

What Is  
*INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?*



Why Is It Important?

# What is infant mental health?

Does the term “infant mental health” make you think of a baby on a couch telling his problems to a psychiatrist? So what is infant mental health? Infant mental health reflects both the social-emotional capacities and the primary relationships in children birth through age five. Because young children’s social experiences and opportunities to explore the world depend on the love and care they receive, the child *and* the child’s relationships are central to “infant mental health.” It is essential to ensure that first relationships are trusting and caring, as early relationships provide an important foundation for later development.

## Why is infant mental health important?



The first years of life provide the basis for children’s mental health and social-emotional development. Social development includes the ability to form healthy relationships with others, and the knowledge of social rules and standards. Emotional development includes the experience of feelings about self and others, with a range of positive and negative emotions, as well as the ability to control and regulate feelings in culturally appropriate ways. The development of self-worth, self-confidence and self-regulation are important features of social-emotional development. Healthy social-emotional development is essential for success in school and in life.

# How is infant mental health nurtured by relationships?

Loving, nurturing relationships enhance emotional development and mental health. When infants and toddlers are treated with kindness and encouragement, they develop a sense of safety and emotional security. A nurturing caring relationship provides a “secure base” from which children can begin exploring the world, frequently checking back for reassurance. The more they explore and try new things, the more success they experience.

Good relationships help children feel valued. Kind, nurturing relationships also teach children how to treat others. Children watch adults and copy them. Children who feel loved and cherished grow up to be adults who care about others.



# What can happen if a child does not have healthy early relationships?

Children may respond to the lack of a healthy relationship in a variety of ways.

- Some children seem sad, rejected and lethargic. Because they lack a role model for smiling or happiness, they imitate a “flat affect” or lack of joy.
- Some babies may become depressed or develop eating or sleeping problems.
- Some children try to meet their own needs. They “self-stimulate” or rock back-and-forth trying to nurture themselves. They may be so starved for affection that they seek hugs from any willing adult.
- Some children get angry. They are aggressive and hostile without provocation. They won’t allow comforting, even when they are hurt, because past relationships have not been nurturing.



# How can adults nurture children's emotional development and mental health?

- Surround children with nurturing relationships.
- Be happy—smile and laugh.
- Create a trusting environment.
- Provide stable and consistent caregivers at home and in child care.
- Understand and respond to children's cues.
- Spend unhurried time together.
- Comfort and reassure children when they are scared, angry, or hurt.
- Develop daily routines to promote babies' feelings of security and to help them learn what you expect.
- Learn developmental stages and have appropriate expectations.
- Model good relationships and healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Consider how whatever you're doing or going through may affect your child.
- Identify early signs of social/emotional problems.



# Behaviors that may indicate emotional or mental health problems

## Infants and Toddlers

- Displays very little emotion
- Does not show interest in sights sounds or touch
- Rejects or avoids being touched or held or playing with others
- Unusually difficult to soothe or console
- Unable to comfort or calm self
- Extremely fearful or on-guard
- Does not turn to familiar adults for comfort or help
- Exhibits sudden behavior changes

## Preschool Children

- Cannot play with others or objects
- Absence of language or communication
- Frequently fights with others
- Very sad
- Unusually fearful
- Inappropriate responses to situations (e.g., laughs instead of cries)
- Withdrawn
- Extremely active
- Loss of earlier skills (e.g., toileting, language, motor)
- Sudden behavior changes
- Very accident prone
- Destructive to self and/or others





### **Always Consider:**

- How severe is the behavior?
- How many weeks or months has the behavior been occurring?
- How long does the behavior last (e.g., minutes, hours)?
- How does the behavior compare with the behavior of other children of the same age?
- Are there events at home or in child care that make the behavior better or worse?

### **If these behaviors and considerations lead to concern, Parents and family members can:**

- Talk with their pediatrician or primary care providers
- Contact their local Early Steps program (for a directory call 1-800-654-4440 or go to [www.doh.state.fl.us/AlternateSites/CMS-Kids/ContactUs/EIPdir.pdf](http://www.doh.state.fl.us/AlternateSites/CMS-Kids/ContactUs/EIPdir.pdf))
- Ask their child's child care program for additional local resources
- Seek mental health providers who have expertise with young children

### **Teachers and providers can:**

- Consider different cultural perspectives
- Talk with the child's family
- Talk with colleagues or supervisors
- Help families find additional local and internet resources

# We welcome your support

**Join the Florida Association of Infant Mental Health.** Join hundreds of others committed to improving systems for children's social emotional development. Attend the annual conference featuring the latest research and evidence based practices and benefit from listserv announcements of resources, trainings and up-to-date information. Download a membership form at: [www.faimh.org](http://www.faimh.org)

**Join local advocates committed to improving services for young children in your area.** *Attend your local Infant Mental Health Taskforce.* Find your local contact information at [www.faimh.org](http://www.faimh.org)

**Attend trainings and seminars** on social emotional development to gain knowledge and implement relationship-based services. Contact FSU Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy (850-922-1300 or [www.cpeip.fsu.edu](http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu)) for schedule of upcoming workshops.

**Read Florida's Strategic Plan for Infant Mental Health.** Our vision is that one day all children will be emotionally healthy, equipped to learn, and nurtured to develop their full potential. Read the comprehensive plan by downloading it from [www.faimh.org](http://www.faimh.org)

**Check out websites.** Recommended ones include: [www.talaris.org](http://www.talaris.org) • [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org) • [www.iamyourchild.com](http://www.iamyourchild.com) • [www.teachmorelovemore.org](http://www.teachmorelovemore.org) • [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)



*Healthy babies  
grow into  
healthy children.*

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