral and mental health treatment when necessary. The last two goals address steps towards helping policy makers and funding entities understand how to incorporate these principles and practices into regular practice. Below is a diagram illustrating the infant and early childhood mental health system of care.



The broad objective is to weave infant mental health practices and principles into the everyday activities of people working and interacting with infants, young children, and their families. Below are the goals found in the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Plan.

Goal 1: Raise the public awareness of the mental health and developmental needs of children birth to age five and the consequences of poor social and emotional development

Goal 2: Create a tiered infant mental health training infrastructure and include all people who touch the life of a child under the age of five such as frontline caregivers (parents, child care workers and home visitors), early interventionists (birth to three providers, mental health clinicians, physical therapists), and specialized infant mental health therapists.

Goal 3: Develop a coordinated system to screen and assess the social and emotional mental health needs of children birth to age five and develop a consistent referral procedure for services in the context of family, culture, and community.

Goal 4: Create a system for providing early mental health assessment and treatment for children birth to age five and their families in need of services.

Goal 5: Develop public policies across systems that support the promotion of healthy social and emotional development through prevention, early intervention, and treatment for children birth to age five.

Goal 6: Secure additional funding across systems to support healthy social and emotional development through prevention, early intervention, and treatment for children birth to age five.

Infant Mental Health Monthly Email Newsletter

WIIMH sends out a monthly email newsletter. The newsletter updates subscribers on our current efforts including progress on the Infant and Early Childhood Plan. The newsletter also provides links to articles regarding social and emotional development as well as current training opportunities. To subscribe, contact Julie Bark, Administrative Assistant at julie.infantmh@tds.net or call Julie at 608-442-0360.

Conclusion

Wisconsin Initiative for Infant Mental Health focuses efforts on promoting the healthy social and emotional development of all children five and under in Wisconsin. The broad objective is to weave infant mental health practices and principles into the everyday activities of people working and interacting with infants, young children, and their families. An early comprehensive childhood system of care promotes healthy development through prevention, early intervention and treatment. The system of care also needs to address training, collaboration among systems, funding, and reimbursement and public policies supporting young children and their families.

If you would like more information, go to www.wiimh.org. To get involved with Wisconsin Initiative for Infant Mental Health or if you have questions, please contact the Director, Therese Ahlers at 608-442-8036 or email at infantmh@tds.net.