

FIVE THINGS

to Know about Mental Wellness in Early Childhood

The foundations laid in early childhood are critical for later emotional and mental wellness. These foundations for healthy development include sufficient nutrition, a safe environment, and warm, supportive interactions with caregivers. Since infants and toddlers form around 700 neural connections per second, stressful--or “adverse”--experiences during these years have the potential to influence brain development, especially if the experiences are ongoing or cumulative. Ongoing adverse experiences can contribute to developmental delays, including emotional difficulties. It is estimated that between 10 and 14 percent of children through age 5 suffer from an emotional or behavioral disturbance. This Child Trends 5 focuses on mental wellness for infants and toddlers birth through 3 years old.



All adults who spend significant time with young children have a responsibility to help them develop to their full potential. That's why we focus here on caregivers, a term that includes all adults who have regular contact with infants and toddlers--such as parents, grandparents, foster parents, child care providers, etc.





Infants experience and perceive a range of emotions.

Caregivers may underestimate the degree to which infants' social-emotional development is affected by early experiences. Although infants as young as 6 months can "begin to sense and be affected by their parents' moods," fewer than 35 percent of caregivers believe that infants are capable of experiencing emotions in this way. Furthermore, nearly 70 percent of parents do not realize that infants as young as 6 months are able to experience a range of emotions, including sadness and fear, as well as express very basic intentional behaviors.



Early positive interactions promote emotional wellness throughout the lifespan.

Interactions between caregivers and infants are critically important, as "neural connections are formed through the interaction of genes and a baby's environment and experiences," especially through communication with caregivers. Infants understand themselves and their surroundings through their interactions with caregivers. A caregiver who consistently engages with an infant (or re-engages after a break) in a responsive, comforting, and supportive way provides a base from which that infant can develop a sense of predictability about the external world, giving them confidence to explore surroundings and develop independence. Without consistent positive interaction, the infant may learn that a caregiver is not a source of support and dependability, and may have a less stable or delayed foundation for future emotional development. The early years are also critical for a child's development of a positive self-image, which begins to develop in infancy.



Having appropriate expectations of young children's development is important.

Emotional development is a critical component of brain development that is not always emphasized as much as cognitive, physical, or verbal development. Each person's development is unique, but caregivers should understand general social-emotional milestones--such as copying caregivers' actions--in order to keep expectations appropriate and monitor potential red flags. Luckily, there are research-based resources available that provide tips and guidance for what to expect and how to encourage healthy emotional development--such as by paying attention to what an infant is trying to communicate through body language, and by establishing and sticking to routines.



Parents and caregivers should be mindful of their own emotional well-being, seeking support if they need it.

It's important for caregivers to consider their own mental health needs as well as the needs of the young children in their care. Infants and children whose caregivers suffer from mental illness are generally at a higher risk of developing mental illness or social-emotional problems, because of inherited genetics and interactions with the caregiver. But, the potential outcomes of having a parent with a mental illness largely depend on the severity of the illness, as well as the degree to which the parent has sought treatment and been able to manage symptoms. Caregivers who effectively treat their mental illness may lower the effects of the illness on their children. Although parenting can be particularly challenging for caregivers with mental illness, all caregivers at times likely experience stress from parenting or other life events. In these challenging moments, it is helpful to know that caregivers have many resources available to them, varying from online handouts, to specialized clinical services.



Young children are resilient and, if properly supported, can overcome potentially traumatic events.

Although stressful or traumatic events in early childhood can contribute to developmental delays, there are a number of factors that promote adaptability, or resilience. Neural connections that are used more often become stronger, meaning that repeated, regular, positive communication between a caregiver and infant will likely lead to more secure attachment, even if the infant experiences occasional adverse experiences, or has previously experienced such events. This is one reason why consistency is important during infancy and early childhood. While there are some innate personality traits that promote positive coping in children, such as being "active, affectionate (and) cuddly," there are also resources for caregivers to use in promoting these traits. Caregivers of children who have experienced traumatic or ongoing adverse experiences can seek guidance from an early childhood clinician or other professional, and use early interventions to address trauma and promote the development of resilience. Young children may be able to overcome the effects of adverse events through consistent, predictable, supportive interactions.

Some helpful resources:

- [Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation at the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development](#)
 - [Social Emotional Tips for Families with Infants](#)
- [Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University](#)
- [The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#)
 - [Attachment: What Works?](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
 - [Resources on nurturing and attachment](#)
- [Foundation for Child Development](#)
 - [Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion](#)
- [The National Association for the Education of Young Children](#)
 - [I Am Safe and Secure: Promoting Resilience in Young Children](#)
 - [Creating Healthy Attachments to the Babies in Your Care](#)
- [Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation \(HHS\)](#)
 - [Services for Families and Infants Experiencing Trauma](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(HHS\)](#)
 - [Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental and Behavioral Disorders](#)
- [UPenn Collaborative on Community Integration](#)
 - [Parenting with a Mental Illness: Positive Parenting & Child Resilience](#)
- [World Association of Infant Mental Health](#)
- [ZERO TO THREE](#)
 - [Social-emotional development information](#)
 - [Age-based handouts](#)

